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1999

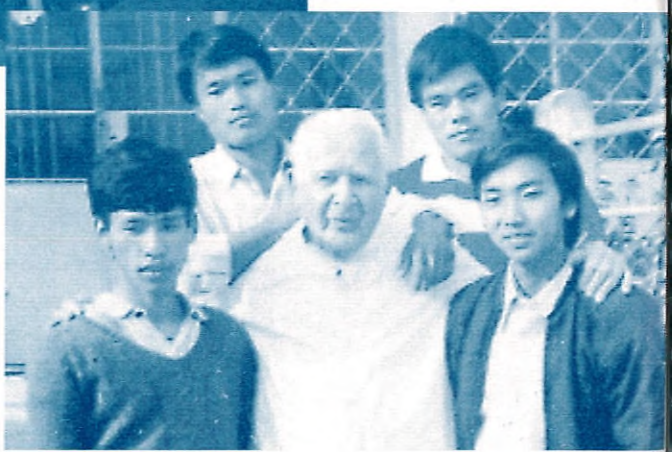
Rev. Fr. FELIX BOLLINI

S.D.B.

In his younger days

1993 :
Celebrating
his Diamond Jubilee Mass

Enjoys a joke
in the auditorium



1991 : Sunnyside:
Young with the young

Don Bosco Technical School
Shillong – 793 003
Meghalaya

Fr. FELIX BOLLINI, Sdb.

1 HIS LIFE :

Felix was born to Carlo Angelo and Antilla Bai Bollini on 1st April, 1910, at Castellanza, in the Province of Varese, northern Italy. He was the second among four boys and two girls. He was baptized on 3rd.

Castellanza used to be a small peaceful town dotted with a number of textile mills. Felix completed his elementary schooling there. After he had completed class VI at the age of 12, he left school for a job in one of the mills. His work was bleaching clothes. His father was an electrician who taught and passed his trade on to his son. In fact it was Fr. Bollini who was called on later to see to the electrical works in the cathedral of Shillong, in Don Bosco Technical School, Shillong, and in some other institutions in and around the city.

Young Felix used to be deeply impressed by the exemplary and devout life of the asstt. priest of his parish, Fr. Hubert Mombelli. At the age of 18, he heard the faint voice of God in his heart, which voice became clearer day by day. He decided to give himself a try. Fr. Hubert took him to the Seminary in Milan where they were told that there was no more room. Next they went to a Salesian house at Ivrea. There the Rector, Fr. Rossi "assured me that though the house was full to capacity, he would make some place for me." He was taken in on 29th December, 1928.

He studied in the missionary aspirantate of Ivrea four years before being accepted for the Assam missions. His companions were Frs. Albera, Cogliandro and Jellici. He was admitted to the novitiate on 5th September, 1932, was given the cassock on 11th.

Felix joined the next missionary expedition to India, and arrived in Shillong on 4th November, 1932. He joined the novitiate on 10th December, and placed himself under the guidance of Fr. Stephen Ferrando, the then Novice Master. After his first profession on 11th December, 1933, he went and studied philosophy in Our Lady's House, Shillong, two years, and then was sent to Guwahati for regency. In 1935 he appeared for matric and passed in I Division.

Considering his age, the superiors allowed him to make his perpetual profession on 11th December, 1936, in Guwahati. In 1939 he was back in Shillong to study theology in Sacred Heart College, Mawlai.

When World War II broke out, Bollini, along with most Italian missionaries, was interned in the concentration camps of Dehra Dun and Deoli. The theology classes continued there in the camps. On January 30, 1943, Fr. Bollini was ordained priest in the concentration camp at Deoli, by an Italian Bishop, Mons. Benedict Cialeo, O.P., himself an internee in the camp.

On his release from the camp on 11th February, 1944, Fr. Bollini was appointed administrator of the Salesian house in Saharanpur, U.P., where he remained only a very short time. In 1945, he was appointed to the mission at Barpeta Road. Happy to be back in the mission-fields of Assam, Fr. Bollini put his heart and soul in his work. In 1946 the Government asked the British missionaries to leave Assam. Fr. Felix was sent to Golaghat to take the place of Fr. John Bennet, an English Salesian. He reached Golaghat on 6th December, 1946, and worked there till 1969, first as asstt. priest, then as parish priest and rector.

In 1969, the Assam Government asked the foreign missionaries to leave. Fr. Bollini prefered to stay on in Northeast India; so he came to the Khasi Hills. He was

appointed administrator in Don Bosco Technical School, Shillong. In 1976 he was sent to Umran to begin the St. Joseph's Agricultural Centre. 2 years after, he was made the first parish priest of the newly erected parish of Umsning where he remained till 1989, in which year the parish was handed over to the diocesan clergy. In July that year he suffered a stroke which would affect him for the rest of his life. But his strong will brought him through quite marvellously, thanks also to the care of the students of Sacred Heart College, Mawlai, where he stayed from July to November 1989. What remained till his last years was only a slight limp in right leg.

Subsequently he stayed in Sunnyside (1990 - '91), Nongthymmai parish (end of 1991 - '92). In 1992, he was sent to Don Bosco's again as Confessor. "I like this community. There are a lot of changes, but the spirit is the same." He was to remain here till his death in November, 1999.

II A MISSIONARY IN THE FIELD :

The real missionary years of Fr. Bollini began in Golaghat where he gave a score plus three of his prime years. In his diary, he wrote : "Thus I began the best 23 years of my missionary life ... all in the mission of Golaghat. At that time there was no other mission centre in the whole of Jorhat district, Karbi-Anglong, Nagaland and Manipur areas."

Arriving there on 6th December, 1946, he made the first tour on 21st. The following year Fr. Bollini made a 24-day long tour to all the christian communties in the parish. He writes : "The tours in Golaghat parish were long and adventurous."

28th December, 1950, remains a red-letter day : 5 Nagas of the Lotha tribe came from Lakhuti to the mission at Golaghat and invited Fr. Bollini to go to Lakhuti. He went and reached Lakhuti village on 19th March, 1951. Unfortunately, Fr. Bollini was "unable to keep touring due to physical impossibility as well as many restrictions." It was the beginning of the mission to the Lotha Nagas.

It was Fr. Bollini who started in 1953 the 15-day catechical instruction for the boys and girls of the parish. Resourceful as he was, in the same year, he started the different associations in the parish. On 4th October, 1966, he also started the ***Christian Deposits*** in the centre with a view to saving the people from the ruthless money lenders. He then started the ***Dhan Gola*** (Grain Bank) in the villages for the people against the lean seasons.

On 3rd July, 1968, Fr. Bollini purchased 7 diesel pumpsets for the different villages for the purpose of irrigation. He also provided handpumps in order to give people drinking water.

He also initiated schemes for better houses. The mission extended financial assistance to those who needed it. "Almost all paid back the amount in full, except one community."

All that was in Golaghat.

When he went to Umsning, the valiant missionary was already 66. His zeal was still on the spurs, but his body lagged behind. However, the good work continued.

Towards the end of his life, Fr. Bollini would derive great consolation from the fact that he gave the best years of his life to mission work : 23 years in Golaghat, 14 years in Umsning.

In November 1995, the Shillong Archdiocese awarded tokens of gratitude to all the foreign missionaries who came and worked in the Archdiocese. Fr. Bollini was one of those awarded the missionary plaque.

In his mission work, Fr. Bollini was guided by solid convictions.

Mission work starts with the missionary himself :

- If Jesus is in me, then it is him I shall preach. If Jesus is not in me, then my preaching is emptiness. (From one of his notebooks)
- Never say no to God. (Resolution no. 1. : Retreat 1986)

- Only those missionaries who live in the state of grace and consequently have God in their souls can efficiently bring people to God and God to people. (Reflection in a notebook)

Human elements interfering with God's work :

- Let not the barriers of nationality spoil our work. In the work of God there are no boundaries.
- Let's not restrict ourselves to the small territory of the mission or house in which we are working.
- Let's work for the glory of God and not for our own. Much of the mission has been spoiled by petty quarrels.
- By this time, the whole world would have embraced christianity if all the missionaries had worked for God only.
- The crisis of these days is more than anything else the crisis of prayer. We persons consecrated to God do not pray enough and consequently lose contact with God and become spiritually dry, and we convey the same disease to our christians.

(Collected from his notebooks)

His care and concern for the poor and the sick :

In the mission field, Fr. Bollini had a very special concern for the poor and the sick.

- "Have we any obligation? Yes, towards the sick and the poor." (His diary : 24 July, 1970)
- Never say no to poor and sick people [(Resolution no. 2. : Retreat 1986) This is one of the many instances of Fr. Bollini's personal concern for the sick.]
- In June 1968, the following was one of his retreat mementos : "My sufferings for the poor, the sick and the dying."

- His concern for the christians of his mission in Golaghat was shown also in his concern for their safety whenever they were terrorised by marauding leopards and tigers that stalked people and cattle in the Tea Gardens and villages. In one of his copy books, there are sketches of traps that he made. He used to narrate with honest pride that he had trapped and killed more than 64 leopards and tigers in and around Golaghat. The first leopard was caught at Pholongi on 11th April, 1954. "The christians have been asking me to get rid of these wild animals which destroy their cattle. With the help of boys I made 3 traps and sent them to these villages." The chronicles continues : "During my stay I also became famous as a hunter of tigers and leopards. My exploits were printed and published in newspapers. In fact I removed quite a number of dangerous animals with my gun as well as with traps. I had to do it to protect the lives of my simple christians." How different those times were from ours !

(III) HIS LAST DAYS :

Fr. Bollini's last obedience was in 1992 to be a confessor in Don Bosco's, Shillong. Especially after that, he became increasingly dependent when the debility of old age and the weakness of infirmities conspired against the spirit of this tenacious soldier of Christ. Even earlier than 1997, he was described as having entered his second childhood. A man of strong will and otherwise strong physique, it was not always easy to get him to agree and do what it was thought was best for him in the circumstance.

On 26 March, 1999, he complained : "I am not doing any work." Dr. (Col.) A.C. Khanna explained : "You have done your share of work, and now you are given time to sit and rest." Fr. Bollini did not leave it at that, and retorted : "Yes, that is one way of speaking about it."

That year his health deteriorated steadily, particularly in the latter part of the year, till he passed away quietly on 20th November, at the age of 89.

IV OUR RECOLLECTIONS OF FR. BOLLINI :

a. Fr. Bollini leaves behind an enviable pile of notebooks and copy books, all handwritten, except one that was typed. They contain quotations and anecdotes, inspirations that he had collected over the years from the books he had read, or from conversations; others contain sermon notes, retreat talks, Sunday homilies, good random thoughs and generalities to be used on random occasions. He seems to have been a good reader; that was the mainstay of his religious life and priestly ministry. His writings make an interesting perusal.

   His journals contain his reflections on his missionary experiences, on his priestly ministry or religious life, his conversations with Jesus and Mary.

b. Confreres remember Fr. Bollini as a man who was "strict with himself and with others". He was a tremendous worker. As a "faithful religious", even if he disagreed with what they said, he would always end up obeying his superiors.

   As a confessor, he was available also to many priests and religious from other communities. On 20th March, 1999, I went into the TV hall to inform Fr. Bollini that there was someone wanting to make his confession. Without a moment's hesitation, he characteristically said "Ready!", then struggled to his feet and followed me.

c. On 17th July, 1947, Fr. Bollini started his first retreat talk to the Salesian Sisters at Mawlai : "I'll try to be short; but if notwithstanding this I'll make you sleep, then recall the saying of St. Theresa : *God loves his children even when they sleep.*"

Then he went on to say , "One favour I want to ask you, and it is this : Please do not come to the sermons only to correct the English mistakes that I make. This will avail you nothing. You will have a chance of doing this after the retreat."

On 23 March, 1999, I met him in the morning and asked him : "How are you, Fr. Bollini?" He replied : "Exactly like I was yesterday: one nose, two eyes, ... "

On 1st April, 1998, a few of us went into his room to wish him for his birthday. He did not forget that everyone knows that it was Fools Day. To our greeting, he promptly replied : "Yes, I keep my birthday on 1st of April. I do not know what you keep."

18th August one year in Don Bosco's, it was Fr. Bollini's turn for the goodnight talk. A certain Brother who was celebrating his birthday the next day, and who did not want Father to announce it, sidled to Fr. Bollini and whispered into his ear : "Father, please do not say anything about my birthday tomorrow." Fr. Bollini nodded consent. Sure enough, he went up and started : "Brother so-and-so told me not to say anything about his birthday tomorrow. So I shall not say anything about it."

The above are just a few from among the many incidents from the wit-and-humour of Fr. Bollini.

V EPITAPH :

In the prayer book of Fr. Bollini there was a picture, a souvenir, with a life-programme drawn up for him by his auntie :

Al mio caro nipote Felice per ricordo della S. Cresima
ricevuta il 25 Agosto, 1918 :
Desidero che in tutta la tua vita non mai contristi lo Spirito
Santo col peccato
e sempre ne segui le ispirazioni sue Divine.

Tua aff.ma zia
Sd/- Suor Crocifissa Bollini

VI DBTS's FAREWELL :

The community of Don Bosco's was witness to the ups and downs, the pains and struggles of Fr. Bollini. Everyone of us, at different times, in different ways, shared the cheerful and the painful moments of his last years, rallying equally to his side to enjoy and admire his wit and humour, as well as to his support whenever chance or circumstance seemed bent on catching him off guard, or to take advantage of his absent-mindedness. The last months, weeks and then days, we helplesly watched him waste away, inspite of all our efforts to stay, or at least to slow down the process of imminent decay, as he receded further and further away till he finally vanished beyond the horizon across a thousand hills. There in his eternal abode, MAY HE REST IN PEACE FOREVER.

Dated Shillong
the February 20, 2001

Fr. Roland Kharkrang, SDB
Rector

For the necrology :

Fr. FELIX BOLLINI

Born on 01-04-10

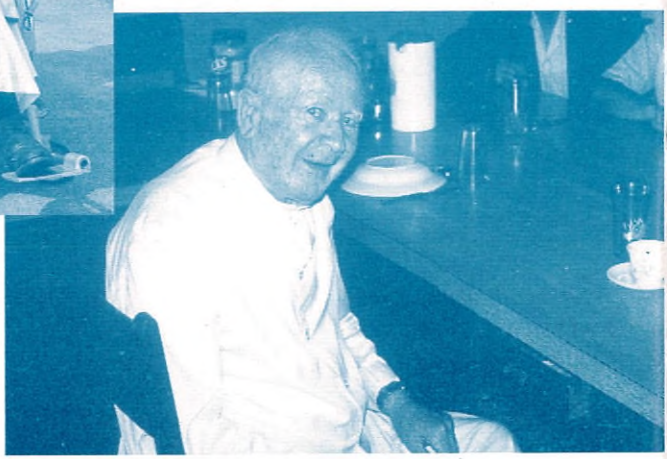
Died in Shillong (ING) on 20-11-99

Aged 89.

2B 1205

1995 : Missionary Award

In the footsteps of the master

1999 : With nephew, Fr. Anthony Della Bella, and his attendant, Ignatius Lyngdoh

1997 : The joy of the table company