



FR. DOMINIC CURTO, SDB

Born: 30 April 1922

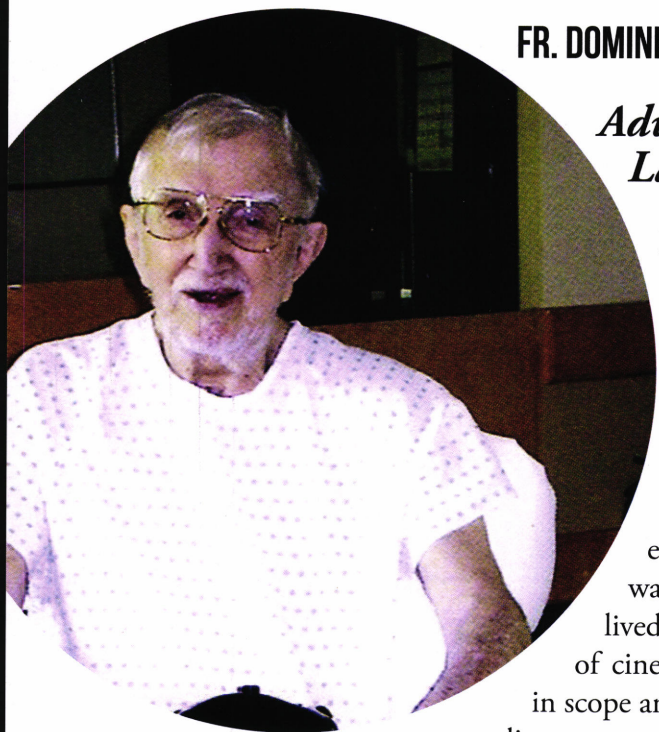
Died: 01 August 2014

First Religious Profession: 06 January 1941

Priestly Ordination: 07 January 1951

FR. DOMINIC CURTO, SDB:

***Adventure with God
Larger than life***



For those who came to know him later in his life, Fr. Dominic Curto was the frail bedridden priest breathing for dear life only through an incision on his neck. For those who knew him earlier, Fr. Dominic Curto was larger than life. He lived an exciting life, almost of cinematic proportions, wider in scope and bigger in scale than the ordinary man.

Fr. Curto was born on 30 April 1922 and baptized the day after to parents Maddalena Andrina and Giacomo Curto in Vialfre, a municipality thirty-five kilometers north of Turin, the city of Don Bosco, in the region of Piedmont, Italy. Fr. Curto described his parents as “poor in earthly means but very rich in faith.” From them he learned a lesson he would exhibit throughout his missionary life: “Duty is duty.”

The young Dominic grew up in a small town situated on a hill with very lazy soil. His village folks were rugged and industrious. But the young Dominic also had a great liking for study, besides hard manual work. So his mother sent him to the Salesian School in Ivrea, some ten kilometers from their village. The Salesian School in Ivrea was a place where Salesian missionaries were being prepared. Dominic acknowledged: “I had no intention at all of becoming a priest. I was influenced by the bad propaganda of the government”, which was then anticlerical. He stuck it out though in that school for Salesian missionaries because, as he admitted, “I wanted to fill my empty brain with knowledge.”

Nevertheless, in 1939, the now adolescent Dominic decided to join the Salesian missionaries to “mysterious India.” He recognized that this was mainly because he wanted to satisfy his adventurous spirit. So he sailed from Italy with the mighty waves of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. His ship was diverted to Singapore and Shanghai when Hitler declared war. He was jailed in a concentration camp in India when Italy entered the war on the side of Germany, while India at that time was ruled by the British Empire. He travelled with wild elephants and listened to whining jackals in the jungles. He stared at a black bear face to face, slept with a wayward tiger by his bedside, and stepped on a camouflaged crocodile while crossing a murky river. He worked in India with the Anglo-Indian lads of the cities and with the Garo tribes of the hills. He learned the Hindu philosophy and spoke the Hindi language. While at the peak of his mission work in the Garo Hills, he was expelled from India in 1968 by a government decree against foreign missionaries.

Fr. Curto described this sudden cut from a big chunk of his life in India as one that “shattered my world to the ground” and “my real greatest moral suffering which lasted over a year and a half.” But Fr. Curto believed that “When God closed a door, He opens a window.” In 1969, he was back on Indian soil, in the border town of Hasimara. He walked on foot in the dark and smuggled his way up the hills of Phuntsholing, the border town of Bhutan. In that Buddhist kingdom he worked as teacher and headmaster of the famous Don Bosco Technical School. There he studied Buddhism and spoke Bhutanese. He so befriended the royal family that he was allowed monthly royal visits to the royal chambers using the reserved royal entrance.

In 1977, Fr. Curto left Bhutan. This was the second sword pierced on his missionary heart. But this time his perceived reason was not the fear of religion by the government, but the antagonism of the people against the new missionaries who failed to conquer the hearts of their students. Fr. Curto explained: “It is not that the Salesians were sent away from Bhutan due to religion, as it was aired. It was the mismanagement of the new Salesians.” This was confirmed later to Fr. Curto by a past pupil who became a member of the Parliament of Bhutan who met him in the year 2000.

After nearly forty years in South Asia, Fr. Curto set his eyes on Southeast Asia. He chose the Philippines after spending a very short time in Thailand and Hong Kong. This was another window God opened for him after closing the door of Bhutan. In 1978, Fr. Curto was assigned to start a Salesian presence in Sta. Cruz, the capital town of Laguna. The parish the Salesians were asked to take over had been abandoned in many ways. People did not know the difference between the Roman Catholic Church, a minority at 30% of the population, and the Philippine Independent Church, which made up the majority at 70% of the population that time. It did not matter to them. They shifted between the two churches according to convenience. There was no Catholic school in the capital town of the province. People living in the far flung barrios did not care to take the long rides to the parish church for worship.



And so began another pioneering work for Fr. Curto, together with two other confreres, Fr. John Andreu and Fr. Rolando Fernandez. The youth center which was in the beginning taunted with disinterest and even arrogance by the youth of the poblacion was soon swarmed daily by many enthusiastic young people. The Catholic school which began with a simple kindergarten class soon grew into a complete basic education institution. The parish church of the Immaculate Concepcion, which was half-destroyed during the Second World War and whose compound was invaded by squatters until the Salesians came in, was rebuilt. Twenty-three chapels in the nearby and far flung barrios were also constructed. Along with the structures were built the community of the faithful. Thus was regained the Catholic faith of the people, now the majority of the population of Sta. Cruz.

But for the third time in his missionary life, Fr. Curto saw another sword pierced into his missionary heart. In 2004, the Salesian community left

Sta. Cruz. The diocese took over the bustling parish and school from the Salesians. From Sta. Cruz, Fr. Curto was sent to Tabor House in Pansol, Laguna, which was then the house for the sick and aging confreres. There he occupied himself constructing the camp site on the hilltop of the property. In 2008, he was brought to the Zatti Clinic in the compound of Don Bosco Technical Institute in Makati, Metro-Manila where he remained bedridden until he gave his final breath.

VICTORY IN DEFEATS

A guru once said that “love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation.” When the teenage Dominic left home for the missions, it was with a powerful sense of claiming his independence from family and farmland, exploring the world beyond the seas, and getting on with his own future. He left Italy for India on the very birthday of Don Bosco, on August 16 in 1939, with a group known as “the eleven Italians”, a Salesian priest as head of the group and ten mostly teenage future novices, the youngest of whom was fifteen years old. Despite the bumps and bruises of his first years in the Indian mission, the adolescent Dominic’s mind and heart were all for the daring adventure that was India.

But while being imprisoned in a concentration camp, hoarded and transported on a train with other Italian and German nationals from place to place, and now detached from his adventures in the Salesian missions, Dominic wrote: “Jail time is a period of deep meditation. It gives one time to ponder, to get stock of one’s life and future; in a word, to meditate deeply. I, for one, wanted to tour around the world, to experience adventures in my last teens and early twenties. Did I have a purpose for it? I realized



I had to steer my young life towards something useful, solid, so that I would not be sorry when old, if ever God would give me a long life time. I felt my mind was very muddy. I felt God wanted me to deliver something: that I had to please him and not myself. In a word, God wanted me to follow him, to steer my life towards helping him save some of the million people around me. So far, I had been very stubborn, veering out of the sight of God.”



“Love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation.” The young Dominic continued his reflections about this period of powerlessness in his life: “It took me a few months more to clear the dust of pride and self-cushiness. God gave me time. God stubbornly insisted that I should follow him. At long last, I gave in. Okay Lord, I said, that’s a deal. You have won. From now on, I shall never turn back, whatever the cost. From that day on, I felt a great peace inside me. I knew the road ahead would be very thorny and rough, but I was sure. Someone would lead me on amid the encircling gloom, as Cardinal Newman put it. Or as we would say now: I was born again.”

Fr. Curto was ordained a priest on 07 January 1951 in Shillong, India without his relatives. His father and a brother died during the war. He came to know about their deaths from the Red Cross two years and a half after the war. Again, he would write about this episode: “Unless you have a personal experience of it, it is impossible to put in words the satisfaction one feels at having sustained a long-fought battle and reached the victory of it. I for one have experienced the fight I had with God and the satisfaction I experienced the day I felt defeated and God won.”

In May 1954, Fr. Curto was allowed to go home to Italy for the first time after fifteen years. The old saying went: “Once in the mission you

are no more allowed to go back to your country.” The modern times had come, though air travel for the common folks like the missionaries had not yet started. So he sailed from Bombay to Genoa by ship aptly named ‘Asia’, with a return ticket. From the port of Genoa he took the train to Turin. But Italy had become a strange land for this native son; he saw no familiar faces around him. He did not even recognize his own mother at the train station.

He wrote: “When at the platform, a lady approached me and asked me whether I had ever seen or known of a missionary coming from India. I did not know what to say. I simply muttered that the person she was looking for might be still behind. The lady left me and carried on searching. My eyes followed her reflected in my glasses. She then turned back and squarely faced me and I faced her. My mind was in a whirl. I did not know what to say. I took a sudden decision and risked it. I simply uttered: ‘Mamma.’ Common blood never betrays. Fifteen years had passed. From a teenager, I had become a grown up man. It was not yet the time for exchanging photos easily.”

At home, Fr. Curto saw the deep scars of the war. His father Giacomo and his younger brother Martin as earlier told were dead. The other brother Thomas was dispersed in Russia. His mother Maddalena was all alone in a shack. Before Fr. Curto could even seriously entertain the thought of remaining in Italy for his mother, he remembered her admonishing him: “You do not belong to me anymore, though I love you dearly. You belong to Christ. Were you married, I could not separate you from your family, could I? Now if you love me still, go back to your India and be true to your vocation. Duty is duty.”



Fr. Curto hesitated to return to India. "Love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation." Again his mother admonished him more strongly: "Son, you are a priest and still have so little faith. God can work wonders. He is with me. My mind is sound enough and I have got two hands. Things will be okay for me. I am afraid that if you stay here, things will go awry. Follow your vocation and God bless you. Do pray for me." After three months of home visit, Fr. Curto returned to India. As his mother foretold, things became better at home with her. His brother also returned from Russia.



The depth of Fr. Curto's love came to the fore again when he was expelled from India in December 1968. Of this separation he wrote: "I felt as a father being forcibly stripped of all his children and left completely

naked under every respect. I had many sleepless nights. Even my body bore the brunt of the coming separation from my children whom I dearly loved and was loved in return... My God, I shouted, why should this happen to me? I was really 'amid the encircling gloom', as Cardinal Newman put it. I felt I was extremely human in my youthful life. My spirituality, my faith, my trust in the good God was at a very low ebb. I needed an awakening so as not to be a sounding cymbal, as St. Paul put it... I was taught by the Lord a very great lesson. Work and suffer for God only, who is a perfect gentleman, and not for men, who may not prove being thankful."

"Love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation." The second blow Fr. Curto received in the missions was the closure of the Salesian work in Bhutan. He had grown accustomed to the truth that

“everything that has a beginning has also an end.” But the pain caused by the closure came not from external forces but from the hearts of new confreres who must have forgotten Don Bosco’s warning in his letter from Rome in 1884: “The youngsters should not only be loved, but that they themselves should know that they are loved... By being loved in the things they like, through taking part in their youthful interests, they are led to see love in those things, too, which they find less attractive, such as discipline, study and self-denial, and so learn to do these things, too, with love.” The antagonism of the students, who earlier loved the first missionaries, grew so much against the new ones that the Bhutanese authorities had to take the step of closing the Salesian work in the kingdom.

Now also accustomed by the Lord to holy indifference and serene resignation, Fr. Curto simply exclaimed: “Where to, Lord, now? Why so many blows? I felt awful! I never thought of quitting my missionary life. I had to start from scratch once again... Where next?” It was the Philippines. He mused: “Was this the window God opened for me, after closing Bhutan as well? It seemed so, as time unfolded.” Sta. Cruz in Laguna was his last mission work. But after twenty-five years of hard work and honorable witnessing, the Salesians decided to leave the place upon the insistence of the bishop, along with other circumstances of much greater pain to the pioneer who was Fr. Curto.

Right before his departure from Sta. Cruz, Fr. Curto made this prayer to Mary: “O Mary, our Immaculate Mother, four hundred years ago, our forefathers chose you to be the Patroness of our bayan (town) and our dagat (lake). Twenty-five years ago, we placed your statue on top of our belfry, the highest building of our township. Though we are sinners, we still love you and place ourselves under your mantle. Continue to be to us our real Mother. Take care of each family. Bend lovingly on our sick members and the old people. Remove far from our young people the scourge of sin and drugs.” The young adventurer who was ordained a priest of Christ had now become an intercessor for God’s people.

It is said that the finest steel has to go through the hottest fire. So it was with Fr. Curto, from beginning to end of his missionary life.

And what had all this fire made of him? As his malleability as a mere human instrument decreased, his fusibility with his “kindly Light” increased like steel. And like steel that is tempered, Fr. Curto retained his magnetism in the midst of the fires of suffering. His pains shattered his soul, indeed, but like steel these did not dent his resolve to steer his life towards helping God in saving people, as he wrote in a moment of conversion in a concentration camp.

MAN OF STEEL

Fr. Curto was well-known for building structures and furniture with solid steel. By character, he was likewise solid as steel. In illness, he was as well. On 22 August 2010, Fr. Curto visited Sta. Cruz, Laguna for the last time. He was transported by a well-equipped rented ambulance and accompanied by no less than the revered nephrologists Dr. Claver Ramos, benefactor and doctor of the Salesians. With sheer strength of will power, Fr. Curto made it through the entire day, with his beloved parishioners lining up to greet him, touch him, offer him presents, give him a sumptuous lunch, assure him that all is well with the parish and the school he left, and bid him goodbye and good health.

Persistence in duty, whether driving on his motorbike for the Masses in the barrios or repairing the power generator and the procession cart, was the trait known to all people who got acquainted with Fr. Curto. He was resolute in accomplishing the task he thought was for the good of the people he served.

A passion for study, especially the culture and the language of the people entrusted to him, was a quality known to some who lived with Fr. Curto. He also learned midwifery and pharmacy in his early years in the missions, even if he said he “loathed this kind of learning.” But they were needed skills during his “jungle peregrinations”. He mused: “Didn’t Christ do the same thing? Come into the world and start learning at once.”

But what truly marked the character of Fr. Curto as carbon is to steel was piety. Fr. Curto recalled his sentiments when he was ordained a

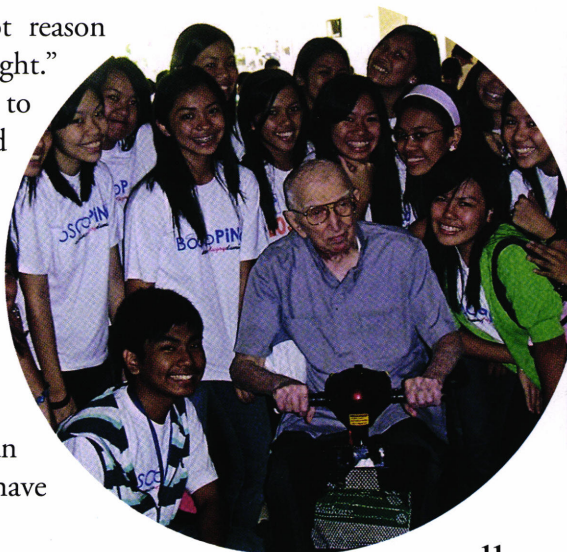
priest: "A priest is chosen by Christ for the great task of carrying on his work of redemption throughout the coming ages by following on the footsteps of Christ himself. At my ordination, I almost physically felt I was endowed with extraordinary powers, as it were, over life and death, through the administering of the sacraments: powers greater than any emperor's or president's. I felt I was walking in the sky, in thin air, over the earth. This feeling lasted just about a month; then it subsided. It left in me, to this day, a very lasting impression."

He would speak about the spiritual retreats in his years in the Indian missions: "After so much time dedicated to others, you are inclined to feel dried up spiritually. You feel the need of a heavy recharge... Only the love of God and the good you can do to the tribe give you the necessary strength to live for years all alone in such jungle places with no material comfort at all, neither from men nor from the ambient in which you live, especially if you are a foreigner, completely cut off from your usual habitat. God is absolutely with you. He gives you the spiritual consolation so that your life and work bring betterment in the life of your tribe people."

In moments of tiredness, bad thoughts would come into Fr. Curto's aching brain: "I have it enough! I could get saved even if I were to go back to my country. Here there is only unbearable heat and hunger." Then he would look at his eight-inch crucifix and surrender: "Lord, I cannot reason with you. You are always right."

It was this surrender of spirit to Christ Crucified that sustained him through the high and low moments of his life: "I did not ever think calling it quits. Like a horse would do, I had to get out of this quagmire willy-nilly."

Jiddu Krishnamurti, an Indian writer, said: "The moment you have

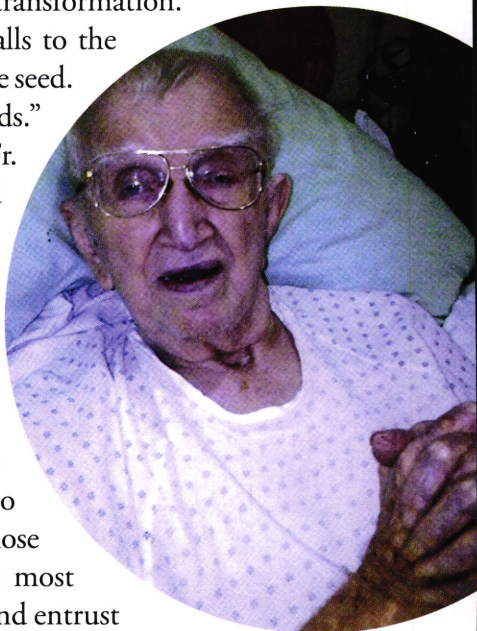


in your heart this extraordinary thing called love and feel the depth, the delight, the ecstasy of it, you will discover that for you the world is transformed.” What he failed to mention besides the ecstasy of love is the agony which truly brings about transformation.

Jesus said: “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed.

But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”

This is God’s adventure. That was Fr. Curto’s adventure with God. Sick and speechless, and yes still stubborn but also sweet, on his bed for five years, he serenely passed away on the first day of August, 2014.



To you Fr. Curto, we say thank you, knowing full well that our highest appreciation of your life is not just to utter these words, but to live by those examples you left for which we are most grateful. We bid you now eternal rest and entrust you to the kindly Light:

Meantime, along the narrow rugged path, Thyself hast trod,
Lead, Savior, lead him home in childlike faith, home to his God.
To rest forever after earthly strife
In the calm light of everlasting life.



SALESIANS OF DON BOSCO
Philippines–North Province