



# OBITUARY LETTER of FR. ATTILIO COLUSSI

Salesians of Don Bosco  
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The departure of our beloved Fr. Attilio Colussi is still fresh in the minds of those who knew him. Even the day and the year that marked the end of this great life have a special significance. It was on November 2nd, the day dedicated to the Holy Souls, and in the centenary year of the death of St. John Bosco that Fr. Attilio Colussi went to meet his Creator, after a long and dedicated life spent totally for God's glory.

## HIS LAST DAYS

Fr. Attilio's health was generally stable though never quite strong. It was only in the last year of his life that there was cause for alarm when on June 13, 1988 he complained of difficulty in breathing. A doctor was called and after some immediate care he was admitted to Belle Vue Hospital in Calcutta, at 1.30 a.m. on the 14th June. He was kept in the intensive care unit till the 7th July, when he was shifted to another ward.

On the 10th July, he was brought back to the Provincial House and given the necessary medical care including the regular visit by the doctor, as well as the assistance by a full-time nurse. Gradually his condition showed signs of improvement and he was able to join the community for breakfast on the 29th August. But the community's optimism was to be short-lived as subsequent events were to show.

## The last "Hail Mary"

On the 31st October, he had concelebrated Mass with the community and breakfasted as usual and retired to his room. At 9.00 a.m. he began to struggle for breath and the nurse rushed to his side and her



quick intervention helped him to recover. But on 2nd November at 10.45 a.m. he suffered another heart attack and confreres rushed to his bedside. The nurse tried to give him oxygen and in the meantime an urgent call was sent to his doctor. The confreres placed a rosary in his hand, and he clasped on to it and recited a "Hail Mary" with them. He remained tranquil for sometime and at 1.20 p.m. with his confreres around him, he breathed his last with the rosary still held in his hand. The doctor arrived late and could only certify the death. Fr. Attilio was 81 years old, short of one month; 61 years a Salesian and 54 years a priest.

The news of his death was received with sadness both by the Salesian Family and by so many to whom he had endeared himself through his spiritual ministry and acts of charity.

### **The Final farewell**

On 3rd November, at 8.45 a.m. the body was taken to Don Bosco Park Circus where he had been Rector and Principal from 1968 to 1974. In the fully packed hall the Mass was concelebrated by about 30 priests, presided over by Rev. Fr. Sebastian Alancheril s.d.b., the Provincial. "Calcutta, a city with a heart, has lost a man with a heart", observed Fr. Provincial during the funeral Mass. Archbishop Henry D'Souza, who was among the concelebrants, spoke at the end of the Mass, and thanked Fr. Attilio for his untiring work in the Archdiocese of Calcutta, for eighteen years in the cathedral parish and later on as an apostle of the confessional to the faithful in Calcutta and as an animator to the YCS, Legion of Mary, Diocesan Family Commission and similar other groups. Mr. Gerardo Zampaglione, the Consul General of Italy in Calcutta who was present at the Mass, paid glowing tributes to this great Salesian, describing him as a compassionate man who loved the poor.

At 10.45 a.m. the body was taken to Bandel Church for the final farewell by the Salesian Family and his friends. Over 60 priests concelebrated the Mass presided over by Rev. Fr. Thomas Panakezham s.d.b., the Regional for Asia. He presented before everyone the great example of Fr. Attilio as a tireless missionary, an apostle of souls, and a lover of the poor. After the Mass the confreres carried the body to the Salesian graveyard in front of the Church and bid farewell to this saintly priest whose death was to leave a deep impression on their memory.



## **FR. ATILIO : A SHORT BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

### **Family background**

Born on the 1st December 1907, in Casarsa, Pordenone, Italy, he was the eldest of the four children of Alessandro and Margherita Muzzini. The people of this region that was invaded often in the past by powerful barbarian tribes, have a distinct culture and speak a dialect called Friulano, and are known for their enterprising spirit and determination of will that have contributed hundreds of such missionaries to the Church. The village of Casarsa has even today over 300 religious, and priests working in various dioceses of the Catholic Church, both inside and outside Italy.

The family of Alessandro Colussi was esteemed in the village for the leading role it played in parish activities. One of the brothers of Attilio became the choirmaster of the parish, while their sister Carolina, although a little handicapped physically, was an active lay apostle fully dedicated to catechesis. She spent all her life in preparing children for first Communion and Confirmation.

### **The young missionary**

Coming from such a background, it is quite understandable how young Attilio had developed a taste for the service of the Lord and joined the missionary Institute at Ivrea and after completing the studies there, went to Turin in 1925 to continue his preparation to become a Salesian missionary. His desire to come to India as a missionary was soon fulfilled as he set foot in India on 17.12.1925. He was admitted to the novitiate on 05.01.1926. He did his philosophical and theological studies in Shillong, in the years between 1926 and 1934. He did his practical training in Bombay where he taught for three years, (1928—31). He then returned to Assam for his theological studies and showed great progress towards maturing in religious life and acquiring mastery of his character, which was described as "tactless", during his studies in the philosophate. He was ordained in 1934 by Bishop Ferrando of Shillong. After his ordination he worked in the Missions of Garo Hills (1934), Guwahati and the Brahmaputra valley (1934—35).

### **A life of heroic Service: In war and out of war**

After a brief but active service in the missions of the North East, he was transferred to Calcutta as assistant parish priest of the Cathedral parish (1935—37). He was made Rector of the Don Bosco School



Liluah, from 1937—40 when he was asked to go to Guwahati as Rector. He promptly obeyed and remained there till 1950. He was fortunate that he was not sent to the concentration camp. Instead his service as chaplain, were requested for the allied troops on the Burmese front. Towards the end of the war he was asked to go for three months to a place called Yol in Punjab and together with two other missionaries worked hard to assist the Italian soldiers who were prisoners of war and helped to revive their sagging moral and spiritual strength.

When he was in Guwahati he also had time to promote vocations to the religious life, as Fr. Uguet recalled later. It was during the war years that he found among the parishioners a few girls wanting to join the religious life. The Sisters who were in that region could not oblige. So he wrote to Mgr. Ferrando, the Bishop of Shilong. As the Bishop could not leave Shillong during the war years, he asked Fr. Attilio to look after those girls and to guide them. During the war Fr. Attilio took care of them and later on Bishop Ferrando took charge of them and admitted them into the congregation, "The Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians", that was just being founded by him.

His next appointment was back in Calcutta as parish priest of the cathedral parish, where he remained for 18 years. In this period he distinguished himself as an inspiring preacher. Above all, he was a tireless hunter of souls. He visited his parishioners often, loved them tenderly and was loved in return. He also brought to the Faith hundreds of Chinese boys and girls from the nearby China Town. At his invitation Mother Teresa opened a little school for the education of poor Chinese children.

Owing to the migration of the Catholic population, the cathedral parish had been living a precarious existence. Supporated by the full co-operation of the Salesian community and of a little band of devoted friends, Fr. Attilio soon turned it into a throbbing centre of Catholic life which drew a considerable number of people even from other parishes of the city. A little flourishing daily youth centre was established, and after sometime, also a Children's Mass was introduced that attracted hundreds of children every Sunday, who filled the cathedral with their joyous prayers and songs. Church ceremonies too were conducted with devout dignity and due solemnity, while a wonderful church choir, of which Fr. Attilio himself was a member, so excelled in the execution of polyphonic music that Calcutta Radio became interested and broadcast some of its renderings, especially at Christmas and Easter.



In 1968 he was appointed the Rector of Don Bosco School, Park Circus. His priestly and loving presence in the school made such a profound impression that the public pleaded with the Superiors not to remove him on the expiry of the six-year term. But obedience was the path followed by Fr. Attilio. In 1974 he was asked to come to the Provincial House, and appointed Vice-Rector and in-charge of correspondence with the benefactors and friends.

Even during this period when his health was frail, he was able to reach out to many souls through the apostolate of the confessional and the ministry of the Word. He was constantly busy trying to meet as many requests as possible to minister to all who needed his spiritual assistance in and around Calcutta—to the Sisters and students of Loreto and St. Mary's convent, the Sisters and boarding-inmates at Lavinia House, the Sisters of Mother Teresa, and various groups and movements like, YCS, YCW, Legion of Mary and other similar groups. Alongside with such spiritual activities he also found time and means to help the poor wherever he met them. In spite of all such activities he never neglected his duties in the office where he diligently kept up the correspondence with friends and benefactors, always prompt in replying to them and giving them the required information on the work for the poor in the province.

#### **Honoured by the Italian Government**

On 23 July 1982, the Italian Government conferred the honorary title of "Cavalier" on Fr. Attilio in recognition of his long and meritorious service to the poor in India. Celebration in his honour were held both in India and abroad. But Fr. Attilio took everything with his characteristic humility.

#### **FR. ATTILIO : A SHINING EXAMPLE**

Many who knew him intimately can testify to the outstanding qualities that distinguished Fr. Attilio as a most exemplary religious, a zealous and compassionate priest and a lover of the poor.

His simplicity and sincerity impressed many and he was easily approachable. His spirit of obedience was profoundly religious and always prompt. Fr. Uguet narrated the following incident that illustrates Fr. Attilio's spirit of obedience. "When Fr. Attilio was the Rector of Don Bosco, Liluah", recalled Fr. Uguet, "all of a sudden one day the provincial came back from Guwahati and called Fr. Attilio by



phone and asked him to go to the provincial office at the C.O.P., (Catholic Orphan Press) and when he reached there, he was told to leave the same day for Guwahati to be the Rector of the school there. Within four hours Fr. Attilio was in the train bound for Guwahati." He was a very observant religious and very faithful to the teachings of the Church, a quality that made him a reliable preacher and spiritual guide.

His zeal as a priest led him to spend hours in the confessional. Archbishop Henry of Calcutta recalls his visit to the Provincial House on 22.10.1989, the last before the death of Fr. Attilio. His Grace went to the room of Fr. Attilio and not finding him in the room, looked into the chapel and found him hearing confessions. His fatherly presence at the confessional evoked great confidence in the penitents and his visit were always eagerly awaited.

His compassion for the poor knew no bounds and it could be truly said of him that he could never say, "no" to the poor. Some may have taken advantage of his goodness, but his largeness of heart certainly would have left a lasting impression on them. Like a typical Salesian he was drawn to the youth and they loved to be around him and found in him a true father.

If Fr. Attilio has left a great void in the confessional and in the hearts of many a soul, they can draw comfort from the thought that he is even now inspiring everyone with the shining example that he has left behind. Today we definitely cannot forget him and we are grateful to him and to God for the great gift that he was for the Church and the Salesian Congregation and for so many whom he has helped some way or other. He still lives fresh in our memories and we will surely continue to pray for him.

May I request prayers not only for the soul of Fr. Attilio but also for our community here at the Provincial House, so that while imitating the sterling qualities of our departed brother, may we be found worthy of the Kingdom of the Father.

Fraternally yours in Don Bosco,  
**Fr. Thomas POLACKAL S.D.B.**  
 (Rector)

For the Necrology :

**Fr. Attilio COLUSSI, ✱ Calcutta, India, 1988, at the age of 81.**