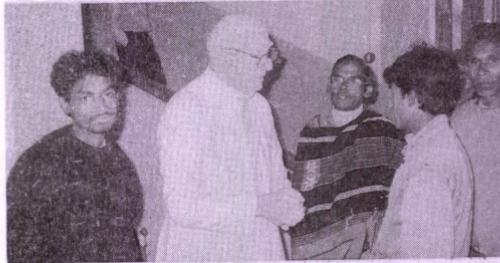
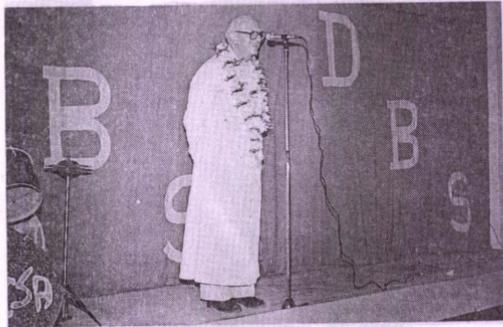


FR. PAUL TAVERNA SDB

41 B007

1915 - 1995



Nazareth Bhavan,
Siliguri, West Bengal,
India - 734 401

Dear Confreres,

While all Italy rejoiced in 1934 at the Canonisation of Our Father Don Bosco and the bells rang joyfully on that Easter Day, our young Paolo began asking questions about what was taking place. He was told that Don Bosco had been canonized. He came to know more about this saint and the 19 year old young worker who was an active member of the Catholic Action at Parabiago began to feel a deep attraction for this new saint. Through the help of a priest friend still alive, he soon found himself in the institute of Cardinal Cagliero at Ivrea (Italy).

Early Years

Paolo was the second of 5 brothers, Roberto, Paolo, Ambrogio Mario and Stefano the children of Pasquale Antonio and Bellani Primina. He was born on 10 February 1915 and was Baptized on the 14th. The records show that he was confirmed on the 8th of October 1923.

When young Paolo completed his Elementary school he started work in a firm near Milan. The young lad's heart was however not at ease. After six years of work in various small factories he found himself seeking admission into the Salesian aspirantate at Ivrea. In the recommendation letter that accompanied him, the Parish Priest states: "The young man, Paolo Taverna, son of Pasquale, aspires to be a missionary... up to now he has been living in all ways, a very exemplary

and disciplined life. For some time he has been expressing a holy desire of co-operating in the Salvation of Souls as a missionary..."

The Missionary

His missionary vocation was clear all through his years of formation. It was this longing to be a missionary that made him take up his books again in 1935 and pursue his call to the religious life and priesthood at the Istituto Missionario Salesiano Cardinal Cagliero. He was described by his superiors in Ivrea as "a good young man already a little advanced in years. He has the ability to study, has great initiative and is a great worker."

He was admitted to the novitiate on the 14th of June 1939. He went to bid farewell to his dear ones before leaving for India in August 1939 on a voyage which would take him and his companions, as a result of the outbreak of war, through a number of sea ports before finally arriving at Calcutta towards the end of the year. He started his novitiate at Sonada under the able guidance of Father Marengo with whom he established a very loving and life long relationship. Father Marengo was later to become his bishop and take him as his Vicar General in Tezpur.

His deep interest in his missionary vocation made him put his heart and soul into his studies and acquire a great love for his Salesian Vocation. He had a good Salesian Spirit. The provincial council that admitted him to the renewal of his vows described him as having a great attachment to the congregation. He manifested a very practical love for his missionary vocation during his practical training at Don Bosco Guwahati from 1947 till 1949. During these years he had his first encounter with the Assamese language and with Hindi

which he soon began learning and which would stand him in good stead as a missionary in the Brahmaputra Valley.

It was as a young priest at Naharkatya, Assam, that he gave full rein to his missionary zeal. It is interesting to read parts of his first letter to his friends and benefactors on reaching his new field of labour. After describing how he reached the railway station and found nobody there to receive him as those who had been sent for the purpose reached late he continues to describe the condition of the Naharkatya mission. "The house where the fathers live is built partly of brick and partly of bamboo and mud. It is low and dark... The Church - poor Our Lord..! The school building is certainly not much better than the residence of the fathers and the church... My love for this mission grew greater on the occasion of the First Friday of the month of February... I was then left alone... I had to stay in the confessional for more than 4 hours at a stretch. At night I had to be present at the meeting of the catechists and the heads of the villages... The following morning I began my ministry with the administration of several Baptisms...my first! They then began to come and wish me, to speak to me and even offer me some gifts." He then speaks of some who asked for instruction in the faith and of others 'who were in a hurry' because they wanted to return home fearing the elephants might have destroyed their huts and their trees during their absence. He continued At night when alone, I thought over and over again about the greatness of my vocation and about the great grace God had bestowed on me!" He concluded that letter asking for help to build a 'pucca' Church dedicated to St. Francis Xavier patron of the missions.

What strikes us in this letter is the great zeal of the young Missionary! It was a zeal that would keep on growing as he entered more and more deeply into his pastoral commitment. He was always full of zeal for the 'Salvation of Souls' and he

did all he could to be available to the people as a true pastor of souls. He never spared himself when it came to the celebration of the sacraments for his people. "Father Paul was a missionary who not only drew hundreds of people to Christ through his preaching and witnessing but he also infused that same missionary zeal in others. If I can say mass in Hindi today and say a few words in Hindi at the homily, it is only because I had the fortune of accompanying this great missionary during his apostolic contacts with the people. I recall one of his trips to a tea garden village where people had been waiting for him. After they welcomed him in their traditional way, he spoke to them, heard their confessions, gave them a homily, and after mass went on informally sharing the message of Christ. And at the end of it all, one of the elderly men said, "Father, continue speaking to us. You remind us of the way Jesus must have spoken to the people". He reflected Christ to them by his word and witness". (Fr. Joseph Manipadam).

His Love for the People

As a missionary he showed great love for his people and the young. We could very well put these words on his lips: "Here in your midst I feel completely at home; for me living means being here with you" (Con 35). He made their concerns his own. He always had a word of welcome and a beaming smile on his face for them. He kept up this constant availability for the people to the very end of his life. As a matter of fact he was on his way to the Savio Centre hostel and the convent when he collapsed. He would often speak of the need of being with the boys and of meeting the people after mass and of saying a few words to them. As long as his health would allow it he would go to the villages and the tea gardens to meet the people. This was his great joy! He was at times blind to their defects and would be carried away by some on account of his

attachment to them. However he was not so attached as to forget to look after the rest of his charges.

This constant presence with the people and the young was noticed by them and made one past pupil say at his funeral "I have never seen Don Bosco in my life, I have heard about him; but seeing father Paul was for me seeing Don Bosco alive" (letter of father provincial). He had a nice way with the young. He was "actively present among youth in brotherly friendship, helping them in their efforts to grow in what is good and encouraging them to cast off every form of slavery..." (C 39). His approach to the young was truly "open and cordial, ready to make the first approach..." (C 15). His love for youth was truly that of a "father brother and friend, able to draw out friendship in return" (ibid). The past pupils who knew him would often come to meet him and share their problems with him.

His Vision

His missionary zeal was not confined to the spiritual alone. As our Constitutions say "In parishes and mission residences we contribute to the spread of the Gospel and to the advancement of the people" (C 42). Father Paul did this in every mission station he was in especially through education. He made sure that he established new schools or boardings where needed. He developed and expanded the existing ones. In this way he did his part to build a society more worthy of man's dignity. (cf. C 33) He was concerned about people and tried to help them in whatever way he could. It is this desire to help the poor that enabled him to spend long hours at his fund raising campaign. But "in seeking and accepting help for the service of the needy he truly imitated Don Bosco in his zeal and gratitude and tried to use it for the services of the poor and the needy of society. (cf. C 79)

Naharkatia

Father Paul had a vision for his mission. At Naharkatia he saw to it that the parish was well equipped with a school and dispensary. Sisters were brought in to look after the girls and a boarding was provided. He built a simple but beautiful church there. His efforts at improving the mission and working for the people were amply rewarded by a steady flow of vocations to the congregation and the diocese. Among these first vocations we find persons like Bishop Joseph Aind, Fr. Benjamin Toppo, Fr. Paschal Dung Dung, Fr. Nicholas Kerketta, Bro. Dominic Indwar and Bro. Aloysius Indwar and others. These vocations were the fruit of the family atmosphere of welcome, faith and joy described in our Constitutions as the most efficacious setting for the discovery and guidance of vocations (cf. C 37).

Father Paul was still parish priest of Naharkatia in 1963. He was a very hard worker and by September 1962, with the help of benefactors he had built a beautiful parish church, a convent with a school for girls, the fathers residence and a place for the boarders. He was in the process of collecting funds for a new school for boys. His provincial described those years of his at Naharkatia in these words "He had worked and suffered much for the last ten years". [A letter of Fr. Alessi to the provincial of Milan Dt. 20.9.62].

Tezpur

Another centre which blossomed with the missionary zeal of Father Paul was Tezpur. It is not clear when he actually went there. It must have been when he came back to India after his well deserved holidays in the second half of 1963 or early 1964. He was Rector of the Bishops House and the Vicar General of the Diocese by March 1965. It was Bishop Marengo

who had taken him to Tezpur to help him in the establishment of the new diocese. Here too we are able to see great zeal and vision. He helped his bishop wholeheartedly in the organising of the diocese together with his dear friend Brother Pancolini. The priests I met in Tezpur spoke very highly of Father Paul and of the way he helped establish mission centres which could be self sufficient. The diocesan priests were quite attached to him and would often come and visit him when father was at Siliguri. He extended the boarding, enlarged the Cathedral and bought various plots of land for future parishes.

His work at Tezpur was truncated in 1968 when he was given a quit order and asked to leave the country. This event left a deep wound in him which affected his health and his attitudes. He was no more the same out-going and free person. He developed a number of fears and suspicions which affected his work and his attitude to people. However his strong will and determination were not crushed. He went to Italy in August 1969 with the hope that he would one day return. He was allowed to come back and work anywhere except the North East. He opted to come to the province of Calcutta. Father Stroscio welcomed him and the province received him with open arms. The heart of father Paul, however, was in Assam and his opting for Calcutta was with the hope of being able in time to go back to his beloved Assam. He arrived in Calcutta on the 31st. of March 1970. After a short stay in the then COP, he reached Siliguri by the end of August 1970.

Siliguri

On his arrival at Siliguri he found the residence completed (present teachers quarters) and over 39 acres of land. Father Venia (RIP) had done a lot of spade work to put this land in order with the hope of starting an agricultural school with the help of Brother Jacob Ettil (RIP). Father Paul set to work on

the land but soon realised that all efforts were futile. At one moment some even thought of selling the property and of buying a new one near the town. Father Paul strongly resisted the proposal. He had a new vision for Siliguri, this fast developing town of North Bengal. With the approval of the superiors he set about building a new and spacious residence. At that time the town of Siliguri had no good school for boys. Father Paul set about planning for this and started the school in January 1973 with just seven boys on the rolls in class seven. As location he chose the ground floor of the present teachers quarters. Father was a great source of encouragement to these first boys. He would come and take classes for them and make them look forward to the day when they would have a brand new school of which they could be proud off.

After having completed the school his heart was not at rest. He would often dream of a parish church and a lovely parish where every confrere could find ample opportunity of fulfilling his priestly ministry. With this in mind he started a small boarding for the boys of the Tea Garden workers. This, later, grew into the Savio Centre. He saw the need of having a group of sisters to help in the animation and catechesis of the parish and so he invited the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians and established the convent for them. With the help of his benefactors he put up a dispensary and a boarding for primary children. In the midst of all this activity he found time to visit the people regularly and he was much sought after as a spiritual guide by priests and religious of the Jalpaiguri diocese.

As the years passed he became aware of his failing health. Diabetes did not make things any easier. His eyes began to fail him. His indomitable spirit could not be brought low. He still had two more dreams to complete - a parish church and a non formal school. The occasion of the centenary celebration

of the death of Don Bosco made him propose to his benefactors the building of a beautiful shrine in honour of our Saintly Founder. He gradually got the needed funds and the Shrine became a reality in May 1993 with the collaboration of all the communities at Don Bosco Siliguri.

Gold Medal from Parabiago

The people of his native town Parabiago were always supportive of all his dreams and projects. They truly loved him and felt a sense of pride at all he had been able to do with their generous help and support. On the 26th of September 1993 He was awarded the title "Parabiaghese d'oro" by a cultural centre in his own home town. The letter announcing it has this to say "We believe that this choice could not be better because our Father Paul, following in the footsteps of Blessed Mazzucconi (a missionary martyr who had studied at Parabiago), has dedicated his entire life for the poor people of far away India. India still keeps calling him. Father had in fact thought of definitively returning to his native place for rest... now however he will return to 'His beloved India' to spend to the last his energy alongside 'His People' whom he feels are an integral part of his life." Yes Father Paul had fallen in love again with the people in and around Siliguri. Providence, however had other plans for him and asked of him this ultimate sacrifice of dying and being buried away from the people he loved to the very end.

Love for Don Bosco

Don Paolo had another deep love which filled his life; it was his love for our father Don Bosco. He was like the morning star in the midst of the clouds, like the moon in the night and like the sun at noon day. Father Paul could never stop talking about Don Bosco and make him known especially to the boys.

His Life of Prayer

One may wonder where all this activity came from. On close scrutiny one could find in Father Paul a very simple but convinced spirit of piety. He was up early every morning, no matter what the season, to give the first hours of the day to his beloved Lord. He never missed his breviary and he did his best to pray it in community. He enjoyed community prayer. When his failing sight prevented him from reading the prayers himself he would be there to participate in whatever way he could in the prayer life of the community. The Rosary was always with him. As he moved about one could see him pray his Rosary.

This was more evident during his last years when he could not pray the breviary on account of his failing eyesight. He had a very tender and loving devotion to our Blessed Mother. All her feast days were celebrated well and he hardly missed a Saturday mass in honour of his Dear Mother. He would often meditate on her virtues. He was able to pass on to his people this same love.

The Priest

Father Paul was at all times and in all situations the priest. He was always available to celebrate the sacraments for his people. He would spend hours in the confessional. Whenever he went to the tea gardens or on feast days people would flock to him to make their confession. He would be quite upset when young people were not so regular with their confession. He would go out of his way to see to it that other priests were also present to celebrate this sacrament for his boys. We could say the same about his availability to celebrate the other sacraments. When his health was good he was much sought after as a chaplain and spiritual guide. He was a man of experience

and so he was a great help to the bishop and other priests when they were in need of advice and council.

His Benefactors

Like our father Don Bosco, father Paul kept up a steady relationship with his benefactors. He would correspond with them regularly and keep them well informed about all his plans and projects. He would make it a point to visit them personally when at home. Without the help of his benefactors he would not have been able to build up any of the places he was assigned to. He was deeply grateful to them and remembered them in his daily Eucharist and other prayers. His benefactors were not many but they were very generous in helping all his projects and sponsoring many of the young people he was working for. May the good Lord bless all of them for their great generosity.

His Last Days

It was on the 29th November 1994 at around 3.15pm that our dear father Paul took bad suddenly on his way to the sisters for his usual tea. He found himself very unsteady and called out to a novice to give him a helping hand. He was helped there but soon his condition worsened and with much difficulty he was brought back to his room in the noviciate. He just could not control his limbs. The doctor was informed and came to see him. On his advice we put him into hospital and then arranged to send him to Calcutta. We took him to Calcutta on the 2nd of December 1994. He was admitted into the Woodlands Nursing Home through the kind arrangements made by Father U.P. Sebastian and other confreres at the Provincial house. The Doctors soon realised that they could not do very much for him and so when Father Provincial returned from Burma it was decided to bring him

to the provincial house after a week of steady improvement. He was looked after lovingly by Sr. Cycilia Barla MSMHC, Mrs Maria and the confreres of the provincial house. On the 25th of January 1995 there was a slight deterioration in his condition. In the morning of the 26th he became breathless. Father Bertie Fernandes, Vice Provincial and Rector of the community administered the last rites. He could hardly swallow Holy Communion. The Doctor arrived and advised hospitalisation. He was admitted to the ICU at Woodlands again. His condition steadily grew worse. Even though Brother Abraham was at the hospital, no confrere could be present with him in the ICU when he died at 4.30pm. The body was brought to the Provincial House at 8.30pm and a Mass was offered for the repose of his soul in the Provincial house chapel. Many confrere and faithful of Siliguri wanted to come for the funeral, so it was put for Saturday the 28th of January at 10.00am. Don Paolo's journey with Don Bosco started way back in 1934 and it finally reached its culmination as the bells of the Bandel Basilica rang and he was laid to rest with the other Salesians to celebrate the solemnity of our beloved Father and founder in the Salesian Garden of Paradise. May he rest in peace. "Death for the Salesian is made bright by the hope of entering into the joy of his Lord, and when it happens that a salesian dies working for souls, the Congregation has won a great triumph" (C 54) May his memory unite us who are on pilgrimage with him who is already resting in Christ.

Fr. John Berger
24.05.97

FOR NECROLOGY

Born	10.02.1915	Professed	06.01.1941
Ordained	07.01.1951	Expired	26.01.1995

