

56

*Province of
Gauhati
India*



SALESIAN
NOVITIATE
Sunny Side
Upper Shillong

Rev. Fr. A. Comba, s.d.b.

Dear Confreres,

On 1st of December 1970 the Salesians of the Gauhati Province and the whole Salesian India as well, sustained a great loss in the death of the revered and beloved Father Alvin Comba. He was the Patriarch of the Salesians in

India. He passed away at Nazareth Hospital, Shillong, at 3.30 p.m. He was 89 years of age at the time. Though he was suffering from the effects of old age, no one expected him to be taken away from us so suddenly. His death is mourned all the more because of the tragic circumstances accompanying it. On the 30th of November, at the evening meal he looked exceptionally feeble and cold. To take away the chill from his room, an electric heater was placed in the corner of his room. Well after midnight I was awakened by a loud cry from his room and on rushing to it I found him lying on his back with his clothes in flames, and the heater overturned at his feet. He sustained several burns on his legs and back part of the body. While it is clear that the fire was due to the heater, it is really difficult to know what actually happened and how he got into that lying position. He was rushed to the Nazareth Hospital where the good Sisters did everything to help him. He passed away peacefully and without any show of pain on the 1st of December at 3.30 p.m.

The funeral services were conducted on the following day at 1.30 p.m., at the Shillong Cathedral in the presence of many Confreres and Christians. His Grace, Dr. Hubert D'Rosario, S.D.B., Archbishop of Shillong-Gauhati officiated at the concelebrated Requiem Mass. He also gave the introductory sermon at the beginning of the Mass. Rev. Fr. Scuderi, the one-time Provincial of Northern India, gave the homily after the Gospel. One of the novices gave the farewell talk to their revered Fr. Comba as he belonged to the Noviciate house. The funeral oration in English was delivered by Bishop O. Marengo, S.D.B. who spoke of the great figure that Fr. Comba was. Rev. Fr. Vanni, S.D.B. spoke in Khasi.

Fr. Comba was born on 5th of March, 1881, at Frassasco, Italy. Due to some initial difficulties from the family he could not enter the religious life early in life and so he devoted himself to the acquisition of those qualifications which would stand him in good stead in his missionary life. He secured a doctorate in Italian literature. As a young man he held a job in the municipality of his place which he later left to follow the Master's call. He was over thirty years of age when he could definitively hearken to the voice of the Lord and enter the Salesian noviciate. Fr. Zolin was his Novice-Master and he helped him in compiling the "Manual of Religious life". It is noteworthy that this man who lived up to the ripe old age of 89 took his first religious profession "In Articulo mortis". Towards the end of his noviciate he got seriously sick and for fear that he would succumb to the illness before the profession, the Superiors granted him the special favour of making it earlier.

He made his profession on 1st of March, 1912. After his noviciate and a short practical training, he commenced his theological studies. Even as a theologian he was called by that apt name, "Il Professore". After the first year of theology he had to carry on his further theological formation while working is one of our houses.

At this time the First World War broke out and Subdeacon Comba had to join the forces. He worked in the hospital section. He was ordained a priest on September 19th, 1920. The first years of his priesthood were spent in the Salesian houses of Sicily and it was there that he assisted at the first Mass of our Rector Major, Very Rev. Fr. A. Ricceri. He was generous to the call of Our Lord inviting him to the beautiful land of India to bring His message of hope and love. He came to the mission of Assam in 1929. He spent most of his missionary career as a professor in the Salesian Theologate. He remained in Our Lady's house, Shillong, till the house was destroyed by fire. Following that he had two short sojourns at Woodcut (Darjeeling Dt.) and Bandel, near Calcutta. When the new Theologate of Mawlai was opened he went there as professor and confessor till 1967 when he was transferred to the Salesian Novitiate at Sunnyside where he spent the rest of his life in the company of his beloved companion, Fr. Guttierrez. During the Second World War he was exempted from going to the concentration camp because of his old age and ill health. He remained at the Shillong Cathedral teaching theology to a small batch of students and acting as confessor to the Salesian Sisters and the faithful of the parish. But the main scene of his long years of labours was the Salesian Theologate at Mawlai, and even when, towards the end, he could not recollect any other name or place, he still held some memories of Mawlai and his professorial life there. He spent the last three years of his life here at Sunnyside, edifying the novices with his exemplary Salesian and priestly life. The novices as well as the whole province had celebrated his Golden Jubilee of Sacerdotal Ordination just three months before his death. He was visibly moved on that occasion thinking of the many graces God had bestowed on him his long life through. He treasured especially the letter of felicitation and good wishes of the Rector Major.

An extract from the condolence letter of the Most Rev. Dr. Stephen Ferrando, S.D.B., the former Bishop of Shillong, gives an insight into the life and character of this great figure of Salesian India : " He loved God, he loved all in God ; he was the soul itself of kindness, generosity and mercy. In these days

of ferment we must not forget that our true progress is always grounded on the living spirit of Don Bosco and the shining examples of those, who, like Fr. Comba, loved Don Bosco and followed him faithfully."

He was an example of human, religious and priestly virtues. Anyone who had come into contact with Fr. Comba could experience his prudence and reserve in life. One of the characteristics which endeared him to others was his justice. This virtue was all the more conspicuous as a professor and as an examiner. His fairness and adaptability to all under any circumstance explains his popularity with all. He has had no grudges with any one and no one had complaints, grudges or ill-feelings against Fr. Comba. His paternal figure was the embodiment of the saying, "He went about doing good." Yes, doing good to all and evil to none was the chief trait of Fr. Comba's life. He found joy in life inspite of its vicissitudes and boredom, of which he had a good share, living the routine life of a studentate. His witty sayings and jokes and the familiar way, made his company and his lectures something to be looked for. His joviality and good humour were conspicuous in his lectures and sermons. That, together with his depth of thought and the appealing language, went to make him a much sought-after preacher of retreats and sermons. Another noteworthy trait of his character was his friendliness towards all, to the young and old. The fatherliness that radiated from him made all feel at home and happy in his presence. Gratefulness is the mark of a noble soul. And Fr. Comba was indeed a noble soul for he was grateful to all for the least service done to him. The words, "thank you" were ever on his lips especially these last years when he had to receive much attention and care from others due to his age and condition. He was heard to utter the "thank you" to those in the hospital even before his death, which was surely that of a just man.

In these days of crisis in faith and Christian living. Fr. Comba stands out as the example of true Christian witnessing. He loved Christ and the Church and his mature Christian living gives testimony to this. It was a common sight to see him spend hours on end in the chapel, lost in adoration of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. That keen and penetrating look at the Tabernacle portrayed his deep faith in Our Lord and His presence. It was his deep faith and attachment to Jesus that made him bear the boredom of life and work with an even temper and holiness. His sacramental life was very exemplary indeed. Even till the end he used to concelebrate Holy Mass with Father Guttierrez and it seemed that it was the thought of the Mass, to which he

looked forward eagerly and for which he prepared himself, that kept him up in his last days. He had a great devotion to Our Lady. Every retreat that he preached had a sermon on his favourite "Maria Ausiliatrice". His great love for Mary made him also include Sts. Anne and Joachim among the list of his favourite patrons. His devotion to St. Anne was a known feature among all and her feast was kept with special remembrance and he used to give a good night on her every year. With his work as a professor he gave credit to the Church and the Pope. He had made it a point to study the discourses of the Popes and anything related to the Church and would impart this knowledge to his students. It should be noted that it was his love for Christ, the Church and souls that made him forsake his native land in spite of his advanced years to come to the mission field. It is true that he did not serve the missions in the front ranks but at the same time his contribution to the missionary apostolate cannot be overlooked, especially considering the fact he had dedicated himself to the formation of priests and missionaries who carried his zeal and love for souls to the field. He formed over thirty generations of priests in his long work in the Studentate.

Fr. Comba stood out among us all for his exemplary religious and Salesian life. He lived his religious life to the full till the last days of his life. His sense of poverty and detachment from the comforts of life was only an expression of deep attachment to Our Lord. He bore up all the privations of his daily life and that too at such an advanced age without any least complaint. His chastity was very delicate, and all who came into contact with him could not but be impressed by his candour of soul, modesty and great purity of life. But the most remarkable trait in his religious life was certainly his obedience. In his long religious life he never occupied a position of authority, but lived his life as that of an ordinary confrere. Though he did not have a chance to command yet he had learned to obey all the Superiors even though they might have been his pupils and far younger than he was. Obedience was for him a habit, a matter of his conscious daily life. A month before his death I had told him that he could make his meditation in his room to prevent him from dosing off in the chapel and falling. He obeyed immediately, though it must have cost him much, regular as he was with all the community practices. He would ask permission for any important action he did. Even to the last days of his life he was perfect in the observance of common life. In spite of his advanced years he kept the routine of the house as any other young member, making it a point to be prompt and punctual in all the practices of piety and at meals.

His genuine religious spirit, coupled with his strong love for the Congregation, made him a model Salesian and he will surely stand out as a beacon light of true Salesianity to all the young confreres of Salesian India. He had a great love for Don Bosco and everything related to him. Most of his readings towards the end of his life was limited exclusively to Salesian literature. The life of Dominic Savio, "Il Ragazzo Santo", was his inseparable companion and it would be seen open on his table day in and day out. He radiated the joy of his Salesian life all around him. The three great Salesian devotions were remarkably his and to it he added his great love and veneration for Don Bosco. He was seen visibly moved when speaking of the Rector Major, the Superiors and anything related to the Salesian Congregation. As a true son of Don Bosco he had a great sense of work and he spent his long life working for the Congregation and for souls. Just one month before his death, impelled perhaps by the thought that he was not working enough, he came to ask me for something to do. His spirit of work and dedication was manifested in his life as a professor of the Studentate where he imparted his knowledge and sense of dedication to the young priests whom he was training with great love and care. Fr. Comba will ever be remembered by those who had the privilege to listen to him as a great preacher, especially of retreats. His sense of humour, his convictions, the excellence of the language and especially the probity of his life gave his sermons a warmth and flavour of their own. And they were much appreciated and sought after by the confreres. His words were easy, he spoke with diction and unction, and every thing that he did or said had a touch of his enthusiasm and optimism. Thus we see that in Fr. Comba we have lost a great priest and confrere whose soul was noble and whose actions were manifestations of his love for God and for men. His fatherliness, his sense of dedication, unassuming ways, simplicity of life and good humour and optimism were expressions of his intense Christian and Salesian life.

Fr. Comba's life is surely in accordance with the Vatican concepts of Christian and religious witnessing to the world of today. He is one of the integrated personalities according to the concepts of Vatican II. In these days of religious ferment, when we speak of crisis of faith, identity crisis among priests and religious, we see here a man who had none of these crises in his long priestly and Salesian life, though he lived it in the common rank of submission and obedience. In this he will always remain an example to the young generation of Salesians and priests in these times of renewal. His life speaks of a renewal in the spirit of Our Lord and of Don Bosco.

Before concluding this letter, I feel it my duty to express my sincerest thanks to the good Sisters of the Nazareth Hospital for all the service they did to Fr. Comba in his last moments. They did really show their life of dedication in their care of Fr. Comba. May God bless them! I and the community of Sunnyside are really grateful to the House of Don Bosco, Shillong, where the body of Fr. Comba was laid in state before the funeral, for all the care and service rendered to the remains of our beloved Fr. Comba. Finally I express my thanks to all those who shared with us our grief and mourned for Fr. Comba.

Let us ever keep the memory of this great Salesian. Many years ago in a house in Sicily, Fr. Comba was seen by a young cleric, now a Professor at the PAS, raise his hands towards heaven and say aloud: "Paradise, Paradise." We firmly believe that he has already reached the goal of his ardent desire. Let us, however, be generous with our prayers for the repose of his soul, should he still be in need of them. I would also ask you all for a prayerful thought for this house which has sustained such a great loss and also for our 48 novices who are preparing themselves for their self-dedication to God, that they all may be fully faithful to their commitment after the example of Our Good Fr. Comba.

May his soul rest in peace.

Yours devotedly in Don Bosco,
Fr. N. Lo Groi S.D.B.
Master of Novices,
Sunnyside.

NECROLOGY:- Rev. Fr. Alvin Comba, born at Frassasco (Italy) 5-3-1881; died at Shillong (India) 1-12-1970; age 89; 58 Profession; 50 Priesthood.