

REV. BROTHER
MICHAEL ČAHOJ S.D.B.



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DIED ON
1ST JULY 1994



His Loved Ones



It was 22.30 hours, July 1st, the first Friday of the month. I was at Br. Michael's bedside anxious to assist him in any way I could as he stood on the threshold of his New Life with the Lord. Three hours earlier, in the presence of ten other Salesians, he had been anointed with the Oil of Strength for the Sick. Now it was certain that his time to depart had come.

At 22.40 hours I had the joy of imparting to him the Papal Blessing and of whispering into his ears: "vi dono l'anima mia: I give you my heart and my soul," as he breathed his last.

The Last Days, Death and the Funeral

In and out of Nazareth Hospital, Shillong, for the last few years, Br. Michael had, as it were, come to like the hospital and the care he received at the hands of the Sisters and the Staff. On 23rd June, he complained of difficulty in breathing and was rushed to the hospital by Fr. Thomas Edamattath in the nick of time. By the end of the month he showed signs of improvement and the doctors intended to discharge him and continue the treatment at home.

On 1st July, however, his condition suddenly deteriorated. But when I visited him in the evening, he greeted me and proved that he still possessed his characteristic sense of humour despite his struggle to breathe. The doctor, however, informed me that his condition was irrevocable and that no further treatment was possible as his body would not respond to treatment anymore.

By now some ten confreres had gathered round him and I gave him the anointing, after which he was moved to the Intensive Care Unit. There his condition worsened. He survived a heart attack a little later but succumbed to a second one at 22.40 hours with the words of the Papal Blessing and "I give you my heart and my soul" ringing in his ears.

The mortal remains of Br. Michael were brought to Savio Juniorate late in the evening and placed in the chapel. I presided over a concelebrated Requiem Mass with all the inmates of the house.

The Mass over, the body was placed on a table beautifully decorated by the Salesian Sisters and Novices of Bellefonte. Soon there was a constant

flow of visitors, who came to pay their last respects to Br. Michael: Sisters, Brothers, Priests and lay people who knew him. Three bishops, whose dioceses he had once served, paid him their respects.

"How could I not come?" said the 88-year-old Bishop Orestes Marengo, who was not well, as he stepped into Savio Juniorate. That was a tribute to Br. Michael, who was his companion in the three dioceses where he was bishop.

Fr. Joseph Thelekatt, the Provincial, presided over a concelebrated Mass on 2nd evening with Religious and Priests from the various institutions of Shillong.

Another Mass was celebrated for him on 3rd July, attended mostly by the inmates of Savio Juniorate. We gathered round his mortal remains to bid him farewell from the house.

The funeral Mass, held in the renovated Salesian Cemetery at Laitumkrah, was presided over by Bishop Abraham Alangimattathil SDB, assisted by Mons. Marengo and over 50 priests. Mons. Marengo spoke in glowing terms about Br. Michael.

Fr. Provincial, who performed the last rites, gave his tribute to the departed confrere on behalf of all the Salesians. Fr. Pavel Bernick, his fellow countryman, too touched upon his Salesian qualities. One of the aspirants from Savio Juniorate greeted him in the name of all the Salesians and the boys of the institution, his last home. *May he rest in peace.*

A Brief Life Sketch

Br. Michael was born on November 19th, 1911, at Ruskovce in the former Czechoslovakia. He was the youngest of the five children of Lorence Vavrin Cahoj and Mary Michalicka. From birth Michael was sickly and never enjoyed good health all through his life. At birth he was diagnosed as having pneumonia, a sickness he contracted from his mother. Ten days after his birth the doctors forbade his mother from breast-feeding him lest his condition should worsen. His mother was inconsolable as she feared he would die of malnutrition. It certainly weakened his already frail constitution.

Though physically weak, Michael was mentally very sturdy. His life was one long struggle that lasted till his last breath. During his school days there were problems galore. Financial hiccups marred his progress in studies and

his attempts to qualify for a good job. Nevertheless, he kept trying. A ray of hope dawned on him when he began to sense a religious calling. But the going was certainly tough. He made three unsuccessful attempts to enter the local seminary. Nothing could be done, and Michael was back home for some time. It was then that his Bishop introduced him to an SVD missionary. But Michael's delicate health stood in the way. The bishop was sympathetic and offered to employ him as a teacher and organist. But music was not his cup of tea. He failed to qualify in the test and lost the prospect. Back home, with a bleak future and a confused mind, Michael prayed silently. Finally, he decided to learn the trade of a blacksmith and eventually to become an engine driver. He went to a place called Vizovice to learn the trade. The skills that he acquired here stood him in good stead as a missionary in India.

At Vizovice, together with apprenticeship Michael began to awaken to a deeper spiritual thirst. He frequented the Eucharist and made four private pilgrimages a year to a nearby shrine of Our Lady. His good mother kept reminding him that the Religious Vocation was a special gift of God and that he must pray for it daily.

Before long, the years of vigil ended: he was accepted by the Salesians. He relished whatever book he could get hold of on Don Bosco. There were not many available in his mother-tongue as the Salesians had arrived in his country only in 1924. Very few books on Don Bosco had been translated or written. But the few that were available were sufficient to know the Saint and love him, and that Michael did. After a ten-month prenovitiate course, he was admitted to the Salesian Novitiate at Moravia in 1932.

Life in the novitiate was certainly not all cakes and ale. He sure had his share of crosses. Here again his weak physique was the Achilles' heel and the Novice Master wanted to send him away. But the Rector and the Prefect upheld his cause, and they had reasons for doing so: every Salesian is unique in his capabilities. Michael was not a sportsman or a musician but still, he could be a Salesian. "All the works I give him are meticulously carried out," his prefect was wont to say. Don Bosco had promised "work, bread and heaven." Michael had plenty of work, some bread, and sure enough heaven! Before leaving the novitiate he had made fifty iron bedsteads for the incoming novices. He made his first profession on 31st July, 1934.

A Missionary is Born: One of the good habits that Michael acquired from the early years of his life was reading the lives of saints. His favourite was St. Theresa of Lissieux. Michael wondered: "This Little Flower, through her little

ways, became a great saint and the Patroness of the Missions.." She was a marvel that moved his imagination. He asked himself: "Why not be a missionary?" But he was not sure whether someone might say, "What a ridiculous idea! Your health is too poor to stand the test of hard missionary life."

A golden opportunity came his way when, during the spiritual retreat, the Novice Master announced that those who wished to go to the missions could directly write to the Rector Major. Michael applied and was chosen for the Assam Missions. The expedition had sixteen Salesians: five Italians, two Sicilians, two Germans, two Irish, two British, two Lithuanians, and Br. Michael, the sole Slovak. He reminisced later: "I was in for trouble from the beginning since I knew no Italian and my companions and confreres knew not a word of Slovak. Fr. John Med, the only Salesian who knew my language, was in South India, and we hardly met."

Fifty Years of Service in India : Michael and his companions reached Shillong in December 1934. Their first home was Our Lady's House and Br. Michael worked in Don Bosco Technical School, Shillong, for a while. After a year of their stay there, tragedy struck: in April 1936 the house was destroyed in a fire. From there Michael went over to Kurseong and then to Bandel and Sonada in Darjeeling. He joined the first group of Salesians who did pioneering work in that part of North India. Life in Sonada was marked by all the struggles of pioneer missionary work. Lack of conveniences and the damp, cold weather played havoc on the health of the missionaries. But their warm hearts and the good spirit reigning in the community kept them going. In those days of struggle, Br. Michael's technical prowess came in handy. He was soon involved in modifying the building - which was originally a house for soldiers and later on a brewery - to adapt it to suit the requirements of a Salesian community. He used his expertise to the best of his ability and toiled day in and day out.

The ten years of fruitful labour in Sonada did not go unnoticed. The little *Sabib* going around on a bicycle was a familiar sight to the people of Sonada. Staggering up and cruising down the hills of Sonada, Brother seems to have covered over 12,000 kms. on his bicycle in the ten years of his stay there. Many people who often saw him struggling up the hill on a bicycle thought that he was poorly paid by the Fathers and, therefore, could not afford to travel by train.

The years of World War II were a time of anxious struggle for Br. Michael who had to plough a lonely furrow because many of the confreres were interned

in the concentration camps. He himself had to serve a month of internment at Fort Williams, Calcutta. Food was scarce and he had to really sweat to procure the necessary provisions for the community. He turned the brewery into a bakery so as to reduce the expenses of buying bread.

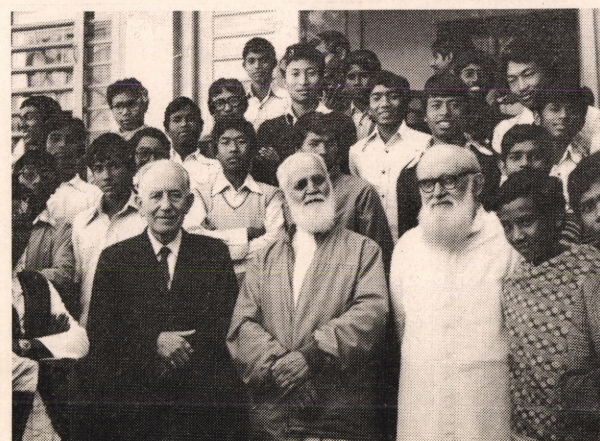
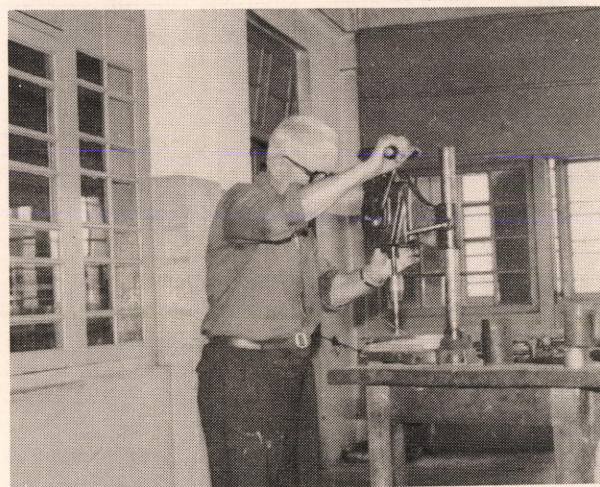
His next appointment was to Sacred Heart College in 1948, and in 1951 he was back in Bandel together with the aspirants. From 1953 he worked in close collaboration with Bishop Marengo in Dibrugarh up to 1964, and in Tezpur up to 1968. For the next seven years he was Administrator of our Novitiate at Sunnyside, Upper Shillong, from where he once again joined Bishop Marengo, who was now the Apostolic Administrator of Tura. The last fourteen years of his life were fruitfully spent in Savio Juniorate in the company of hundreds of aspirants. In spite of his ailments and physical discomforts, he was always at the service of the community. Repairing locks and taps, or making shoe brushes, or his favourite salami, he spent his last days working hard and praying much.

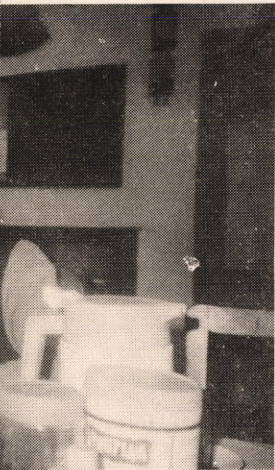
During the fifty-nine years he spent in India only once did he go home. The Communist regime in Czechoslovakia denied him access. When finally the curtain had fallen on the long rule of the Communists, his poor health spoiled his plans for a home visit. But he never complained. He had set his hands on the plough, and there was no looking back, no regrets. The sixty years of his Salesian life was a living proclamation of the Gospel. He was a man against all odds: sicknesses, poverty, misunderstandings, and several other problems that constantly dogged his steps. But he remained unshaken. Three times death knocked at the threshold of his life, but he survived. For nearly thirty years he lived with just one kidney and finally when death really came, his energy was spent ...; he had run the race ... he was ready to behold his Creator.

Br. Michael's Convictions, Interests, and Loves

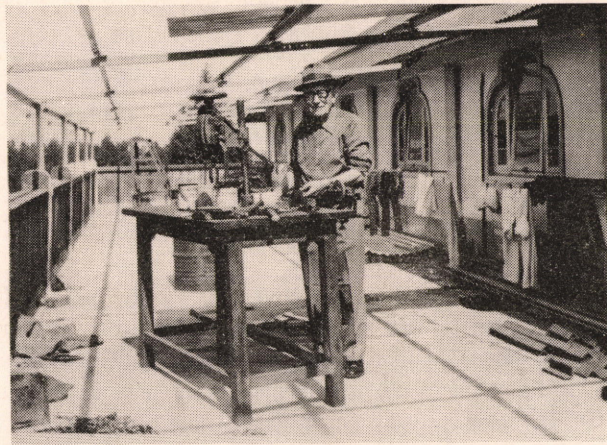
A wonderful profile of Br. Michael can be had by understanding his concerns, interests, convictions and loves:

The Missionary: He came to India to be a missionary. He wanted to accompany the priest to villages where he would attend to the sick and see to the other material needs of the people while the priest celebrated the Eucharist, preached, or heard confessions. He had this dream fulfilled on a few occasions during his stay in Dibrugarh.





OTHERS: 15 - 17 AUG. 1986



Work: As a Salesian, Br. Michael could put his hand to anything - making bedsteads, repairing motors, building and repairing anything and everything in the house, baking and cooking. Everyone knew his mechanical knowledge and culinary skill. He was indeed a 'factotum'. But he was master of one: he did everything for God, with purity of intention. "It is consoling" - these are his own words - "that I am doing what I can, that is, with good intention." And again, "God will not ask you how many years you were a Salesian, but for whom you worked." This he said on the 55th anniversary of his religious profession. He was deeply convinced that he must do everything for the glory of God and he did not spare himself even when he was not keeping good health. In his characteristic way he remarked, "Everything ends with the *Gloria*, even the *De Profundis*."

Prayer and Reading: "To pray is not difficult, but to pray well is." He would repeat this thought to everyone, especially to those who admired him and congratulated him on the long time he spent in prayer and the way he prayed.

He had his favourite books - the lives of saints, especially the life of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus, recommended to him by Mons. Marengo. He was fond of reading Church documents and religious, Salesian and devotional material. He got his own articles on the missions published regularly in a Slovenian Catholic monthly.

Fear and Anxiety: Br. Michael had one fear: the fear of offending God. He was ready for death but the anxiety was about his final perseverance. Mons. Marengo would remind him that God is most displeased with the one who does not have complete confidence in Him. And Br. Michael would say: "God is good, but at times I feel bad because everyone thinks and says: 'Michael is doing his best.' But my best is poor."

The Eucharist: The Church lives and grows by the Eucharist. A Salesian lives and grows by the Eucharist. Br. Michael did this all his life. Besides the community Mass - which he closely followed with his little missal in hand - he would attend as many Masses as possible in the house or in the parish church, where he betook himself often with great difficulty. He would be upset with the one who did not call him to attend Masses celebrated at other times of the day, though he would express his disapproval of Masses celebrated at odd times of the day. His love for the Eucharist expressed itself in his extraordinary respect and love for the Ministers of the Eucharist, his concern for priestly vocations and the formation of aspirants. His many years

of work among those in formation deepened his interest in and love for the Ministers of the Church.

His Proverbial Sense of Humour: Br. Michael would always see the witty side of things and make everyone laugh and reflect. "You cannot be a daughter of Mary Help of Christians because she has no daughters," she told an FMA once. And those who had the patience to listen to him could enjoy many details and facts of early Salesian life in Northeast India and laugh to their hearts' content.

Towards the end of his life, his memory was failing and he would often forget which day of the week it was. Sometimes he would ask a confrere, "Is it Friday today?" But when asked by a young confrere on Ash Wednesday, "What day is it, Brother?" he quipped, "Ash Wednesday is not on Friday!"

Ave, Ave, Ave Maria: This was his favourite hymn, which he constantly sang and invited others to sing often. He learnt to honour the Mother of God from his early youth. The four yearly pilgrimages he made to the shrine of Our Lady in his native land - he was convinced - obtained for him his Salesian vocation. One of his most difficult obediences was his transfer from Bandel, the shrine of Our Lady.

The Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes in our courtyard was his favourite spot, where he prayed to his Heavenly Mother and when unable to go there, he would face it from anywhere in the house to invoke her name. The last time he joined the community to recite the Rosary was on 31st May, 1994, when we concluded the Marian month at the Grotto.

"He has done everything well" (Mk. 7:37). Br. Michael strove hard to practise all the Christian virtues, and as a Religious he was very exemplary in the practice of obedience, poverty and chastity.

When asked to go to Sonada, he is said to have remarked: "You cannot send me to a place where God does not exist" - he was recalling the words of St. John Chrysostom. But he did go to Sonada. The Mission at Sonada was in its early stages and he had to fend for himself. "This is a gift of Child Jesus and you can offer it to Him. You can spend Christmas in Bandel if you like and go after that," he was told. This was narrated on 17th December, 1952, by Fr. A. Alessi, the then Provincial, who had asked him to leave Bandel for Dibrugarh to be with Bishop Marengo.

His spirit of poverty was proverbial. He spent sleepless nights to tally the accounts, even with the difference of a paltry sum. His room had a spread

of broken pieces of various gadgets, thread, nuts and bolts. He took care of even the least object and was pained to see how others often took poor care of the things of the community.

A Salesian practices and lives his chastity by loving his confreres and boys. Br. Michael loved his confreres and boys very much. In fact, he had his favourite Bishop, Rector, Administrator, Cleric, and boy. He knew how to deal with Fathers, Brothers, Sisters, friends, well-wishers ... everyone; how to entertain them with his long description of curious and daily events. God bless his simplicity and enthusiasm in everything.

Who can be a Salesian? "Prayer, sacrifice, willingness to obey God's will and readiness to brave hardships are the essential qualities for becoming a Religious and a good Salesian." This can be taken as an invitation to all young people from Br. Michael who spent long years in formation houses and trained many youngsters on their path to Religious and Salesian life.

Who do People say Br. Michael is?

Bishop Orestes Marengo, who was his spiritual guide and companion for many years in Sonada, Dibrugargh, Tezpur, and Tura, spoke about him at the funeral and called him "My Brother," just as Br. Michael used to call him endearingly, "My Bishop."

"He was a saintly Religious. He worked and prayed ... completed works which others did not succeed in doing. I cannot forget him, not because of the works and services he did for me during the 35 years we were together, but for his good example. He was afraid of only one thing: offending God. He is now with God. Pray to him," he invited the congregation at the funeral.

Fr. Pavel Bernick on Br. Michael: I asked Fr. Bernick, "What are your impressions about Br. Michael?" "Everything in the superlative," he replied spontaneously. He had these other reflections about Brother, which he expressed at the funeral, in the name of all the Slovak confreres: "Br. Michael was a perfect Religious. He made his profession in the year of Don Bosco's canonization and that spurred him on to become a saintly Salesian. He understood very well the motto of Don Bosco: work and prayer. He did much but more than that, he knew how to harmonize work and prayer. His delicate conscience and his personal poverty were his other prominent qualities. Yes, he was a perfect Religious."

Fr. Anthony Bucciari, who came to India with him as a missionary and lived with him in various houses, summed up his impressions thus: "Pious, rule-abiding, industrious."

Fr. John Med, his novitiate companion, recalls how he was esteemed by his 49 companions, who admired his spirit of work, simplicity, piety and, above all, poverty. He took everything seriously. Later on in India Fr. Med admired his cheerfulness and sense of humour, his interest in the house, respect for superiors and simple piety.

Another companion of his, also from the missionary group that left Italy in 1934, *Fr. Joseph Marchesi*, still remembers him dearly. "I would define him," he says, "a true picture of the Salesian Coadjutor [Brother] as Don Bosco saw him."

Fr. Carmel Attard describes him as a convincing witness to Christ; *Fr. Thomas Edamattath* called him a "well-disciplined Salesian"; and the boys spoke of him as one who kept his promises in spite of hardships, and as one who had a special devotion to Mary, a devotion that came from his heart.

Fr. Sylvanus Sngi Lyngdoh recalls: "My first impression of Br. Michael when I first arrived in Sonada in January 1942 was that of a man who had a welcoming attitude. ... I was struck by his spirit of hard work done with great joy. ... Br. Michael was for me a veritable gentleman - courteous, kind, affable and grateful. And this impression of him grew as the years went by. ... His greeting sounded genuine and true; his smile unfeigned; his words sincere. That was Br. Michael."

Fr. Joseph Thelekatt, Provincial, in his eulogy spoke of Br. Michael and his sterling qualities: "Br. Michael was a man steeped in the knowledge and love of God, a faithful servant whose watchwords were courage, loyalty, fidelity, zeal, hard and unobtrusive work, sacrifice and suffering, with prayer as the key." And again, "He was a man who walked blamelessly, did what was right and spoke the truth from his heart" (Ps. 115). He concluded thus: "He is our hero. He was possessed by Christ. ... We are all the better for having known Br. Michael."

Conclusion

My dear Confreres,

A great Salesian has gone to heaven. He is great because he made God great in his life. He is great because he was humble in the sight of the

Lord. He is great because he chose the one thing that most matters in anyone's life - God and His glory. For him to live was Christ and death was for sure gain (cf. Phil 1:21). His one great wish was perseverance unto the end, and the Lord was with him throughout to honour that sublime wish. Fidelity to his vows at all costs was his priority, a priority he never compromised. "The Lord alone was his guide, and no other god was with him." (Dt. 32:12) And so "precious in the eyes of the Lord" is his death, the death of his "faithful" one (Ps. 115:15).

May Br. Michael's life of simplicity, hiddenness, deep love for and union with God inspire us; may he be an example for us to emulate.

Kindly remember Savio Juniorate and all of us working here so that we can effectively help the boys "to discover, accept and develop the gift of a lay, consecrated, or priestly vocation for the benefit of the whole Church and of the Salesian Family."

Yours in the Lord of Life,

Fr. John Kalapuraputhenpura SDB
Rector.

For the Necrology :

Born on : 19.11.1911
Professed on : 31.07.1934
Died on : 01.07.1994.



With Fr. Bacchiarello and Mons. Marengo



*With
Mons. Marengo
and
Brother
Pancolini*

LAST FAREWELL

