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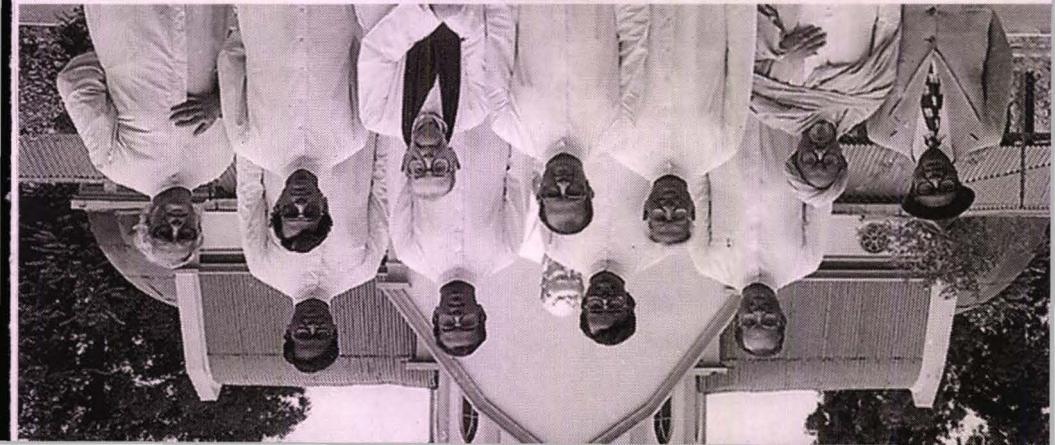
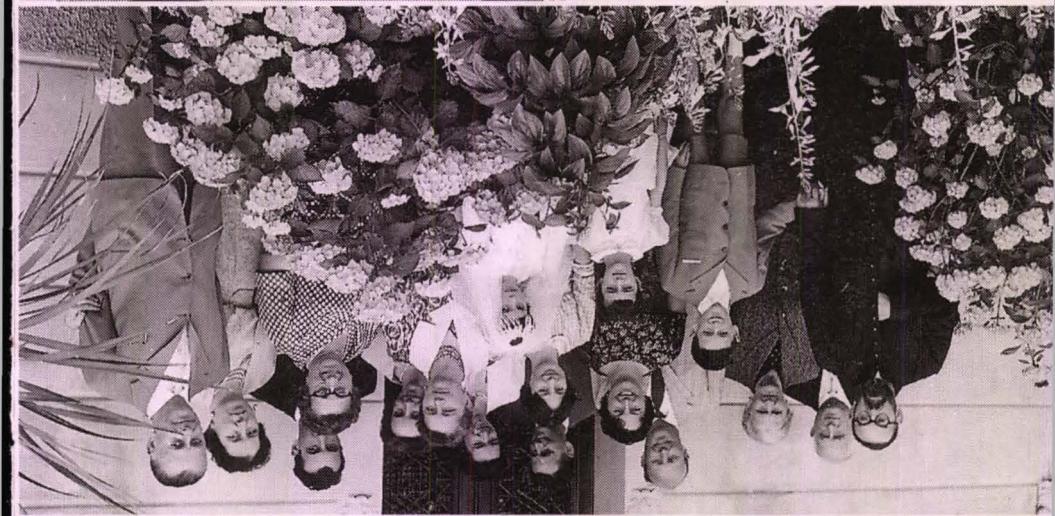
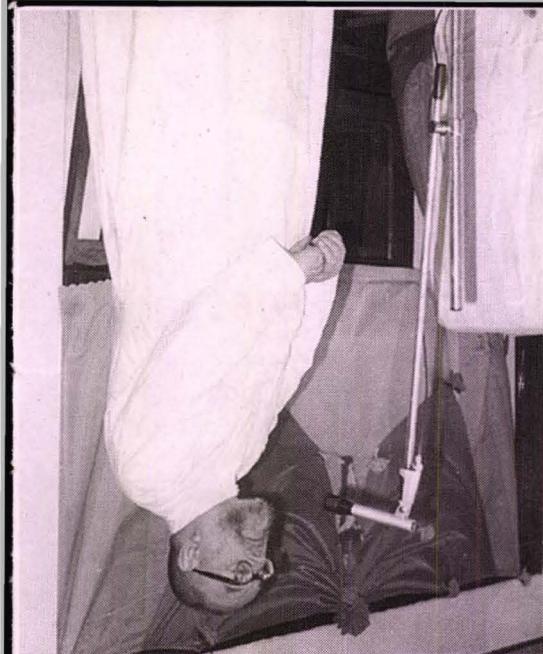
**REV. FR.**

# **PETER TONELLO**

**S.D.B.**

**1903 – 1995**





PROVINCIAL HOUSE  
DON BOSCO  
GUWAHATI 781 001

August 15, 1997

**O**n 20 January, 1995, at 5.15 p.m. at Wintrobe Hospital, Guwahati, there passed away one of our veteran missionaries, Rev. Fr. Peter Tonello, SDB. He was 91. With his demise, a luminary of evangelization vanished from the horizon of Northeast India. He had worked with us and for us; we had loved and admired him, and listened avidly to his animated conversation. Now, he was no more. The long haul of an enthusiastic apostle had come to an abrupt end. One journey was over, and another launched to the shores of eternity, to be with the Eternal High Priest.

### 1. His last moments

Fr. Tonello had gone to the Provincial House, Guwahati, to spend the winter of 1994-1995. On Friday, 20 January, 1995, he was at the Provincial House. In the morning after breakfast, when Fr. Joseph Thelekkatt, the Provincial, enquired about his health his enthusiastic reply was 'magnifico'. During the day, he was his usual self. In the evening, at tea, he was the centre of a spirited conversation. He talked with zest and showed no signs of impending death. He enquired about Bishop Resto who was to return from his visit abroad.

After tea, he went to the room of Fr. Mathew Vellankal to read the newspaper clippings about the Pope's visit to Manila, and then went for a walk with Fr. Benedict Toppo, who happened to be in the Provincial House that day. During the walk, in the playground of Don Bosco School, he said that he was fainting. Fr. Benedict helped him to sit. Dr. Phanbuh, Sr. John Mary and Sr. Goretti – all from Nazareth Hospital, Shillong – also happened to be standing near, and they too came to his assistance. It was a heartstroke and he was immediately rushed to the hospital

which is a mere five minutes drive from the house. However, 15 minutes later he breathed his last. Fr. Provincial, the vice-Provincial and many other Salesians were at his side. He died peacefully after receiving the anointing of the sick and general absolution.

## 2. The Funeral Rites

On that Friday evening, as the news of the death spread, representatives from the religious house of Guwahati and some of the faithful came to offer condolences and prayers. A Requiem Mass was concelebrated at the Cathedral Church, Guwahati, at 7.00 p.m. presided over by his Lordship, Rt. Rev. Thomas Menamparampil, SDB, Bishop of Guwahati.

At 9.45 p.m., the mortal remains of Fr. Tonello were taken to Sacred Heart College, Shillong, where he had been confessor for the last nine years. In the morning of the following day, a large number of religious and faithful attended the concelebrated Eucharist presided over by Fr. Francis Cheeramban, the Vice-Provincial. The body was then taken to the Parish Church at Mawkhar to enable the faithful to pay homage and offer prayers for their beloved former pastor. From there the body was brought to the Shillong Cathedral Church. At 1.00 p.m. on Saturday, 21 January, over fifty priests took part in the concelebrated Mass presided over by Bishop Tarcisius Resto Phanrang, SDB, the Archdiocesan Administrator.

At 5.30 p.m. that day, another Holy Mass was celebrated in the Cathedral. The body was then transferred to the Church at Malki where the faithful kept a vigil of prayer. On Sunday, 22 January, in the morning after Holy Mass, the body was once again taken to Mawkhar, where at another Eucharistic celebration, the people paid homage and prayed for their departed pastor. From Mawkhar the funeral cortège was taken to the Salesian cemetery chapel at Laitumkhrah where a large crowd of priests, religious and faithful had gathered to bid farewell to the dear departed. At 2.45 p.m. after a brief funeral oration by Fr. Sylvanus Lyngdoh, Fr. Peter Schiavon presided over the concelebrated Eucharist. Fr. Provincial conducted the final rites in the

presence of Rt. Rev. Mgr. Tarcisius Resto Phanrang, SDB, the Archdiocesan Administrator. Representatives from the parishes of Mawkhar, Laitumkhrah, Cherrapunjee, Mawlai, and from Sacred Heart College spoke eloquently and with nostalgia on the life and work of Fr. Peter Tonello.

### 3. Life in brief

Born at Fontanella in the Province of Treviso, near Venice, Italy, on 30 October, 1903, Peter was the second son of Francis Tonello and Paolina Maschio. At an early age, he 'left the boats behind' and decided to follow the Lord. He came to Turin and began his studies with the Salesians. It was there that he met some of the great Salesians like Fr. Albera, Fr. Rinaldi, Fr. Francesia and Fr. Cagliero. He also had several opportunities to listen to the missionaries from Latin America, and to Fr. Fasse and Borgatello who had written about India.

Peter went to Ivrea for his novitiate. His novice master was the saintly Fr. Canepa. Some of his novitiate companions were Frs. Igino, Foglia and Tome, and Bro. Ferraris. Peter made his first profession on 4 October, 1921. Novitiate over, he went for higher studies to Valsalice where he remained for two years.

Fr. Tonello fondly recalled his practical training years in Turin with Blessed Callistus Caravario, the Salesian martyr in China. Speaking of his coming to India, Fr. Tonello once spoke to Fr. George Plathottam, the editor of the Guwahati 'Newsline', "Callistus had applied to go to China. I too wanted to go there. But the Assam missions were beckoning me. The Salesian Bulletin from Assam used to bring us exciting news about the missions. Further, my cousin, Aurelius Maschio, had already preceded me to Assam."

In 1925, the Golden Jubilee year of the Salesian Missions, Tonello and his companions received their missionary crucifix from Fr. Rinaldi at the Basilica of Mary, Help of Christians, Turin. In November, they set sail for Marseilles on their way to India. Mgr. Mathias received them at Shillong.

He started his theological studies at Our Lady's House, Shillong. The professors were Mgr. Ferrando, Fr. Tome, Fr. Gutierrez, Fr. Comba and others. As a student of theology he also taught in St. Anthony's School along with Fr. Joseph Bacchiarello. He was also delighted when he got the chance to tour Sohryngkham, Mawpdang and other villages. November 9, 1929, was the happiest day in his life. It was on that memorable day that he and his companions were ordained priests by Archbishop Perier, S. J. of Calcutta.

#### 4. Apostolate and Mission

Soon after his ordination, Fr. Tonello was appointed assistant parish priest at the Cathedral of Shillong where Fr. Vendrame was the parish priest. Along with Fr. Vendrame, he started touring the Bhoi country, the Maram area, Mairang, Nongstoin, Smit, Nongkrem, Jongksha, Mawryngkneng and other areas. The following year, 1930, he was appointed Catechist at Don Bosco, Guwahati. He was there with Fr. Scuderi. He liked the boys and found them good. He also came in contact with the pioneering missionaries of the Assam plains, Fr. Piasecki and Fr. Marmol. But his stay at Guwahati was short. The next year, 1931, he was back in the Cathedral parish once again as assistant parish priest. From the year 1937 to 1940 he was the assistant parish priest at Cherrapunjee. From 1940 to 1945 he served as the first parish priest of Mawlai. It was first thought that he could take over from Fr. Bago and look after the Maram, Nongstoin, Marbisu and Bhoi country regions. Fr. Foglia, however, shared some of the regions and Fr. Tonello was placed as parish priest of Mawlai and in charge of the Bhoi country.

From 1946 up to 1959 he was parish priest of Cherrapunjee. Subsequently, up to 1967, we find him as parish priest of Mawkhar, Shillong, where Frs. Ivan Giacomello and Albert Correngia were his assistants. In 1967, he was once again posted as assistant parish priest of the Cathedral parish where he had a long stint of 19 years. On 31 May, 1986, he came to Sacred Heart College, Mawlai, Shillong, where he spent the last nine years of

his life. He would often thank the superiors for sending him there where he felt himself young again in the company of the students of theology. There as confessor he rendered spiritual assistance to young Salesians and generated missionary enthusiasm in everyone.

## 5. The missionary

In 1925, Rev. Fr. Philip Rinaldi, the then Rector Major of the Salesian Society, organized an extraordinarily big group of Salesians to go to the various missions in the world on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the first Salesian missionary expedition. Fr. Tonello spoke of the privilege of belonging to this special group (*una grande spedizione missionaria*). Even after 70 long years of missionary life, his enthusiasm did not wane in the least. He spoke in glorious terms about his missionary work, and his bubbling missionary zeal spilt over to others. Even at 91, he was as aglow with zeal as in 1925 when he first set foot in India.

His total commitment to the missions right from his youthful years was remarkable. He talked with great earnestness about the pioneering missionaries. He could go on narrating endless stories about the versatile aspects of Fr. Vendrame, 'the apostle of the Khasi Hills' : his stamina, his impressive preaching style, his vigorous village tours, his family visits, his friendly chats with people, his use of magic lantern and bioscope. Fr. Tonello once said that Fr. Vendrame was not a man of many words, but he watched and observed and picked up a lot of things from him. The 'Apostle' presented Christ as Saviour with great conviction, and showed the uniqueness of the Catholic Church.

Fr. Tonello became a great missionary after the example of his mentor, and continued to nurture the communities left behind by the latter. He trekked long hours in the Ri-Bhoi, Ri-Khasi and Ri-War areas reaching out to the Khasis, the Karbis, the Tiwas. Even in his old age he continued to cherish a great love for the missions by encouraging and helping the missionaries in the field. The grand old man would sum up his past adventures and achievements with the emphatic "I myself was there", which became a buzz

word for many. But everything he said had a reference to souls. He took keen interest in young missionaries passing out from Sacred Heart Theological College. He showed his love and concern for them by writing to them often and offering financial support whenever possible. The new missions of Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Mizoram won his predilection. His missionary zeal was evidently born out of his love for Christ, the church and the people.

Before he went on a village tour, he would prepare all the things necessary for two weeks or so. There used to be a special basket (a big basket called the 'Khoh') in which tea, sugar, condensed milk and other tinned foodstuff were packed and carried by porters of the village where he was to go. He would send word beforehand to keep hot water ready for him to wash or bathe, and also water for making tea. Tea, sugar or milk were not available in those parts of the Bhoi area. Arrangements, such as the house for the priest to stay, were left in the hands of the catechist or the Rangbah Balang, the Church elder. The people provided the simple food they could afford.

Once he reached the village, Fr. Tonello would visit the sick, give the sacraments, conduct Jingiaseng (prayer meeting), offer Holy Mass, and visit the non-Christians. He would stay in a particular village for one or two days, and the whole tour would last one or two weeks. Fr. Tonello found the people simple and good, and they accepted the faith quite easily. They discovered in the Catholic Church the culmination of their religious practices and the fulfilment of their spiritual aspirations. He would refrain from threatening with hell-fire, as was the practice with many a protestant preacher of the day, but would present Christ as the harbinger of eternal life.

Fr. Tonello looked upon the catechists as key persons for evangelization. They accompanied him everywhere, and with them at his side, he had access to all villages. Many of the catechists did an excellent job, and contributed a big share to the spread of the Church in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. Some of the Christian denominations opposed the missionary, and tried to vilify the Church, accusing it, for instance, of

worshipping Mary. But that did not deter him from approaching them and preaching the Word to them, and some of them were also converted.

Like the other missionaries, Fr. Tonello too tried to combine preaching with education and care of the sick. He opened small schools wherever possible, and distributed whatever medicines he could afford. In line with the traditions set up by Fr. Vendrame, he founded flourishing sodalities and associations for all sections of Catholics – for the adults, the youth, the children, both for men and women, for boys and girls. As it was for Fr. Vendrame, the magic lantern and the bioscope came in handy during the village tours to attract the people and teach the faith.

The people were extremely poor in those days. Poverty, sickness and hardship were the lot of the missionary as well. Malaria, rheumatism and other ailments nagged Fr. Tonello, but he forged ahead with the mission entrusted to him. In all his apostolic endeavours he found in Bishop Ferrando an understanding father who encouraged initiatives, even though he had an immensely vast area under his jurisdiction. Later, Archbishop D'Rosario also supported him in his work. Fr. Tonello firmly believed that Christian families should be stable and well-knit, and tried to inculcate in everyone that ideal. He was glad that, as the years progressed, boys in the families were being looked after better than in the earlier years.

An embodiment of the Salesian priest, Fr. Tonello was a fatherly figure. In his younger days, perhaps, he was not as paternal as he was in his old age. He was rather pedantic; orders given by him had to be obeyed, or he would give a shouting or even report to the Bishop. However, like Don Bosco, he was a priest everywhere, and exercised his priestly ministry till the end. He was concerned about fostering vocations, prayed often for vocations, and also urged others to pray.

## 6. The man

As a man, he was remarkable for his nobility, childlike simplicity and sense of humour. His dignified and charismatic

personality was transparent whenever one met him. He was a righteous man, and always courteous. He always had something to say to everyone, and no one felt left out in his company.

He was a man of action. Once he became convinced of an idea, he went about doing it with singular determination and tenacity. He had his plans and clear-cut goals. Someone said of him, "Fr. Tonello did things very fast. He would never put off for tomorrow what he could do today." This hurry and insistence on getting things done quickly, as it were, at times annoyed some, but he proved the truth of the words, 'If you want to do many things, begin with one thing at once'.

He was simple and frank. He had suggestions and plans for all categories of people and different types of work done in parishes, formation houses, schools or youth centre. There was a modicum of truth in what he said, everyone was convinced.

A lover of life, Fr. Tonello did not talk much about death, certainly not about his own! He knew how to take care of himself. He took sufficient rest, food and medicine. Without any apology he enjoyed the simple things of life. He was also concerned about the health of others. In the theologate especially his heart went out to anyone who was not keeping well. He did not hesitate to offer him his own medicines. He would advise those going to Assam and Garo Hills, "Remember to take your mosquito net... Take care of your health." We can say he had a zest for life and lived it to the full. He was so happy and so full of life till the very last as though challenging with St. Paul, "O Death, where is thy sting?"

Gratitude was another hallmark of his personality. He practised it towards others, and wanted it for himself too. Ingratitude pained and upset him. To the students of theology of Sacred Heart College he was 'student leader', 'Fr. Tony'. They were his fans and he led them by the heart. Welcoming the new Brothers was one of the most memorial events every year, when each of the new students was recruited as his faithful 'follower'. He was 91, and yet very much 'a youth'.

He had human weaknesses and frailties like all of us. He loved subterfuges and euphemisms but his simplicity and passionate love eclipsed and transformed these liabilities into assets that gave him a special lustre. Indeed he was truly loving and lovable.

## 7. The Religious

As a religious, he loved his vocation and was very grateful for the call he received. He was very attached to the congregation and would often fondly reminisce about his early days at the oratory of Valdocco. He loved Don Bosco and Mary Help of Christians. He showed great enthusiasm for the growth of the congregation and encouraged many youngsters to become Salesians. It gave him immense joy to see and hear about the growth of the congregation and about his confreres excelling in many fields. He often expressed anguish at the dearth of vocations in Italy and the rest of Europe.

A Salesian to the core, he upheld the noble traditions of the family. He acted Salesian, talked Salesian, was jealously Salesian. His world was very much Salesian. This was evidenced also by his out-going, pastoral attitudes. While walking along the road, he would not bypass any youngster. He would stop, 'salute' him and enquire where he was going and what he was doing. He would want to ascertain if he was attending Holy Mass on Sundays or if he was regular at the afternoon Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. Corrections and tips would be given whenever needed. However, he was not in the habit of doling out money all too easily. He would suggest to anyone who came to him for money to look for a job and get employed. As a result, hardly anyone would come to him for financial help.

One of his concerns was to see the Salesian confreres excelling in every way. He would often ask a Brother in the theologate whether he was able to play any musical instrument. If the answer was 'no', he would encourage him to learn something as this would be of great help in the missions.

He was a man of prayer. He rose early and celebrated the Eucharist with devotion. He was faithful to all the practices of piety. He loved community prayer and recited it loud and clear. If he was not at his desk, he was found reciting the rosary, making visits to the Blessed Sacrament and to Our Lady. He taught many to pray both by word and example. He was quite meticulous about rubrics and liturgical rules and regulations.

He was fond of preaching. He did it with missionary zeal and with a loud and clear voice, in full command of the Khasi language. While he was at Sacred Heart College, he was always available for pastoral assistance at Mawlai Parish. Sunday morning mass and the afternoon benediction of the Blessed Sacrament were his privileged moments. Only in his last year, he ceased from these activities because of his failing health. Whenever called upon, he gladly accepted to give talks (especially goodnight talks) to the students of theology. He prepared himself for these occasions with the help of others. His limited knowledge of English did not deter him from talking with ardour and conviction. The language mistakes he made only reinforced the message and made it unforgettable. His catch-words and phrases (such as, 'What to do? Such is life! Do your own thing!') entered into the repertoire not only of the theologate community but also of the whole province.

He was an example of obedience. He literally obeyed whatever the superiors told him to do. As a Parish Priest he would not take up any project or enterprise without first consulting the bishop or the superiors. He was a zealous missionary, but very prudent. He loved and respected superiors and confreres and taught the boys and others to do the same. Fr. John Kalapura recalls how when Fr. Tonello was in the Cathedral Church of Shillong, he would himself call together the boarding boys for the rosary, night prayer and good night talk by the provincial. He did this contrary to his custom of retiring early to bed after supper.

He had a sense of belonging to the communities to which he was assigned. This was particularly seen in the community of Sacred Heart College. He was like a patriarch

among the staff and students. He took keen interest in each and every one, and in the various activities of the community. His dynamic presence everywhere and at every programme spoke volumes for his community spirit. He visited the staff and students in their rooms or offices. With paternal solicitude he provided many gifts for the community that would enable the young to develop their talents: computers, musical instruments, P.A. system, and games and sports articles. He loved his community and wanted it to have the best.

The nobility of heart and holiness of life of Fr. Tonello were seen in the goodness and joy he radiated wherever he worked. His presence in any company lent an elevating, inspiring and, of course, entertaining touch. To him the world seemed to be "charged with the grandeur of God". He was never let down by life's whims and fancies. He could be ninetyone and thirtyone at the same time. No wonder, young Salesians particularly enjoyed his company immensely. How he could enjoy a picnic, a volleyball match, a film, if he knew the young confreres liked them!

Not by any stretch of imagination was he a grumpy old man. Not for him the prophecies of doom! Sanguine and optimistic by temperament, he believed in and looked forward to the future. The marvellous developments taking place in Northeast India filled him with enthusiasm. He welcomed new ventures, ideas and projects. No doubt, he loved the glorious past but that did not prevent him from appreciating the present generation.

For quite a number of years that we knew him, he was the fatherly figure personified. Little acts of fatherly kindness came natural to him. He would never miss an opportunity for a word in the ear, a piece of advice for everyone. He loved to get money and gifts, but nothing was hoarded. All the gifts he received were in turn gifted away generously.

## 8. Conclusion

Fr. Tonello was born 15 years after the death of our Father and Founder, Don Bosco. His boyhood days were

spent in the cradle of our congregation, in the rooms and fields hallowed by our Father. He was formed and nurtured by the first members of our congregation, many of whom were noted for their sanctity. Reaching Northeast India three years after the arrival of the pioneering missionaries, he was a witness to the miracle of Mary, Help of Christians in that region. He contributed his share to make that miracle happen. He lived with many of the confreres who by their sweat and sacrifice advanced the growth of the Church and the Province. Thus he was an eminent link with the glorious heritage of our society. In the words of Archbishop Thomas Menampampil, with the demise of Fr. Tonello, we are losing one of the firm pioneering roots. Out of seventyfour years of his religious commitment, seventy years were spent in Northeast India, and precisely in the Khasi Hills. His life and thought will always remain with us as a legacy. May his soul rest in peace!

*Yours fraternally,*

**Fr. Anthony Lendakadavil, SDB**

**FOR NECROLOGY**

<i>Born</i>	:	30 October, 1903
<i>Professed</i>	:	04 October, 1921
<i>Ordained</i>	:	09 November, 1929
<i>Expired</i>	:	20 January, 1995

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