



23B029
January 18

Fr. ANTONIO ALESSI

1906-1995

Birthday:	27-04-1906	Italy
First Profession:	16-08-1923	Italy
Ordination:	26-04-1931	Bandel
Died:	18-01-1995	Bombay

At the time of his death, Fr. Anthony belonged to INB, but he had been a member of the undivided INM for many years.

EARLY LIFE

Antonio Alessi was born into a family of strong faith and deep Christian convictions at Nove in the diocese of Vicenza, on April 27, 1906. Being the eldest of nine children, Antonio found himself practically at the head of the family when in 1915, his father was called to military service, though the little boy was hardly nine years old then. At the end of the war, Antonio could go to the Salesian Aspirantate of Faenza and later to Castel de'Britti for his novitiate and philosophical studies. His first profession was on September 16, 1923. In 1925, the Golden Jubilee of the Salesian Missions, young Anthony was sent to the missions of India. He did his practical training in St. Anthony's Orphanage, Shillong, which was followed by his theological studies, also in the same city. Finally on April 26, 1931 he was ordained a priest by Mgr. Vanni, Archbishop of Agra.

MINISTRY

1. Brahmaputra valley: Fr. Alessi's first missionary experience was in the Brahmaputra valley, together with Fathers A. Pianazzi and V. Scuderi, with Gauhati as headquarters. He had to look after a territory which covers the whole diocese of Tezpur today. They travelled by boat or on foot, normally walking 40 kilometres a day, to win souls for Christ. They often had bouts of malarial and typhoid fever and dysentery, but this did not deter them from their onward march in search of souls for Christ. In fact, they had the consolation of seeing a six-fold increase in the Catholic population, from 3,000 to 18,000, in a matter of three years. Of these years, Antonio wrote later, "It was a time of great poverty, hard work and spiritual consolation". From 1935 to 1938, he was Rector of the House of Gauhati, where he built up the Technical School for about 300 students and expanded the orphanage to accommodate 200 boys.

2. Burma: In January 1939 Fr. Anthony was sent to Burma to take charge of an orphanage, a small school and the parish from Fr. Lafaon, M.E.P. He was organizing the work for youth in the Salesian way with a boarding school, youth work,

training centre, etc. when, in December 1941, Japan declared war on England. Two days later, the Japanese army landed in Burma and in the war that ensued, the church and the house were destroyed and the good missionary had to cope with hundreds of thousands of refugees who had neither food nor shelter. Since Italy was on the side of Japan, he was able to help out more effectively. After the war, Fr. Alessi rebuilt the church and the house and also constructed an Aspirantate at Anisakan. By 1951, he was so exhausted that he had to go to Italy, his first home-visit after 25 years in the missions.

3. **Provincial:** In November 1951, he was nominated Provincial of Calcutta. He kept frequent contacts with his missionaries living in unsafe areas, separated by long distances and poor roads. The new Provincial could stand any amount of physical suffering and fatigue. Souls, work, duty and service were so deeply rooted in his heart and mind, that they took absolute priority above all other considerations. He was appointed provincial for a second term. But when in 1958, the province was divided, Fr. Oreste Paviotti became the provincial of Calcutta and Fr. Alessi was asked to be Provincial of the newly erected province of Gauhati.

4. **Bombay:** After nearly 40 years of very hard work in Assam and Burma, Fr. Alessi was sent in 1964, to what was expected to be, a less taxing work in the province of Bombay. He was made the Rector of the Apostolic School at Lonavla. With the financial assistance of Fr. A. Maschio, the new Rector completed the House, modifying the plan to accommodate 200 boys rather than 100, as planned previously. In 1966 while cycling to the post office, he fell down and fractured his hip bone and had to limp for the rest of his life, in spite of the best medical care. He also built up a missionary Apostolic School at Borivli and was appointed its first Rector. In 1974, he was transferred to the provincial house, Bombay, his last Salesian community. There he collaborated very closely with Fr. Maschio, both in his work as Economist and in the organization of the Shrine activities. Fr. Alessi used to spend several hours in the confessional every day and saw to the meticulous and decorous functioning of the Shrine.

At the beginning of 1978, he had a severe attack of gastric ulcer. In spite of all odds he carried on the work with great determination. Age, the stress of the war years in Burma, overwork, the number of ailments he had and the adamant refusal of medical care, were all taking their toll. Gradually he began to lose his memory and neglect his personal appearance. In fact, his senile behaviour became more and more erratic. "There is nothing we can do, the man will die walking", said the doctor. These prophetic words became literally true. On January 18, 1995, he collapsed while climbing the stairs leading to his room. The doctor could only declare him dead due to an acute myocardial infarction. The funeral was celebrated by Bishop Penha, Auxiliary Bishop of Bombay on the following day, with the participation of many Salesian and diocesan priests and a great number of friends and the faithful.

With Father Antonio Alessi disappeared one of the last dedicated and hardworking representatives of the first missionary expeditions to India. He saw the birth and development of the Salesian Congregation in India and contributed in no small measure to its growth.

CHARACTERISTICS

1. **Total dedication to the cause of God and the Congregation:** To the very last years of his life, he remained a model of dedication to work, uncompromising religious fidelity and detachment from self. He was not an easy person to live with, because he used to make tremendous demands on himself, his time, health, energies and resources, subordinating everything else to the requirements of the development of the Church and the Congregation in India. He expected others to have the same commitment and dedication, which for many, was not easy.

2. **Untiring worker:** He could stand any physical suffering and fatigue. His secretary once wrote: "The provincial is very tired and is absolutely in need of rest, but he never stops working". The chronicle of the provincial house commented in October 1952, "His health is poor. The ulcer must be hurting him much, but he does not show any sign of discomfort".

3. **Comforter of the afflicted:** During the war, four of the Salesians of Mandalay were deported to India and from February 1942 Father Alessi and the 3 remaining Salesians had to face the problem of the war refugees. Thousands of them were asking for food, medical care, shelter and a place to die with dignity in the compound of the Fathers. Fr. Alessi and his three companions helped them in all possible ways, offering whatever they had, to those desperate people, starving with them, sharing with them their quarters.

4. **Availability for the sacrament of reconciliation:** He spent several hours every day in the confessional of the Shrine. Besides, he was the ordinary confessor of a number of communities of Sisters in Bombay and often visited the Orphanages and Institutions of the Helpers of Mary around the city, in spite of the discomforts caused by his many ailments, hurting hip bone and old age.

5. **Man of prayer:** Long before sunrise he was in the church and spent several hours in prayer daily in the Shrine; "Where your treasure is, there is your heart".