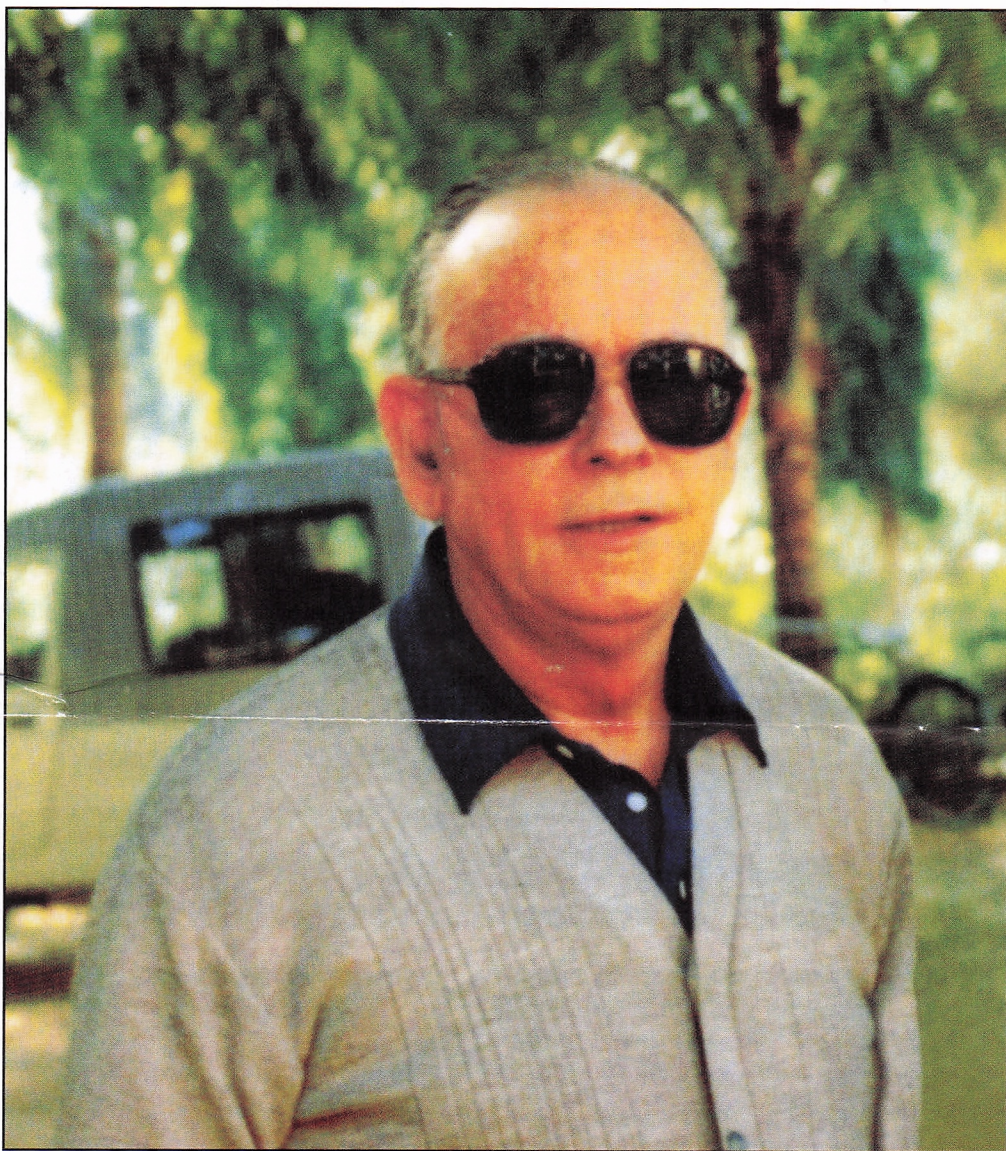


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FR. JESUS GIMENEZ (JIM), S.D.B.  
APOSTLE OF THE SANTAL MISSIONS  
1931-2001



Dear Confreres,

Fr. Jesus Gimenez (known to everyone as simply Fr. Jim) passed away quite unexpectedly on 15 January 2001 in Spain. His untimely death came as a sudden shock to all who knew him. It was also a big loss to the Salesians in Madrid where he had been appointed to the Mission Office since three years. He had taken charge of the work with great efficiency and dynamism in his characteristic way. His death was not in the least foreseen when he was admitted to a hospital in Madrid for a simple prostate gland operation. Circumstances went beyond human control as a blood clot developed in his lungs and led to his sudden death. Later it was disclosed that after the operation the doctors had said that he had an advanced state of cancer.

He had still more great plans to be realized, as he had telephoned to Katihar before he went to the hospital and asked the parish priest Fr. Cyriac Manianchira to ring him up on 15<sup>th</sup> January, the day he was to be discharged from the hospital. Even in those last days he was closely following up the progress of the works which he had to leave behind in Purnea after he was asked to quit India in 1998 by an unfriendly Government. But this great exiled missionary's heart was still in India and from Spain his support for the different works in the missions never diminished but only grew rapidly and substantially. One major project that was close to his heart and which he had financed through his benefactors was just nearing completion when death overtook him. It was his great

contribution that had made it possible to commence the reconstruction of the church that once he had built in Polsonda More in Murshidabad and which had given way to the pressures of peculiar soil conditions. Although his death will deprive him and others of his physical presence at the time of the blessing of the church, yet his presence in spirit will be a true and loving experience around that beautiful and grand monument that rises gloriously to his memory. His 52 years of Salesian life, of which 30 he spent as a missionary, cannot be summed up in a few pages and could run into volumes if information could be gathered about all that he had done and left behind.

#### HIS EARLY DAYS AND VOCATION

Born on 04 December 1931 at a village called Layana in Spain, Jesus Gimenez grew up in a traditional and fervent Catholic family. Early in his life he was inspired to be a missionary and he was attracted to the Salesian way of life already when he was attending school. He entered the Salesian novitiate on 15 August 1948 and made his first profession on 16 August 1949. Already in the novitiate the young, slim and dynamic Jim was known to be always daring and full of the spirit of adventure. He had read and heard about the foreign missions and longed to make it one day to distant lands beyond the oceans. So he did not hesitate when he heard that volunteers were being recruited for the missions in India and his wish was promptly granted. He joined the missionary expedition that reached Goa on 17 March 1950. During the one-year stay



in Goa he learnt Portuguese, Italian and English and a year later he was sent to Sonada to do his studies in Philosophy. In later years, while talking to young Salesians, he would recall that he was often called upon to do any tough manual work because he had the strength to do such works.

## PRACTICAL TRAINING IN KRISHNAGAR

After two years of philosophy he was sent to Don Bosco Krishnagar for his practical training, that is salesian practical experience among the boys. That was quite a tough experience both because of the hot and humid weather in a poorly equipped house and also because the boys those days were the usual restless and mischievous type one finds in hostels. He recalled later how he was able to cope with a nick name that the boys had given him as they used to do to all young salesians. They found his fair complexion that at times changed into red, particularly remarkable and they called him, in the Bengali language, "lal moola" which meant radish, a vegetable root that has a red colour outside. One day he went to the study hall and drew on the blackboard a big radish and asked the boys to name it. They all shouted out spontaneously, "lal moola". Then with a big beaming smile, he thanked them for the nickname. From then on, they never called him by that name or any other nickname. In Krishnagar he picked up the Bengali language and later, as a young priest, he would remember sufficient Bengali to teach it to the aspirants at Bandel.

## ORDAINED PRIEST

Fr. Jim made his perpetual profession on 01 June 1954 and began his theological studies in Shillong. He was a very intelligent student and found also time for reading books and made sure to read the life of Don Bosco and the lives of several Saints. As a young man his spirit of fun and adventure could never

be suppressed. He and his companions explored many of the villages on the hills and across the rivers while going on the usual Sunday walk. He would recall later how his Rector Fr. Gutierrez used to wait for him and his companions to return because he knew that they would be turning up often quite late. While in Shillong he developed a great love for the Missions in Assam, particularly, those of the Khasi hills. He had often expressed his desire to be allowed to work in those missions, but in those days young priests were always assigned to full-fledged, regular communities at least for the first five years after their ordination to priesthood and that was to be also the direction that Fr. Jim would have to take. He was ordained on 28 June 1959 by Bishop Stephen Ferrando in Shillong. His first assignment as a priest was to leave the beautiful hills of Shillong and come down to the plains of Bengal, to Bandel on the banks of the river Hooghly. Prompt obedience led him to accept an appointment that was not his first love.

## AT BANDEL

In 1959 he came to the minor seminary at Bandel as its prefect of studies to take up the formation and education of about 200 young boys coming from diverse cultural backgrounds. As prefect of studies, he was known to be a very active, demanding but caring person. He had his eyes everywhere and followed up closely everybody and every activity. He was a very forthright and frank person and he expected from his boys too a candid admission of their mistakes. He was quite severe on those who were lazy and sly and he made sure that the students and teachers alike never neglected their duties. As a good Salesian he kept the boys cheerful especially on feast days with some well prepared entertainment in which the feature play had always a good moral and which he personally selected and directed. If there was no electricity in the evening, as it happened



occasionally, he used to take the boys to the playground and tell them a long and interesting story. As the prefect or economer later in the same house he took care of the boys' needs reminding them at the same time not to waste anything. He was very clear with them on two topics: good manners and cleanliness. In spite of all the work he had, he used to find time to take the place of an assistant or to be present among the boys during the study hours, games and other activities. As a teacher, he preferred teaching Catechism and he taught it with great conviction and love and he organized the annual Catechism competitions with a lot of enthusiasm.

At Bandel he used to share with the senior boys his love for the missions and he used to speak frequently about his desire to be a missionary among the Santals of Murshidabad. He used to keep talking about the first house that was being planned to be opened in Azimganj for the Santals. From Bandel he was sent to Calcutta to be the Rector of the Catholic Orphan Press (C.O.P) in 1965. After two years of service in this community, his wish to be sent to the Missions was finally granted when he was asked to be the first parish priest of the newly opened mission for the Santals in Azimganj.

#### IN AZIMGANJ

After the first house was already built in Azimganj, it was left to Fr. Jim to establish the parish and to organize the pastoral work. In a short time he built the residence of the parish priest. Next, a beautiful church was completed and blessed in 1974. His next major project was a convent for the Sisters and a hostel for the Santal girls. He bought land in a number of villages and set up village chapels as well as quarters for the visiting priests and sisters. The Azimganj Mission saw a rapid growth as a result of his zeal and abilities, especially due

to his great interest in the welfare of the Santal tribe. In fact he spoke the language well and pioneered the translation and publication of religious literature in Santali. Fr. Jim's dynamic presence was felt throughout the district of Murshidabad and news about his activities also reached the other missions in far away Bihar. Some of the Jesuit missionaries from Bihar who would come now and then to visit his new mission in Azimganj used to refer to him as "The Lion of Murshidabad". He toured villages extensively on a bicycle in the beginning and later on his motorbike until he was able to procure a jeep. In spite of the harrowing summer heat, he pushed on with his work and projects relentlessly. By the end of his nine years of intense activity in Azimganj he increased the strength of Christian presence beyond the borders of his parish till the district of Birbhum to the West and to Dalkola in the North beyond Farakka.

#### AT POLSONDA MORE

As Azimganj developed into a big parish he bought land in Polsonda More and opened a new parish there in 1976. He built up in a short time a new parish centre with all the facilities and requirements such as confreres' residence, boys' hostel, church, convent and girls' hostel. To provide food for the children, he acquired sufficient agricultural land and set up a mini deep tube well. As more and more villages embraced the faith he also established substations with chapels and residential quarters for conducting Sunday service in various places and trained Catechists to assist in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the pastoral care of the people. During the short period of 5 years in Polsonda More, he developed it into a full-fledged parish and made the mission self-sufficient financially through well established agricultural resources and sponsorships for the children in the hostel. Soon his services were needed in other regions too and at the request of his Superiors, he had to go to open a new mission in Bihar.



## IN PURNEA AND KATIHAR

On 31 May 1981 he was placed in charge of a vast mission territory comprising of the two districts of Purnea and Katihar in Bihar. When he reached there he found an old Catholic Mission that, in spite of its century old existence, had stagnated in its growth. There was just one parish, the parish of Purnea and another quasi parish in Katihar and a few substations. The small Christian flock remained neglected, especially due to the distance of the area from the Diocese of Dumka and due to lack of priests to work there. The few priests who were there had no one to guide or assist them spiritually and materially. Fr. Jim's appointment there, as the dean of the area was a God-sent event in the history of the Church in Purnea and Katihar. He built up everything necessary starting with the basic facilities like the residence of the Salesian community and hostel for the children, primary school, girls' hostel, senior boys' hostel and the High School. Quite soon, in keeping with his usual pastoral vision of having the house of God as the centre of the parish complex he constructed a magnificent Church in Purnea that was blessed on March 8, 1992. Foreseeing the possibility that the parish would be handed over to the future Diocese, he got into an agreement with the Bishop of Dumka, Rt. Rev. Telesphore Toppo, and obtained his permission to establish a Salesian house in an adjacent piece of land. As a result of that agreement the Salesians would run the High School and later on, also set up a non-formal vocational training center. Fr. Jim himself built the school and the non-formal vocational training center and arranged also to maintain the two works and the Salesian community.

While being busy with the activities in Purnea, Fr. Jim also turned his attention to the development of Katihar and other substations in the two districts. In 1986 he built a parish house in Katihar and in 1987, he got Katihar erected as a parish, which the Bishop entrusted to the Salesians. In addition, Fr. Jim built a

convent for the Sisters of Mary Immaculate in Katihar and a school to be administered by them.

Gradually, he set the foundation for other parishes by developing the substations of Gopalpur, Baghela, Satmi, Raniganj, Kishanganj, Banmanki, Munshibari and Thakurganj. In almost all these centres, he bought land and built up the essential requirements like parish house, convent and school. Simultaneously with the growth of the parishes and substations, Fr. Jim also thought of the maintenance and continuity of his works and set up the necessary material resources, especially, through sponsorships for the education of children. He always kept in mind his dream of making the districts of Purnea and Katihar into a Diocese and when he saw that the time was drawing near for the fulfillment of that dream, he drew up plans for the formation of the new Diocese. Unfortunately, his stay in India did not last till the day the new Diocese was born because the civil authorities in India served him a quit order for no other evident reason than the fact that they had taken note of his missionary activities. He had to leave India in December 1998. He had worked for thirty years as a missionary, 15 years in Murshidabad and 15 years in Purnea and Katihar and his heart never left his beloved missions. As the Mission procurator in Madrid, Spain, he continued to help both the missionary regions.



*Fr. Jim with Fr. Cyriac Manianchira, who succeeded him at Purnea when he had to leave India.*



It was his joy to return to Purnea on 8 November 1998 for the ordination of Bishop Vincent Barwa, the first Bishop of Purnea and the inauguration of the new diocese, for the establishment of which he had worked so hard. He saw his dream realized and went back to Spain contented.

#### GLIMPSES OF HIS PERSONALITY

Anyone sketching the profile of Fr. Jim after knowing him personally would find him a good blend of three outstanding characteristics, his human trait, his Salesian charism and his missionary zeal. He was a true human person with a temperament and character that reflected his cultural background and at the same time was in tune with a balanced religious and Salesian way of life. His many gifts such as intellectual qualities, organizational abilities and leadership, a warm and friendly personality, a very robust faith and strong belief in his Salesian charism formed him into a multifaceted personality and a powerful and effective instrument in the hands of God.

##### *A True Human Person*

The human traits of character in him were by no means suppressed, hidden or camouflaged by any tendency to put on a semblance of conformity to rules and strict adherence to religious observance even during the various stages of his religious and priestly formation. In short, he never pretended to be what he was not and rarely employed diplomacy, charm or delicate ways to sooth people and win them over. However, he did show that he was understanding and magnanimous. He was typically forthright, plain and blunt and it was soon evident to everyone that Jim always loved to call a spade a spade and spared nobody big or small when it was a question of standing by the truth. He was quick to forgive where the mistake was

candidly accepted and never let the sun go down on his anger and took care to apologize whenever it was needed. His strong and at times explosive temperament that seemed to hide his good and caring nature never really created enemies. On the contrary he had a host of friends and well wishers.

Fr. Jim had a large number of benefactors. He kept in touch with them through newsletters into which he inserted salient points from his missionary chronicles. No wonder he was able to establish so many parishes and provide numerous buildings in these parishes. The culmination of all his building activity was the beautiful Cathedral of Purnea.

He was easily at home among any category or creed of people and deeply appreciated the Indian culture and people. He felt very proud of being in India and suffered bitterly when he had to leave this country. He was never affected by any religious bias in his relationship with others and accepted and loved people of other religions and denominations. In fact, several of his benefactors were not Catholics.

##### *A True Salesian*

One characteristic that was outstanding in Fr. Jim was the love for his vocation as a Salesian of Don Bosco. His service as a young cleric and later as a priest bore witness to his love for youth and his great interest in taking care of the boys entrusted to him. He used to be constantly present among the boys, participated in all the activities of the house and took great interest in planning the school calendar with a good mix of duties, recreation and entertainment. Every Sunday the boys longed for the documentary or feature films that he would screen. Occasionally, he arranged also a Bingo game and made the boys go crazy that evening.

Wherever he went he carried the spirit of Don Bosco. When he opened the first parish in Azimganj he decided that the Church would



be dedicated to St. John Bosco. He took great pains to find an artist to make a good statue of Don Bosco and it was with great joy and triumph that he arranged to have the statue transported to Azimganj across the river from Berhampore. In Polsonda More when he built the residence for the priests and the boarding for the children he made sure that the two blocks were joined by a common staircase used both by the confreres and the boys. When a visiting Jesuit priest asked him whether he was not disturbed by the presence of the boys he replied, "I prefer to see the boys use the staircase as I do. There is so much life here in the company of the boys and I really enjoy it. I can never think of keeping my boys far from me". On another occasion, an old Santal who was not a Christian came to visit the Polsonda More Mission and inquired from the assistant parish priest who was known to him, "Is your Saheb married and does he have children"? The assistant parish priest told the curious old man, "Why don't you go in there and ask the Saheb who is just now sitting in his office? He will be only glad to answer your question". The old man plucked up courage and went to meet the Saheb and a few minutes later he came back blushing. He replied to the inquisitive assistant parish priest "The Saheb stretched out his hand in the direction of the boys in the playground and said, 'All those are my children'". His heart was with the children as he often watched the boys at meals and instructed the other confreres to feed the boys well. He made sure that through an abundance of sponsorship money and adequate supplies from the land and farm, his children lacked nothing.

Being a good Salesian he was naturally a great devotee of the Blessed Virgin Mary. When he had established his residence in Azimganj he came to know that there was a marble statue of Our Blessed Mother in a public park nearby. It had been there from the time of the Muslim rulers of Murshidabad. Immediately he visited the park and requested the authorities to hand

it over to him. They obliged and he got it installed near the parish house in Azimganj. When he opened his next parish in Polsonda More, he again installed a statue of Our Lady of Fatima to whose patronage he dedicated the parish.

In spite of being occupied with so many different works, he continued to keep himself up to date with good reading. Don Bosco's love for publishing good books also inspired Fr. Jim to get good books translated into Santali and published. Some of the books that he published in Santali are "My Catechism book" written by Bishop L.R. Morrow, S.D.B., and the lives of Don Bosco, Micky Magone, Dominic Savio and a spiritually inspirational book, called "The Path", published in Santali with the title, "Hor". He also provided his centres well with audio-visual aids and equipment for the propagation of the Catholic Faith. Once, the Bishop of Dumka had commended Fr. Jim's catechetical activities in the diocese as a great contribution to the Diocese.

#### *A Great Missionary and Pastor*

Fr. Jim's missionary life was unique, challenging and impact making. He was unique as a missionary because of the energetic and speedy realization of his plans, projects and targets. In the 1960's it was planned that a new phase of missionary expansion in the diocese of Krishnagar was to be launched among the immigrant Santals in the district of Murshidabad and the Salesian Province of Calcutta needed someone to lead from the front. It was then that Fr. Jim offered himself to go to work for the Santals of Murshidabad.

His arrival on the scene of missionary action in Murshidabad and later in Purnea and Katihar changed the history of these regions. The choice of the dispersed Santals as his field of apostolate and his leadership when missionary action was most urgent just when the harvest was ripe, carves out for him a



unique place in the kingdom of the Santal mission. It was due to his vision, dynamism and resources that the missionary work for the Santals developed at an amazing pace. It was not merely fund raising ability that contributed to his success but his true missionary zeal, vision and pastoral heart.

As a missionary Fr. Jim was intrepid, zealous and absolutely dedicated. Whenever he went to a new area he took care to study carefully the geographical, social and demographic situation of the entire region before beginning his work. He was one with the people for whom he dedicated all his energies. In the early stages of his missionary life, he did use the bicycle often and spent nights in the villages with the people. Like a good pastor he often took sick people to hospitals or arranged to have them taken there by the Catechists. Later on, when he suffered from high blood pressure he could not do his usual tours in the villages and took to publishing Christian literature in Santali. He did not find it easy by temperament to adjust to the people and still he was well accepted by them because he was open and frank with them. In the early years when he did not speak Santali very well, he had a simple way of asking his listeners for the right word and often he would laugh at his own mistakes.

God had a wonderful plan for this great



*Fr. Jim with Mother Theresa*

pioneer missionary, leading him through the successive phases of his life to meet various challenges by equipping him well with a variety of gifts and qualities. What he received from the Lord he placed at His service and the result was a rich harvest of achievements for the Kingdom. Even his absence from India in the last three years of his life, he turned to good advantage for the Kingdom through substantial financial support and through his much appreciated personal interest. True to his character he was a fighter till the end for the cause that he stood for. That fact remains today a source of great strength to those who have taken his place. In fact, it is already being reported that his friends abroad are coming forward with great sympathy and interest to support the missions established by him.

The sudden death of Fr. Jim has left a great vacuum. He was called to his eternal reward in the midst of activity. However, though no longer physically with us, his presence and support are felt strongly by those who are continuing the same work from where he left off. The memory and the noble example of his dedicated salesian life live on among us and we are consoled at the thought that we have gained a benefactor in heaven who intercedes for us.

As we offer suffrages for our dear Fr. Jim, let us also pray for the missions, especially for the Santal missions in which he took great interest. May all of us be inspired by the heroism of Fr. Jim and courageously work for the spread of God's Kingdom.

Fr. Francis Alencherry  
Provincial.

For the Necrology:

**Fr. Jesus Gimenez, died in Madrid, Spain, on 15 January 2001, 70 years old, 52 years a Salesian and 42 years a Priest.**