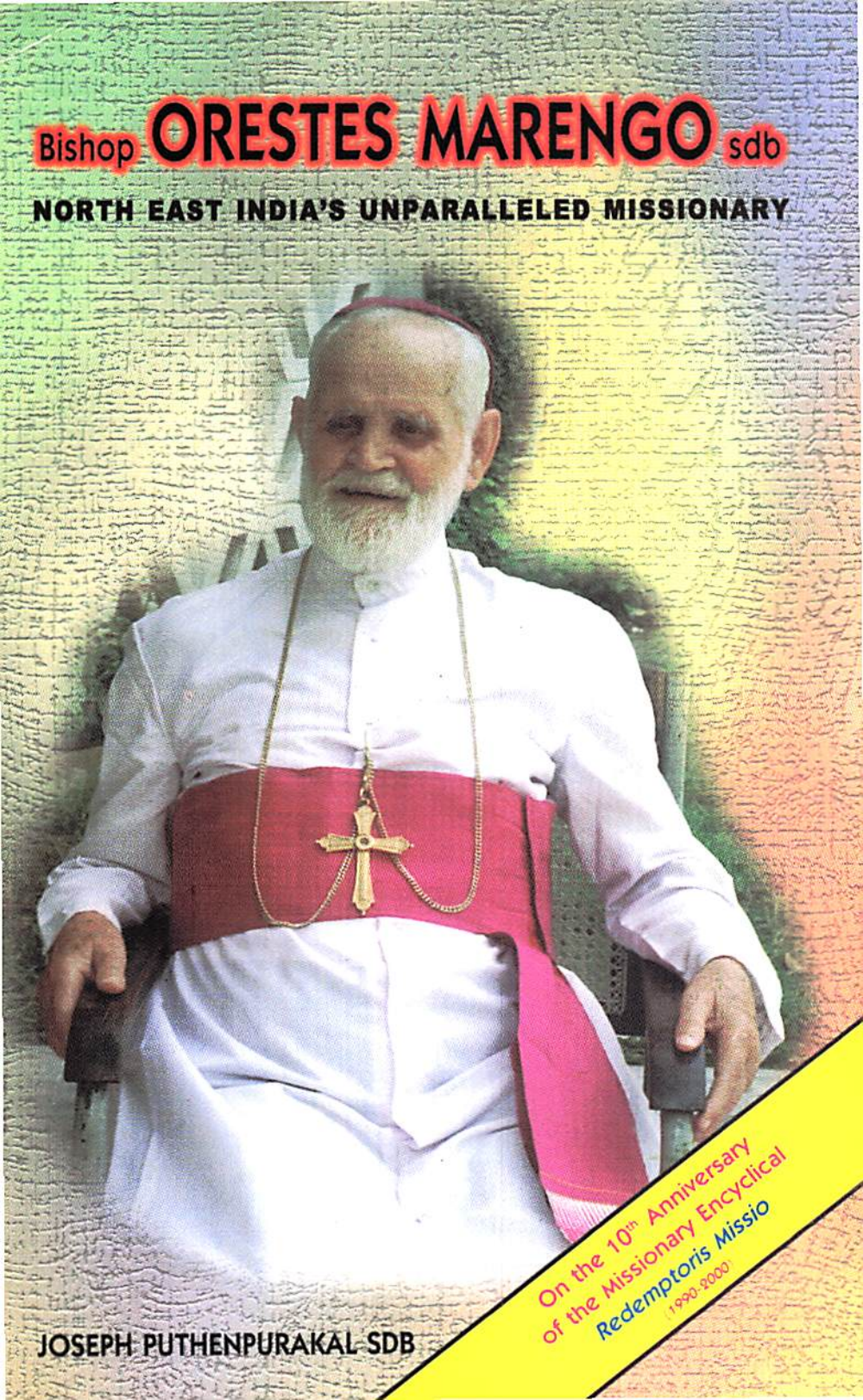
# Bishop ORESTES MARENGO sdb

## NORTH EAST INDIA'S UNPARALLELED MISSIONARY



On the 10th Anniversary of the Missionary Encyclical Redemptoris Missio 1990-2000

JOSEPH PUTHENPURAKAL SDB

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**Joseph Puthenpurakal SDB**

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ON THE OCCASION OF THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE MISSIONARY ENCYCLICAL *REDEMPTORIS MISSIO*
OF
**POPE JOHN PAUL II**
(7TH DECEMBER 2000)

*We Lovingly Dedicate*

***Bishop Orestes Marengo SDB***
*North East India's*
*Unparalleled Missionary*

*to*

**Archbishop Joseph Mittathany of Imphal**
**Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil of Guwahati**
**Archbishop Tarcisius Resto Phanrang of Shillong**
**Bishop Denzil R. D'Souza of Aizawl**
**Bishop Robert Kerketta of Tezpur**
**Bishop George Mamalassery of Tura**
**Bishop John Kattrukudiyil of Diphu**
**Bishop Joseph Aind of Dibrugarh**
**Bishop Lumen Monteiro of Agartala**
**Bishop Jose Mukala of Kohima**

*Shepherds of the flock entrusted to them by Christ*
*and who loved Bishop Marengo dearly*
*&*
*to all the priests, religious and lay people of*
*North East India*
*especially the band of dedicated men and women*
*and generous youth*
*who helped Bishop Marengo during 75 years*
*of Extraordinary Missionary Life*

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***A big "Thank You" to the Lord***
***and to His Blessed Mother***
***for countless blessings.***

**Joseph Puthenpurakal, SDB.**

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# ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| AMCH | Assam Medical College Hospital |
| CBCI | Catholic Bishops' Conference of India |
| CID | Criminal Investigation Department |
| EN | *Evangelii Nuntiandi* |
| FMA | Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice |
| MCBS | Missionary Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament |
| MSFS | Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales |
| MSMHC | Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians |
| RM | *Redemptoris Missio* |
| RNDM | Religieux de Notre-Dame des Missions |
| SCCG | Sisters of Charity of Sts.B. Capitanio and V. Gerosa |
| SDB | Salesians of Don Bosco |
| SEI | Societa' Editrice Internazionale |
| SHTC | Sacred Heart Theological College |
| SHTCD-MF | Sacred Heart Theological College Marengo File |
| SHTCD-MM | Sacred Heart Theological College Documentation Memoirs Marengo |
| SHTCD-MPS | Sacred Heart Theological College Documentation Memoirs Paul Sebastian |
| SMMI | Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate |
| SJ | Society of Jesus |

# PREFACE

Here is an interesting incident.

Let Bishop Marengo speak:

"Once a Lushai youth in his attempt to catch an already moving train at the Bandel station managed to hang on the door of a first class compartment. The passengers kindly took him in, but then added:

"You should not be here. Don't you see, this is a first class reserved compartment?"

A benign venerable looking old man intervened:

"Please, do not worry the poor boy, he is welcome to stay with us".

Then turning to the boy, he said:

"You must be a tribal of Assam from your appearance".

"Yes, sir, I am".

"Then you might also be a Christian?"

The boy on his defence blurted out rather boldly:

"Why? Yes. I am a Catholic Christian".

"Very good, my young friend, endeavour to be a good Christian, and you will surely be a good citizen of India".

The venerable benign looking old man was no less a personage than Mahatma Gandhi."[1]

---

1. See, Silver Jubilee 1951-1976 Souvenir, Dibrugarh: Bishop's House, 38.

This extraordinary incident was told to Bishop Marengo by that youth himself.

"Endeavour to be a good Christian,
and you will surely be a good citizen of India".

In *Bishop Orestes Marengo : North East India's Unparalleled Missionary*, the reader will get a taste of what missionaries have done, are doing and will continue to do, preparing "good citizens" for Mother India.

"Good citizens" are not produced over-night through some magical political re-alignment. They are the result of love, self-sacrifice, hard work, relentless effort to build up communities beyond caste, colour, creed, and language differences. The Christian missionary, like Bishop Marengo, uses the power of the Good News of Jesus Christ, to form good Christians, because he / she knows that good Christians are also good citizens.

This book, therefore, is all about Bishop Marengo, a missionary who spent 75 years in the North East to preach the Good News of Jesus. The good he has done is so impressive, and the sacrifices he has made are so many, that he is truly the unparalleled missionary of North East India.

*Joseph Puthenpurakal SDB*

# FOREWORD

Bishop Orestes Marengo was one of the most revered of all the Ecclesiastical personalities who ever worked in North East India. Accounts of his wanderings over the hills of Nagaland, Manipur and Meghalaya and across the green valley of the Brahmaputra, the words he said and the deeds he performed are fast growing into legends. Working today in some of the mission fields where he laboured, I cannot fail to admire the vastness of the areas he covered, the depth of the impact he made, the strength of the faith he kindled, the fervour of the Christian communities he left behind, and the reverence in which his memories are held.

Bishop Marengo was eminently human. He had an enormous capacity to love. He reached out to every kind of people in warm affection. He treated even the humblest of them with respect. It was precisely in happy relationships that his life seemed to make meaning. He was generous to the needy, and went out of his way to help. He could sit with people for hours during a missionary tour and discuss problems. He would play with children, tell stories to adults and pray with the community. His warm-heartedness and unfailing good humour made him welcome wherever he went. And everywhere people valued his presence. His skill for learning languages opened out to him the hearts of hundreds of thousands of people. He was a wonder-worker in making new contacts and establishing new relationships.

Bishop Marengo was quite incapable of picking up quarrels, keeping grudges, or trying to settle old scores. His very simplicity disarmed a possible critic or opponent. Though he was quick-witted and humorous in company, his words hurt nobody. He brought joy to all people present.

He had a unique way with the sick. He would go round the hospital wards and offer a cheering word to every patient. Sick people, irrespective of caste or creed, would long for a visit from him. His prayers for the sick during village-tours were considered specially efficacious. The image of a loving pastor bent over the sick has remained fresh in the minds of many.

Bishop Marengo's figure was always priestly. He was the good shepherd who took care of his sheep with the deepest pastoral concern. An air of gentleness surrounded him like a halo. Of him, like Moses, could be said, he was the meekest of all men. His goodness of heart made him most gracious in his ways and unique in every sense. People had a feeling of easy access to him. Even a 'darshan' of Bishop Marengo was considered a special blessing. He was a father figure to many. The depth of his faith and the sturdiness of his virtue gave him a moral authority that was most enviable. His patriarchal image seemed to acquire greater and greater stature with each passing year.

Bishop Marengo had worked in houses of formation during the early years of his priestly life. He made an impact on the lives of many. His special strength was that he provided a role-model. There were persons who, even years later, considered him a point of reference for right conduct and religious behaviour. Not a few set their lifestyle after his; it was never easy. Till the end of his life he remained a true formator, urging priests, religious and laity on the way of the Lord.

But most of all, Bishop Marengo was a pioneer missionary. He took to new languages with little difficulty. He would sit with a catechist and translate prayers and catechetical material. He would personally attend to the training of catechists. He organised his own village tours and encouraged his co-workers, both priests and sisters alike, towards ardent

apostolic endeavour. He sat for confessions for hours. He gladly presided at the Eucharist and broke the Word to the Christian community.

It was precisely in prayer that Bishop Marengo found his strength. Not only would he never fail his practices of piety, but would pour out his heart before the Lord for his people. He kept asking, and he received. He kept knocking, and the door was opened to him. He kept seeking, and he always found. He founded three dioceses. He erected dozens of parishes. He set up schools, boarding houses, dispensaries, convents, presbyteries without number. He led thousands of people to the Christian fold. His powerful faith was amply rewarded.

I must congratulate Fr. Joseph Puthenpurakal for bringing out the portrait of Bishop Marengo so well. The figure of this great missionary emerges in sharp outline in Fr. Joseph's hands, which was precisely what he set out to do. Would that many more of us happily tread the path that Bishop Marengo marked out for us. May he continue to inspire us!

*Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil SDB*

Guwahati

# INTRODUCTION

Documents need time. Writing them, reading them, understanding them. And living them takes more than just time. Some people have no time. They just live the document even before it is written.

> When Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) wrote *Poetics*,[1] Sophocles'(496-406 B.C.) *Oedipus Rex*[2] already existed. However, the tragedian's classical work is seen to exemplify to an astonishing degree the dictums laid down in *Poetics*. To understand Aristotle's document it is quite enough to immerse oneself in Sophocles' stylish work of art. It had preceded the document.

*Redemptoris Missio* (1990) ranks among the most significant encyclical letters of Pope John Paul II. It is a pressing invitation addressed to Catholic communities all over the world to help mankind grow into Christ. And yet, for nearly two millennia the ideas enshrined in *Redemptoris Missio* had been lived out by men and women committed to the command of Christ, "Go and preach the Gospel."

Bishop Orestes Marengo answered the clarion call of the missionary document to an eminent degree even before the document came. He was the flesh and blood version of *Redemptoris Missio*. So when the opportunity and desire came to write a commentary on *Redemptoris Missio*, the natural thing seemed to be to write the life of Bishop Marengo.

---

1. A treatise on literary criticism written over a period of several years (335-322 B.C.).
2. One of the best known plays of Sophocles.

Bishop Orestes Marengo, SDB, a missionary for seven decades and a half

> who had trekked the length and breadth of North East India; visited on foot more villages than any other missionary;
> met more people than most other missionaries;
> touched the pulse of the poor;
> shared their life of joy and sorrow;
> comforted the sick and the needy;
> and helped whenever he could.

He astonished the rest of us with the number of languages he learnt - some more, some less, but always a symbol of his ardent desire to resonate with the people's heartbeat: Khasi, Hindi, Assamese, Sadri, Santali, Kharia, Oraon, Munda and Karbi, Bengali, Nepali and Tibetan, Tangkhul, Rongmei and Manipuri, Zoe, Boro, Lotha, Garo and Apathani.

All this in addition to his fluency in English and Italian (his mother tongue), and a workable knowledge of French, Latin and Greek and something also of Sikhmese - all of which add up to 26! Oh, yes, My commentary did exist. I just needed to capture it. I just needed words.

Lives like that of Bishop Marengo clarify who a missionary is. A Christian missionary is one who is sent to help others to grow. The sacrifices which the missionary makes have no other goal than to see that individuals and communities grow in every respect. The missionary rejoices when Catholic communities multiply; when children receive proper education, excel in studies and are able to find a decent livelihood; when some of them are called by God to dedicate themselves as priests or religious or as committed lay leaders ready to spend their lives for the growth of others; when

among the people there blossom trustworthy politicians and leaders in different walks of life; when the community becomes channels of peace and brotherhood; when Christ's love for mankind is appreciated, and the Good News finds a home in the hearts of more people; and when people have "life in its fullness" (Jn 10:10).

A Christian missionary is one who remembers the words of Jesus: "There is more joy in giving than in receiving"(Acts 20:35), and finds fulfillment in service.

Here it may be remembered that the idea of "growth" which a Christian missionary has is different from the way the world looks at growth. For the world growth means

more power,
more wealth and
more authority *over the other.*

The Christian idea of growth is growth for the sake of service. Jesus says: "... I am among you as one who serves" (Lk 22:27), or again, "... the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28).

The world may not understand this type of a growth. The nearest it has come to experience it in recent times is the appreciation it showed for Mother Teresa, the "Missionary" of Charity. Her entire life was spent in the service of the poorest of the poor. She ministered to Jesus whenever she served the poor, the needy and the sick. Every Christian missionary carries within him or her - in different degrees - the same flame of Charity that burned in the heart of Mother Teresa, the flame of Christ's love.

The concept of growth is central to the Church and to its mission. Anything that grows is alive. That which does not grow is dead. To grow is a moral necessity for man. The

concept of growth, understood in its integral meaning and when applied to a Christian community, would mean growth in number, knowledge, grace, faith, love, and, above all, in Christian influence or service. It is a growth in all ways into Christ.

This is the picture we get of the early Christian community from the New Testament. They grew in all aspects: in number (Acts 1:15; 2:41; 4:4; 6:7; 9:41), in knowledge (1 Tim 2:4), as a body (1 Cor 12:27; Eph 4:16) in grace (2 Pt 3:18), in all ways into Christ (Eph 4:16-21), in faith and love (2 Thess 1:3), in Christian influence: *you are the light of the world, you are the salt of the earth; you are the leaven* (Mt 5:13-14; 13:33).

The need to grow is at the heart of the Church. *Redemptoris Missio* considers it "urgent". The best way to respond to the call to grow into Christ, the encyclical teaches us, is to share the faith with others. "*Faith is strengthened when it is given to others!*" (RM 2). When faith is shared, both the giver and the receiver grow. With the Christian faith comes other blessings as well.

The Second Vatican Council teaches that the Church on earth is by nature missionary (AG 2). This, we may say, is the heart of the Council's mission decree *Ad Gentes* (1965). Church's nature finds its expression in manifold forms of evangelization. The concept and rich reality of evangelization receives a classical exposition in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) of Pope Paul VI.

Evangelization as explained in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* has a global and a specific meaning. Understood in its global meaning evangelization means "bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new ..." (EN 18). In other words, Christian Mission stands for life. It offers life

in its fullness so that individuals and communities may grow, grow in every respect to the full stature of Christ: physically, intellectually, morally, spiritually, individually, socially. The thousands of educational institutions, hospitals and health care centres, technical schools, development programmes, chapels, places of worship and religious formation houses bear witness to what Christian Mission is all about: the offer of life in its fullness.

In its specific meaning the term evangelization would mean bringing the Good News to those who have not heard it at all. The missionary encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* dwells on this specific meaning and shows its importance and urgency for the Church and for the world. We call it *ad gentes* mission, or "missionary" evangelization, or "primary" evangelization, or "missionary" proclamation.

If the 75 years which Bishop Orestes Marengo spent in North East India can be considered as a living tribute to Pope John Paul II's missionary encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, it is equally fitting to consider the document a tribute to the missionary that Bishop Marengo was.

Crisscrossing the length and breadth of North East India for 75 years, Bishop Orestes Marengo was never tired of offering the Good News of Jesus Christ to everyone who came to him. He showed with his life: that the Church by nature is missionary; that evangelization is the reason for her existence; that among all the different dimensions of evangelization, the *ad gentes* mission is the Church's top-most priority.

In today's fast changing scenario of North East India, many realities that Bishop Marengo came across 75 years ago are simply not the same. Today's North East India is characterized by new aspirations, ethnic and political tensions, insurgency movements, flight from villages to urban centres, erosion of traditional values, weakening of family bond,

educated unemployed, disappearance of age-old institutions, and increasing dichotomy between life and belief, and lack of genuine leadership in society.

At the same time there is a fresh awareness of her natural as well as possible resources, of her historical and cultural advantages, and of her human potential, both men and women.

In a relatively changed context as that of today's can an account of the missionary life of Bishop Marengo be relevant in ways more significant than that of mere history? The reader, after going through the following pages, would be the best person to answer that question.

In preparing this book I have followed a chronological frame of reference:

Early Years (1906-1919),
Valdocco Experience (1919-1923),
Formation to Priesthood (1923-1932),
Missionary Priest (1932-1951),
Missionary Bishop (Dibrugarh) (1951-1964),
Missionary Bishop (Tezpur) (1964-1969),
At the Service of Tezpur (1969-1972),
Episcopal Vicar/Apostolic Administrator (Tura) (1972-1979), Mission in Mendal (1979-1985), in Garobadha (1985-1992), and in Bosco Mount, Rongkhon (1992-1998).

Of course, the most productive, energetic and enterprising years of Bishop Marengo are those as priest and later as the first Bishop of Dibrugarh. Hence, a big slice of the book is dedicated to it. Bishop Marengo was nearing 60 when he began as Bishop of Tezpur and 65 when he had to start all over again in Tura. Everywhere he did a pioneering mission endearing himself to one and all.

May the following pages assist the reader to meet Bishop Marengo, that agile athlete who bagged the greasy-pole prize at the annual parish celebrations in his native Diano d'Alba, the young aspirant who wanted to be a missionary in Ecuador by all means, and the exemplary novice both in Foglizzo (Italy), and in Shillong (India).

May the reader accompany Bishop Marengo to the far corners of North East India to discover his large heart - one that specially loved the Khasis, the Adivasis, the Garos and the Boros, the Nepalis, the Tibetans, and the Tangkhuls, the Zous and the Mayols, the Monsangs, the Paites and the Anals, the Zemeis,the Liangmeis and the Rongmeis, the Lothas and the Angamis, the Rabhas and the Apathanis, and others. Bishop Marengo also received much love from his priests - both religious and diocesan, from Brothers, Sisters, and above all, from his dear flock found almost everywhere in North East India.

Bishop Marengo was the father and founder of three dioceses: Dibrugarh, Tezpur and Tura. For anyone he came in contact with, he was a man of God, who found strength in prayer, and who toiled day and night.

He ran away from glory, power and honour, but lives on in the heart of everyone he met.

The pages that follow are an attempt to give flesh and blood to Bishop Marengo's motto : *To Seek Souls*. It is also a homage to all what the Pope says in *Redemptoris Missio*, and especially to the words: "No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid the supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples" (RM 3).

In all what Bishop Marengo said or did, the focus was clear: to proclaim Christ and to build up Catholic communities. If for *Redemptoris Missio* missionary evangelization is a: "primary service" (RM 2), a "supreme duty" (RM 3), the

"best service" (RM 58) one can render to peoples, and the "foremost task" which concerns the [people's] eternal destiny (RM 86), it is equally true also of Bishop Marengo.

Some years ago when I met Bishop Marengo in Garobadha where he was retired, he referred to *Redemptoris Missio* and expressed his happiness at such an inspiring missionary encyclical and said how happy he would be, if he could begin all over again, and put into practice many more of its new insights in keeping with the progress in mission theology.

There are certainly many more facts and incidents in the missionary life of Father/Bishop Marengo than what the reader will come across in this volume. It has not been possible to have an exhaustive account. The author will be grateful, therefore, if other significant facts and incidents are made known to him in writing for an eventual revised edition.

Bishop Marengo did not keep any personal diary or note book. He wrote his memoirs trusting in memory alone. But even his prodigious memory played truant at times and some errors were inevitable. Not everything could the present author verify. Here too he would appreciate any correction.

Finally, it must be confessed that the one who has profited most from this book is the author himself. Any exercise in writing is an exercise in learning. For this I am grateful to Bishop Marengo whose impressive missionary life inspired me to undertake this "sweet burden." If the reader - even one - comes closer to that missionary ardour that filled the heart of Bishop Marengo by reading this book, the author's effort will be more than amply rewarded.

# I. EARLY YEARS (1906-1919)

It was Friday 26th September, 1997 when the bus from Carmagnola brought me to Alba, thanks to Sr. Pushpa Kottuppallil and her community of MSMHC at Pancalieri. Waiting for me at Alba was 'Nuccio'(an abbreviated and affectionate form of "Giuseppe", meaning "little Joseph"). Nuccio is one of the many nephews of Bishop Marengo. He was so kind and gentle that he at once reminded me of the goodness of Bishop Marengo.

Nuccio showed me around before we drove down South East to reach Diano d'Alba and from there another 6 kms further South East to Le Cecche.

We passed through vineyards and orchards, bouncing from one hillock to another over winding roads. The salubrious air of the countryside was so fresh and so pure that it reminded me of the cool air of Shillong, in Meghalaya, known as the 'abode of the clouds'.

> From the moment I met Nuccio and all along our short drive from Alba to Le Cecche many questions crowded my mind. They had to wait till we sat down to a cup of tea and some exquisite cookies which Sina, Nuccio's wife, and Maria, a niece of Bishop Marengo, had got ready in the meantime. Maria looked very similar to Bishop Marengo. I was not the only one who had noticed it. Years ago when Bishop Marengo was with them, someone else had remarked the same thing. Quick came Bishop's rejoinder: "Yes, but not in the beard!"

In the providence of God, Orestes Marengo was destined to be a great missionary son of a saint of his own native Italy, St. John Bosco. Don Bosco, the father and friend of youth, died in Turin, Italy, in 1888. The religious family he founded renders its service in different parts of the world. It consists of over 25 different groups.[1] They include priests, Brothers, Sisters, cooperators and past pupils. They constitute the 'Salesian Family of Don Bosco'. They are his spiritual sons and daughters. In them Don Bosco continues to benefit humanity - especially the youth - by proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ in manifold ways.

Don Bosco's life is encapsulated in his motto *Da Mihi Animas, Cetera Tolle* (Give Me Souls, Take Away The Rest).[2] Among his illustrious spiritual children there is one who took a similar motto *Animas Quaerere* (To Seek souls) as his programme of life.[3] He lived it to the full and became one of the most distinguished sons of Don Bosco in North East India:[4] He is Orestes Marengo or "Reste" as his mummy and daddy used to call him.

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1. See, *Famiglia Salesiana di Don Bosco*, Rome: Dicastero per la Famiglia Salesiana, 1988. In the Salesian Family the SDBs number 17,644, the FMAs 17,203. The other groups total upto 4,107 members. To these may be added 75,000 cooperators and hundreds of thousands of past pupils.
2. For a brief commentary on it see, *Acts of the General Council* of the SDBs October-December, 1995, No. 354, 24-29.
3. This programme of life implies a "pastoral heart", self-donation to those who have never heard of the Good News of Jesus Christ, availability, the courage to take risks in doing good.
4. Today by North East India we understand the 7 states in North East India: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura having a total area of 255036 sq km. (7.7% of India) and a population of 31,547, 314 (3.75% of India) according to 1991 census. In North East India 60% of the land is mountainous.

Reste was born on 29 August 1906 in a small hamlet called *Le Cecche*, six kms South East of the municipal town of Diano d'Alba, in the district of Alba, which is part of the province of Cuneo, in the region of Piedmont in North Italy.[5]

## Alba : The City of Hundred Towers

Both Le Cecche and Diano d'Alba look to Alba, a growing industrial city some 62 kms from Turin, as their point of reference. Alba's greatness is also their glory.

The city of Alba shares many characteristics with the other cities of Piedmont - a land of castles, towers, monuments, wines, truffles, gastronomy, sweets and world famous personalities. No village or hill in Alba is without a

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The plain areas are the Brahmaputra valley, the Barak valley, the Manipur Plain and the Tripura plains. They account for 28% of the area. The rest of 12% consists of the Meghalaya-Karbi Plateau. The present religious composition of the region is as follows : (1991 census)

| | Hindu | Muslim | Christian | Sikhs | Others |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Arunachal | 37.04 | 1.38 | 10.29 | 10.14 | 15.15 |
| Assam | 67.13 | 28.04 | 3.32 | 0.07 | 1.05 |
| Manipur | 57.67 | 7.27 | 34.11 | 0.07 | 0.88 |
| Meghalaya | 14.67 | 3.46 | 64.58 | 0.15 | 17.14 |
| Mizoram | 5.05 | 0.66 | 85.73 | 0.04 | 8.52 |
| Nagaland | 10.12 | 1.71 | 87.47 | 0.06 | 0.64 |
| Tripura | 68.50 | 7.13 | 1.68 | 0.03 | 4.66 |

The tribals are majority in Mizoram(94%), Nagaland(84%), Meghalaya(81%) and Arunachal(70%). In the other states, Tripura has 29%, Manipur 28% and Assam 11%.
Several waves of migration from various racial, geographical, social and cultural backgrounds account for the diversity existing in the population.

mediaeval castle, a tower or, at the very least, a ruin. Renowned celebrities are associated with Piedmontese castles:

> Camillus Cavour at Grinzano, Vittorio Emmanuel at Pollenzo, Charles Albert at Verduno, Silvio Pellico at Barolo, Vittorio Alfieri at Magliano, Luchino Visconti at Cherasco, St. Charles Borromeo at Castellinadlo, Frederic II at Monte Roero, Pius VII at Cravanzana, Charles Felice at Govone, and so on.

Alba in Piedmont is called the city of hundred towers. Its mediaeval architectural treasures include the church of St. Dominic, a jewel of Gothic style, and that of St. Magdalene, a baroque gem. The great wines for which Alba is renowned, comprise the *barolo* which is recognized throughout the world as one of the most outstanding ever produced, the garnet-red *barbaresco* with its orange reflections which become more pronounced on ageing, the

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At the time of Fr. (Bishop) Orestes and his companions, what we refer to today as the North East was known as the Prefecture Apostolic of "Assam" and it included the area under the British province of Assam as well as Bhutan and Manipur. With the independence of India (1947) Sylhet (except a part of Karimganj subdivision) became part of East Pakistan (the present Bangladesh).

For more information on North East India, see Menamparampil Thomas, *An Introduction to North-East India: Culture and History*, Guwahati: Archbishop's House, 1998) (mimeographed for private circulation only). B.G. Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent*, New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1996, F. S. Downs, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol., V, Part 5, Bangalore: The Church History Association of India, 1992. J. Puthenpurakal, ed., *Impact of Christianity on North East India*, Shillong: Vendrame Institute Publications, 1996.

5. The little "Reste" was baptized in the parish Church of St. John the Baptist in Diano d'Alba on the day he was born. He received the sacrament of Confirmation from Bishop Joseph Francis of Alba in the parish Church of Diano d'Alba on 27 October 1913.

ruby-red *roero* made with 95-98% *nebbiolo* and 2-5% *arneis* grapes which give *roero* its delicate, fragrant and fruity aroma, *the nebbiolo d'Alba* of unquestionable excellence, the reddish, dry and sweet *dolcetto* typical of the Langhe with its varied taste depending on the altitude of the slopes where the grapes take root - the *dolcettos* of Alba, Diano and *Dogliani* are world first classes.

Wines and folklores go together. The Pageant of the Hundred Towers with its donkey race taking place each year on the first Sunday of October is an enviable contest among the different districts of Alba. This jocular farce takes us back in history when on 10 August 1275, the day of St. Lawrence, the Patron Saint of Alba, the people of Asti devastated the vineyards around St. Frontiniano Abbey of Alba and held their own celebration in honour of their patron, St. Secondus. To that affront the people of Alba replied with a donkey race.

The practice continues each year. The procession of five hundred donkeys all dressed up in fanciful costumes is a magnificent sight worth witnessing.

Any visitor to Alba can realize that today it is an example of a judicious mixture of mediaeval past and modern progress. It combines the two aspects of past and present to form a singular setting.

The Ferrero factory producing the world famous chocolates since 1946 and now employing over three thousand workers and producing some 700 tones of chocolates a day - *the Rocher*, *Mon Cheri*, *Pocket Coffee*, *Nutella*, *Kinder* - to name a few of its outstanding products. The Ferrero chocolates make Alba preferred the world over.

It is as if the *dolcettos* and the *ferrero chocolates* blend into a harmonious whole in the kindness and goodness of Bishop Orestes Marengo.

The Italian textile giant "Miroglio" fabricating daily kilometres of cloth of varied hues and shades; the "Mondo Rubber" which supplies the best of runways to thousands of athletes - especially for the world's most spectacular sports extravaganza, the Olympics; and the headquarters of the Pauline Publishing House which brings out innumerable titles, and from whose modernized printing machines there emerges week after week the whole year round the most famous Italian family weekly, the *Famiglia Cristiana* with its over one million copies - remind us of the varied activities that go on still in the area from which North East India received a great missionary Bishop after the heart of Paul, the Apostle of the gentiles.

The National Truffle Fair held in Alba every year and which expresses the industry and the folklore of the Langhe and the Roero gives Alba the choicest corner in the hearts of truffle lovers the world over.[6] Costly as it is, the truffle which young Orestes set his heart on will become clear as the reader skims through these pages.

**Diano d'Alba : Orestes' Town and Parish**

It was in the Church of St. John the Baptist at Diano d'Alba that little Orestes was baptized, confirmed and had his first Holy Communion. There he attended church services and studied at a private school run by the Salesian Sisters. Though he put in 12 kms daily walking to and fro to attend school, young Orestes was known for his love for sports and

6. Truffle (*tuber magnatum pico*), a kind of edible tuber that grows underground and which is generally located with the help of truffle-dogs or pigs, is a very precious ingredient in international gastronomy. It is priced at Rs. 35-40 thousand per kilogramme. Alba is undoubtedly the world's most famous centre for truffles of different kinds.

extra-curricular activities. Hence, it was no wonder that Diano d'Alba awakened a world of boyhood dreams in Orestes.

In young Orestes' days, Diano had some 3200 inhabitants. Situated in the neighbourhood of the city of Alba and surrounded by vineyards and alluring little hamlets and guarded by lush green woods, Diano cherishes her own ancient history.

Her blacktopped smooth roads which now gently wind from one hillock to another interlocking her entire rural households into one big embrace were once upon a time the historic *Via Magistra Langarum* of the ancient Romans. Nestling in the midst of a hundred bell towers, innumerable castles, and majestic steeples rising from the Langhe, Diano d'Alba passed from the middle ages to the time of Orestes without staining her hands with bloody battles or sensational events as it has been the case of some other towns of the region. Nevertheless, Diano occupies an enviable place in the province of Cuneo.

The very name "Diano" recalls "Diana", the goddess of ancient Roman and Ligurian hunters. It takes us back to the hoary past when their ancestors offered sacrifices to the "pagan" gods before they were blessed with the name of Christ and His Good News.

Since the Romans had no great temples and grandiose constructions for worship, the people of Diano had their sacred groves and awesome forests where sacrifices were duly carried out. Whereas the goddess Diana was worshipped on the hill where now Diano d'Alba stands, there were other hills and valleys dedicated to several Roman gods like Mars in Martinenga near Barbaresco and Vulcan in Gorzegno. At the entrance to Diano d'Alba, there used to be - people say - a small site of worship dedicated to the goddess Diana in the

bygone past, but now there stands an attractive chapel dedicated to St. Lucy.

In 640 A.D. when the Longobards invaded the region and weakened the strength of Alba, the administrative headquarters were shifted to Diano d'Alba while the Episcopal See continued to remain in Alba itself. Diano d'Alba rose in importance in subsequent years. In fact even after Charles the Great helped to restore the power of Alba, the city executive committee was known for many years as "Comitato Dianese" rather than "Comitato Albese". It was only after the year 1000 that Alba re-acquired its place of honour. What is today the province of Cuneo in the Region of Piedmont was under the power of the Marquis Boniface of the Guasto. It was he who after conquering it from Marquis of Susa made a gift of a 10th portion of its territory to the Rectory or Parish of Ferrania in 1124. In the following decades Diano changed hands between Marquises and Counts and other powerful and power-hungry potentates until it became the possession of the Bishop of Alba towards the close of the 12th century.

The fate of Diano continued to alternate. By the end of the 13th century it was no more under the authority of the Bishop of Alba as a diocesan possession. In 1361 an English mercenary troop found its way to nearby Cherasco and came also to Diano and took possession of it for a few years. However, in 1372, Diano was freed from English occupation by Marquis Manfredo of Busca. It is said that the anti-Pope Clement VII donated Diano to Amedeo VI of Savoia. The construction of the Castle of Diano, one of the strongest in the region, goes back to this period.

By the middle of the 15th century the land of the Langhe, including Diano, changed ownership from the house of Savoia to the Marquis of Monferrato. Along with other lands

Diano returned to Duke Vittorio of Savoia by 1631 who in his turn gave it to Ruffino Ottavio of Castiglione Falletto on 12th October 1631. Being part of the province of Cuneo in the region of Piedmont, Diano d'Alba shared the vicissitudes of the modern history of both Piedmont in general and of Cueno in particular.

Orestes Marengo inherited the rich history of Alba and Diano d'Alba. Two things, however, draw our attention. The first is the parish Church of Diano and the other, the Institute of the Salesian Sisters - both of which had great influence in shaping the future of young Orestes.

**The Parish Church of Diano**

At the turn of the 20th century the parish of Diano d'Alba was blessed with the presence of a learned and holy parish priest, Mgr. Joseph Falletti, who inculcated in the faithful a great devotion to Mary under the title of Help of Christians. He was a great friend and admirer of Don Bosco. In 1937 he celebrated the Golden Jubilee of his priestly ordination at Diano d'Alba. We can notice in young Orestes indelible marks of the zeal and devotion of Mgr. Falletti, as well as of the education imparted to him by the Salesian Sisters. The history of the parish Church of Diano d'Alba dedicated to St. John the Baptist goes back - according to some authors - to the architectural genius of Zangone da Montelupo of the 17th century. Mgr. Abate Allaria, writing in the Gazzette of Alba in 1896, calls it *the queen of the Churches of the Langhe*. Its imposing facade holding high the statue of the Sacred Heart, its elegant and artistic belfry and its neatly sculptured main doors in wood are attractive for its simplicity and beauty. A day will come when the "Reste" of Le Cecche will stand with mitre and crocier alongside his mummy and relations before the facade of this parish church to have a memorable snap.

The renovations done by Mgr. Joseph Falletti during 1894-95 in the interior of the Church have given the parish church of Diano an added attraction. The lovely paintings of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the sending of the apostles to the different parts of the world to proclaim the Gospel, the Holy Innocents who suffered for Christ, the Blessed Sacrament and the Martyrdom of St. Eurosia are among the others eliciting devotion. These had remained etched in Orestes' memory.

The six little chapels which include also one in honour of St. John Bosco are indeed beautiful. The Way of the Cross, a masterpiece of Val Gardena of the renowned firm Delago, adds to the sanctity of the House of God and draws forth compassion for the sufferings of the Saviour. It is probable that Bishop Marengo's love for the poor, the sick and the marginalized had its root also in the influence of the masterpiece of Val Gardena in his own parish church.

On Saturday 27 September 1997 when I had the fortune of celebrating the Eucharist in the parish Church accompanied by Maria (affectionately called 'Mariuccia'), the niece of Bishop Marengo, images of young Orestes who used to walk 12 kms to and from Le Cecche to attend Mass did, indeed, fill my mind. When we saw Bishop Marengo kneeling in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament for several hours even in his old age, in the chapel of Bosco Mount, Rongkhon, Garo Hills, we certainly could imagine that it all started in the parish Church of Diano d'Alba decades earlier.

**Diano and the Salesian Sisters**

An institution of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (Salesian Sisters) was started in Diano d'Alba on 15 July 1900, six years before Orestes was born. Blessed Michael Rua, the first successor of Don Bosco, visited Diano's

Salesian Institute more than once. Cardinal Cagliero honoured it with his presence in 1918 when Orestes was just twelve. Remembering the Cardinal's visit, Bishop Marengo recalls that the two Salesian Fathers who had come with him happened to leave the confessional for a while to breathe some fresh air after several hours of hearing confessions at the parish church of Diano. Cardinal Cagliero who noticed it, said:

> Don Bosco would never leave the confessional as long as there were penitents awaiting their turn.[7]

The fact that this incident remained engraved in Bishop Marengo's mind is pro-indicative of the hundreds of hours he would spend in confessionals as a priest and as a Bishop in the innumerable villages, towns and institutions of North East India over a period of more than six decades. We will have more on this later.

Besides the visit of Blessed Michael Rua and Cardinal Cagliero, the Salesian Institute and Diano had the privilege of receiving other eminent Salesians like Mgr. Costamagna, Bishop of Mendez and Gualquiza, Mgr. Marenco (not to be mistaken with 'Marengo') Bishop of Massa and Carara, Mgr. Mederlet, the Archbishop of Madras, Mgr. Mathias his successor, Fr. Barberis, etc.

Prof. Sinistrero has the following to say about the Salesian Sisters of Diano d'Alba:

> Gentle and kind, zealous and wise, committed and creative starting from Mother Caterina Daghero to Mothers Elisa Roncallo, Angiolina Buzzetti, Marina Coppo, Caterina Novo, Eulalia Bosco ... and the Servant

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7. SHTCD-MM.,I,1.

> of God Teresa Valse' ... they impressed the young with the Salesian charism...[8]

Due to their hard work and zeal among the youth of Diano,

> Church attendance grew,
> the number of communions multiplied,
> the parish became a beehive of activities for the young,
> many people became the beneficiaries of the services of the Sisters, and vocations to priesthood and religious life increased.[9]

The Salesian vocation of Orestes was, to a large extent, the fruit of his coming in contact with the Salesian Sisters, especially with Sr. Catherine Zannone who had the rare privilege of being present at Bishop Marengo's Episcopal Ordination on 27 December 1951 in Valdocco. She didn't mind travelling at the age of 80, all the way from Naples to Turin to take part in that unforgettable event of her one-time pupil, Orestes.

Bishop Marengo writes:

> For three years I frequented a private school run by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and will ever keep a vivid and grateful memory of Sr. Catherine Zannone who was teaching us boys. She had been a missionary in Patagonia and occasionally entertained us with some of her missionary experiences. My Salesian vocation is, to a great extent, due to her.[10]

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8. Prof. D. Sinistrero, "Salesianita" di Diano", *Diano d'Alba e la sua storia gloriosa*, Alba: Pia Societa' Figlie di San Paolo, 1937 (published on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of Mgr. Joseph Falletti), 10.
9. Ibid., 11.
10. Ibid., 2.

The education received at the hands of the Salesian Sisters and the exemplary Christian life at home, together with the spirit of sacrifice and goodness seen in both father and mother, moulded Orestes to be a fit vocation for Salesian missionary life. The parish record dated 8th October 1919 attests that young Marengo

> distinguished himself among his companions
> for good conduct and innocence of life,
> and gave every sign of hope of a vocation
> to Salesian religious life.[11]

**Le Cecche : Orestes' Little Hamlet**

I asked "*Mariuccia*", then nearly 70, to name the fruits that grow in Le Cecche.[12] Out came names as fresh as the fruits we were eating: *uva, ciliege, pesche, fragoli, prugne, mela, fichi, pera, noocciole, mandorle, melograno, castagne, nocci, cachi* and so on. She had no problem in pronouncing them. Problem was with me in jotting them down.

There were so few houses in Le Cecche that I asked Maria again if there were other hamlets of the same kind nearby. Here too she was quick to satisfy me with some names: *Genesio, Gerlotto, Canova, Berfi, Ciabot, Rabino, Voghera, Sorba, Bonoreto*, etc.

After saying Bonoreto, Maria added:

"*li' abitava Maria*" (*it was there that Maria used to live*).

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11. SHTCD-MF, 18. The letter is from Mgr. Joseph Falletti, the parish priest.
12. The name *Le Cecche* (= houses with *blind* windows ) derives from the fact that during the two World Wars the windows of the houses were darkened for safety sake.

Which Maria? I enquired.

The Maria of the first marriage.

The small hamlet of *Le Cecche* can be a delightful holiday resort.

When the Marengos came from Diano d'Alba to live in Le Cecche sometime in the middle of the last century, there were hardly any other houses nearby except the Gerlottos. In fact the two houses were built so close by that the family of Gerlotto Giovanni and that of Lorenzo Marengo lived 'one heart and one soul'.

In the course of years, Natale, the eldest brother of Orestes, married Rosina, one of the five daughters of Gerlotto Giovanni and Bianco Paola. Their second daughter Matilde became a religious in the Pauline Family at Alba.

The Marengos and the Gerlottos lived a busy life in the countryside. Vineyards and orchards scheduled their activities from month to month. From mid -September to mid-October was vintage. Once the grapes were gathered in, the whole process of wine making started. They would spend most of the time in their wine-cellar, bottling old wines, cleaning up big drums to store the new one.

I happened to visit the Marengos just when the vintage was in full swing. Since Nuccio and Sina are childless, they invite every year their friends from Turin to come and help them. With Mariuccia we were about ten of us enjoying the best of grapes of Le Cecche and giving a helping hand in the vineyard and in the cellar. Those are unforgettable days for me.

Talking with them I realized that work in the vineyard can keep people busy almost the whole year round. November to February - that is four long months - for pruning and cleaning; February and March are spent in tying the branches

properly. The whole of April is a quiet month offering an opportunity for other works in the fields, in the orchards and around the house. The month of May is again meant for the vines: cleaning, tying and caring. June and July are for spraying to keep the grapes healthy and free from sickness. And of course, August is sacred all over Italy. It is the same also in Le Cecche. People go for holidays either to the hills or the seaside. It is the Italian *Ferragosto*!

Just as vineyards absorb much of the time, so too orchards and animal husbandry. Cherries and strawberries are collected in June, peaches and plums in July, hazels and almonds in August, apples in September, pomegranate and chestnuts and cachi *(persimmon)* in November, and of course, those who are lucky will find precious *truffles* in October. 'No rain, no truffle', they say.

Though work kept them busybodies, the Marengos and the Gerlottos and the people of the nearby hamlets made use of every opportunity to be in Diano d'Alba, their town in the Langhe.

**Orestes' Dear Ones**

Orestes' father, Lorenzo Marengo, was born in Diano d'Alba on 6 November 1860. He died at the good old age of 83 in Albaretto Torre on 3 October 1943. From Lorenzo's first marriage with Catherina Mascarello was born Maria in 1893. She had two children. She died in 1993 at the age of 100. Of Lorenzo it is said:

> *He was generous, good, sincere with all as well as with the Lord to whom he made a gift of three of his children.*[13]

13. Souvenir published on the occasion of the Month's Mind on 9 November 1943.

Agostina Montaldo, the mother of Bishop Marengo, was born in Alba on 18 September 1872. She passed away in Diano d'Alba on 14 July 1953. About her is written:

> *Suffering, detachment and sacrifice were her daily bread,*
> *desiring to remain hidden,*
> *humility and hard work were her uniform.*
> *The Church, prayer and the Eucharist*
> *were her life's breath.*[14]

As we shall have occasion to show, Orestes was the personification of the sterling qualities of both his parents. The other children in the family of Lorenzo Marengo and Agostina Montaldo were:

Margherita, born in 1897, joined the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of St. Antida de Touret and took the name of Agnes. She died in 1985. Natale, born in 1901, was married to Rosina Gerlotto as we have mentioned earlier.[15] His three children are Giuseppe Marengo known as 'Nuccio' married to Sina from Catania in Sicily; Agostina married to Aldo Borgna of Albaretto Torre in the province of Cuneo and Maria or Mariuccia who remains unmarried and stayed with Cesare (born in 1911), the brother immediately elder to Bishop Marengo. He too was unmarried. Agostina and Aldo Borgna have three children: Alberto, Monica and Nicoletta.

Giuseppe, Bishop Marengo's brother who was a priest and who for over 25 years was the parish priest at Albaretto

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14. Souvenir published on the occasion of Month's Mind 13 August 1953.
15. In the paternal home at Le Cecche one can see certificates of excellence in making wine and in rearing cattle conferred on Natale by the Municipality of Diano d'Alba or by the city of Alba.

Torre,[16] was born in 1904. He died in 1975. Bishop Marengo who received the news of his illness, anticipated his journey to Italy to see him alive. But he came to know that his priest-brother had passed away only when someone who met him in Turin on his arrival expressed his condolences.

Bishop Marengo also had a cousin, Sr. Olimpia Marengo FMA. She was born in Diano d'Alba on 7 April 1902. During the second year of her novitiate, that is in December 1923 almost at the same time in which Orestes left for Assam, India, Olimpia went as a missionary to the United States of America. She made her first religious profession in August 1924. After 64 years of missionary work she passed away in America on 6 July 1988. The description of her character and of her holiness of life by her provincial, Sr. Patricia King, mirrors that of Bishop Marengo, her cousin.[17]

On my visit to Le Cecche I was hoping to meet Cesare and Mariuccia to get to know more about the family and about Bishop Marengo's early years at home. But unfortunately Cesare had already gone to his eternal reward on Sunday 18 May 1997. With Cesare's passing away Bishop Marengo was the sole survivor among the children of Agostina and Lorenzo Marengo.

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16. Writing on 8 May 1962 from Dibrugarh (Assam, India) on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee Celebrations of Don Giuseppe, his brother, Bishop Marengo shows how close he was to him and to the other family members. Among other things he also says "I know how difficult it must be for you to face all those who come with wishes, praises and congratulations. I know how much I, your brother, feel when such occasions come my way." See, SHTCD-MF, 18.
17. The author is grateful to Sr. Celine D'Cunha FMA who brought to his notice information on Sr. Olimpia Marengo FMA.

**In the Company of His Dear Ones**

Recalling his early days at home his mother spoke of "Reste" as

> The most obedient,
> having sparkling qualities of goodness,
> and the most obliging among the children.[18]

Marengo had to walk 12 kms to and from Le Cecche his school in Diano d'Alba. At school, Marengo had a companion called Elia Luigi. For any question that was put to him, no matter on what subject, he would only answer after a pause: "Ah, Elia Luigi". The answer to the question, "have you brought your copy book?" would invariably begin with "Ah, Elia Luigi". "Have you done your homework?" the answer would begin with the same "Ah, Elia Luigi!" While all the other companions made fun of Elia's Dickensian affliction, the young Orestes showed compassion for his friend and tried his best to help him with his studies without making fun of him.[19] As a priest and later as a Bishop, Orestes' greatest pain would be when he could not help someone in need.

Marengo used to prove his prowess in venturesome recreation. Among his companions he was one of the few who could fling a stone as high as the belfry tower of his parish Church. On the occasion of the parish feast, a large crowd used to gather to watch "*la cucagna*", the greasy-pole with a prize attached to its tip. Young men would vie with one another to reach the top and to conquer the coveted treasure. "Uncle", writes Nuccio, Bishop Marengo's nephew from Turin, "was among the first to reach the top of the slippery pole, because he used to climb like a cat!"

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18 See, Letter of Joseph Marengo from Turin dated 28 November 1995 to Fr. Joseph Puthenpurakal, SHTCD-MF, 18.

19. Ibid.

The parents of Orestes came from an ordinary middle class family. They were farmers and cultivated their own land. When the children were growing up and had to go to school, it was not easy for Lorenzo Marengo to pay their fees and to meet other expenses. Maria, the eldest was already married. Lorenzo had to pay for Joseph studying for priesthood at the seminary of Alba and had to think of the "dowry" for Agnes who, after attending a school run by the Salesian Sisters, joined, as we have mentioned earlier, the congregation of the Sisters of Saint Antida de Touret and was getting ready for her vestition.

Since Lorenzo could not pay the full fees of Orestes, who by then had gone to Valdocco for the Latin course, he got a strong recommendation from the parish priest, Mgr. Joseph Falletti, and obtained a generous concession for Orestes' fees. That's how young Orestes started his studies with the Salesians at Valdocco.

Whenever Joseph and Orestes came home during holidays, they were very willing to help out with household chores like bringing firewood, taking sheep to pasture, cutting grass for rabbits, hoeing the land for cultivation and so on. But since the Marengos had their fields on a slope, it was necessary to dig it up from bottom upwards. But the two sons - then seminarians - would invariably hoe it starting from the top downwards. They found it more convenient that way! But it only angered their father. "These two fellows", he would shout "are not meant to cultivate the land. They are meant for something else!" Nonetheless, writes Nuccio, "they became excellent farmers in the vineyard of the Lord." Cesare used to say that whereas Orestes is the shepherd of souls, he was the shepherd of sheep.

The distance between Le Cecche and Valdocco is only seventy kms. But it took four full days on horseback for

Lorenzo to come and meet Orestes at Valdocco. Naturally he could not afford to do it more than once a year. When Lorenzo reached back home, the relatives and friends were eager to know how his son was faring with his lessons in Latin. All what Lorenzo could tell them was that he was doing well and had only praises from his superiors.

Saint John Bosco, or simply "Don Bosco", and his Salesians became known to Orestes from his earliest years. Agostina, the mother of Orestes, was a young girl who studied in Turin. She had heard about the Salesians of Don Bosco. She also had the rare joy of being present when the body of Don Bosco was taken from Valdocco to Valsalice for burial in 1888. Don Bosco, the Salesians, and Turin were also the topic of her conversation with her little "Reste" in the calm, quite hamlet of Le Cecche. But it was his parish priest Mgr. J. Falletti, a great friend of the Salesians, as we have already mentioned, and Sr. Catherine Zannone FMA, Orestes' teacher in the primary school at Diano d'Alba and who later on returned to Patagonia as a missionary, who sowed and nourished his Salesian vocation. Orestes remained eternally grateful to both of them.

# II. VALDOCCO EXPERIENCE (1919-1923)

As a young student at Valdocco, Orestes was fortunate to come in contact with Salesians who had known Don Bosco personally. He was lucky to drink in at the very fountain of Salesian missionary enthusiasm of the early years.

Orestes did his High School (*gymnasium*) studies and the Latin course at Valdocco close to the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians from 1919 to 1923. During these years he had the rare chance of knowing personally Fr. Paul Albera (1845-1921), the second successor to Don Bosco and Rector Major of the Salesian Society from 1910 to 1921. One day Orestes accompanied Fr. Albera, then a frail, old man, as he carried Holy Communion to Mgr. John Marenco. After the funeral of Bishop Marenco and a few days later on 22 October 1921, one of the teachers told Orestes jokingly, that a day would come when the pectoral cross of Marenco would belong to Orestes!" Commenting on this prophecy some sixty years later, Bishop Marengo would remark, that only half of that prophecy was fulfilled. He was ordained a Bishop in the Basilica of Mary Help Christians exactly thirty years after the prophecy, but the pectoral cross of Bishop Marenco by then had already been donated to another Salesian Bishop.

A week after the funeral of Bishop John Marenco, Orestes was again present at the side of Fr. Albera. But this time it was the turn of Fr. Albera to receive the *Holy Viaticum*. Fr. Albera passed away on 29 October 1921.

During his stay of nearly 4 years at Valdocco, Orestes came to know many other prominent Salesians. Among them was Blessed Philip Rinaldi, Don Bosco's third successor from 1922 to 1931.

On Monday 20 May 1996, giving a Good Night talk[1] to the staff and students of Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong, India, Bishop Marengo - then rather weak and infirm, but still active at the ripe old age of 90 - recalled the figure of Blessed Philip Rinaldi and said that the saint one day had kissed his (Orestes') feet! To the audience that remained spell-bound for a few seconds not knowing how, he revealed in a subdued voice: "at the washing of the feet on a Holy Thursday" at Valdocco!".

Fr. Peter Ricaldone, Rector Major from 1931 to 1951 and the fourth successor of Don Bosco, was another famous Salesian whom young Orestes knew personally. He was later to allow Orestes to join the first group of Salesian novices travelling to India in 1923. Fr. John Baptist Francesia (1838-1930) whom Orestes knew was among the first 16 pupils of Don Bosco. In 1859 young Francesia joined Don Bosco and lived with him 40 unforgettable years, first as a pupil, and later, as a member of the newly founded Salesian Society. During Orestes' stay at Valdocco, Fr. Francesia used to meet the boys and share with them his love for Don Bosco. Thus Orestes had the fortune of having first hand information on Don Bosco from those who had lived with him.

Who could forget, Bishop Marengo used to ask, Dominic Palestrino, the head sacristan of the Basilica of Mary help of Christians at Vadocco? Patient, gentle, and most exact in carrying out his duties.

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1. It is a practice in Salesian Houses to address the staff and students with a brief talk on some useful topic or on some significant event of the day before retiring to sleep.

Brother Palestrino, he added, had only one desire: to make himself a "saint" by looking after the cleanliness and decorum of the Basilica - a task which Don Bosco had entrusted to him and which he did to the best of his ability. Though a man of few words, Bro. Palestrino always had a smile on his lips. From the time he met Don Bosco in 1875, Palestrino had no other goal than to stay with him. Don Bosco, knowing his holy life, used to commend to his prayers his many intentions. It is no wonder then that young Orestes remained impressed by the person of Bro. Palestrino.

One day Orestes accompanied Fr. Aloysius Piscetta (1858-1925) to the study hall where he was to address the boys on the topic of vocation. Fr. Piscetta by that time was almost completely blind. On that occasion he asked Orestes his name. Some ten months later in the company of other boys, Fr. Piscetta on hearing the name "Marengo", remembered that he had met him earlier. Bishop Marengo used to recall that incident to prove Fr. Piscetta's excellent memory. Like Fr. Piscetta and, perhaps, even more, Orestes as priest and later on as Bishop had an exceptional ability to learn languages and remember peoples and places by name even after many years.

**A Missionary to Ecuador?**

After the death of Fr. Paul Albera (29th October 1921) the Salesian Society had its General Assembly which elected Fr. Philip Rinaldi as the Rector Major on 24 April 1922. Among the many provincials and delegates who were present, was also Fr. Guido Rocca (1870-1961), the provincial of Ecuador. Orestes approached him and gently requested him to accept him as a missionary to Ecuador. Fr. Rocca had no objection to it, provided it was approved by Fr. Bartolomeo Fasce, the Councillor General for studies.

In a letter dated 18 July 1923 Marengo made a formal application to the Rector of the house of Valdocco expressing his desire to go to the Salesian missions of Ecuador. We give below the full text of it. It reveals the ardent missionary heart of young Orestes.[2]

> *Rev. Fr. Rector,*
>
> *I, Marengo Orestes, a pupil of the Salesian Oratory of St. Francis of Sales, because of a desire that I have since some time to become a Salesian missionary, renew for the 3rd time my request to leave for Ecuador to be a missionary there. It is my firm hope that you will grant my entreaty. I would like to add that I have the full permission of my parents. I have also brought this to the notice of the provincial of that mission through the missionaries who went there in the month of June. With due permission of the Major Superiors I would like to go to that mission along with a priest who will come to Turin most probably in the month of August.*
>
> *In the meantime, I shall pray much for you, dear Fr. Rector and for the other Superiors - to all of them I renew my sincere entreaty to grant me my request, so that my desire will be fulfilled. All this - far from being the result of my fantasy - is, instead, the desire to consecrate my life completely from now on for the salvation of souls.*
>
> *With the best of regards,*
>
> *Yours most respectfully,*
>
> *(Orestes Marengo)*
>
> *Turin 18th July 1923.*

2. For the Italian text of it in Orestes' own handwriting, see SHTCD-MF, 19.

Fr. Fasce gave him a firm "No" and said :

> We must first decide whether you are good enough to be a Salesian. You are altogether too young to decide to go to the missions. Complete your Latin course here and seek admission to the novitiate. After that if you are still of the same mind we shall see.[3]

It remained a mystery for Orestes how and why Fr. Fasce said "no", because his companions from Valdocco were already accepted for the Middle East and for South America.

For Fr. Fasce, Orestes was just one of the 390 student boarders of the Oratory of Valdocco at that time. Orestes felt it much. The "no" of Fr. Fasce remained heavy on his mind. And that was the end of his "Ecuadorian" dream. However, it was the beginning of a new dream, a dream still very vague to him.

Two persons are linked with this new dream. They are Fr. Dominic Canepa and Brother Eligius Cinato.

**Retreat at Valsalice**

Now that Orestes was told to give up the idea of going to Ecuador, he attended a retreat at Valsalice at the end of his High School studies. It was the usual retreat to guide youngsters to discern their vocation in life. Towards the end of the retreat all those who wished to join the Salesian form of life were asked to make their application. Orestes too wrote his application. But the thought of going to the missions was uppermost in his mind; so much so, he only wrote that he wished to become a missionary without mentioning that he wanted to join the Salesian novitiate. The brief application was addressed to Fr. Alexander Luchelli, the provincial. Fr. Charles

3. SHTCD- File J. Bacchiarello.

Maselli who glanced through the letter before handing it over to the provincial was surprised to note that the young Orestes had forgotten to apply to join the Salesian novitiate.

He explained the matter to Orestes, who immediately understood the gravity of his mistake. He, therefore, wrote a fresh application and handed it over to Fr. Maselli to be given to the provincial.

The aspirant Orestes was admitted to the novitiate in the provincial council meeting held at Valsalice on 19 July 1923. After this, he went home to be with his dear ones before beginning his novitiate at Foglizzo in October of the same year.

**The Way to Assam**

Yes, Orestes was admitted to the Salesian novitiate at Foglizzo. But his heart was not there. It was somewhere far away in some missions across the ocean. At times he appeared frustrated. Novitiate, yes. But for what? How to be a missionary in some far away place where he could save souls for Christ? - this thought haunted him day and night.

It was Fr. Dominic Canepa, his novice master at Foglizzo, a holy and kind-hearted man, who understood young Orestes' anguish. He looked for an opportunity to help him out. It did not take too long.

For the first time in its history the Salesian Congregation came up with a new idea: to send young men to make their novitiate in mission countries rather than in Italy. So a big group of youngsters full of enthusiasm got ready to leave for China, Siam (the present day Thailand) and India.[4]

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4. Before the Salesians of Don Bosco came to North East India in 1922, Tanjore and Mylapore in south India had the presence of the Salesians of Don Bosco from 1906 to 1928. For a detailed account of those

**The Genesis of a Novitiate in Assam**

Fr. Louis Mathias, the leader of the first group of Salesians to Assam, was a man of great vision. The first group, that reached Shillong with him as leader on 13 January 1922, consisted of 11 Salesians. They started in full earnest. The harvest was so rich and the horizon so vast that in his first report to Rome, Mgr. Mathias wrote that he would need at least 350 missionaries! Suggesting a solution to the problem of personnel, he confided to his Superiors in Turin:

"The Jesuits are sending their confreres to the missions soon after the novitiate. Why can't we do the same? Or rather, why can't we take a step further and send the aspirants to do the novitiate in the mission lands?"

And he added:

"The personnel from Europe and India living together right from the novitiate would be beneficial, those from Europe will get used to the climate and will have an opportunity to learn better the local languages ..."[5]

Even before waiting for an answer, Mgr. Mathias sent in an application to open the novitiate by the feast of the Immaculate Conception, 1923. Years later, on the occasion of his sacerdotal Golden Jubilee, Mgr. Mathias was asked which was the most beautiful day of his life in Assam. He

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years, see, Mathew Kapplikunnel SDB, *Their Life for Youth: History and Relevance of the Early Salesian Presence in India, Tanjore and Mylapore, 1906-1928*, Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publication, 1989. For details about the second group which arrived in North East India in 1922, see, L. Mathias, *Quarant'Anni in India* (this is his memoirs in Italian covering the years 1921-1935), Torino-Leumann: Elle Di Ci, 1963, and O. Paviotti, *The Work of His Hands*, Shillong: Archbishop's House, 1987 and A. Pianazzi, *Don Bosco nell'Assam*, Leumann (Torino): Editrice Elle Di Ci, 1983.

5. A. Pianazzi, *Don Bosco nell'Assam*, 76-77.

replied: "The day when the first group of novices arrived. In them I saw a bright future for the missions of Assam."

**God's Ways for Orestes**

One of the boys from the group meant for Assam decided to drop out at the last moment, and another one unfortunately passed away. With two places vacant, Bro. Eligius Cinato (1898-1964) the eldest of the group, had already asked permission from Fr. Peter Ricaldone, the Prefect General of the Congregation, to look for someone else. The master of novices, Fr. Canepa, who came to know about it told Cinato to approach Orestes to find out if he wished to take the place of the one who passed away.

On a fine day Cinato came to Orestes and said:

*If you wish to join us, then, you only have to write a line to Fr. Ricaldone. He knows everything about it.*

Orestes dispatched the letter without any delay. But the reply was not forthcoming as he had expected . So with the permission of Fr. Canepa he left for Valdocco to meet Fr. Ricaldone personally.

Seeing a rather long line of people waiting to meet Fr. Ricaldone, Orestes took his place in the long queue, and was resigned to await his turn. Then came a pleasant surprise. The door of Fr. Ricaldone's office suddenly stood ajar. And Orestes heard Fr. Ricaldone call out:

"Marengo, come in." Someone had informed him that the young Marengo had come all the way from Foglizzo to meet him.

"He received me", recalled Bishop Marengo in later years, "with fatherly goodness" and said:

*I am so happy that you want to go to the missions. You will join the group of novices leaving for Assam. You*

*will receive your clerical dress along with the others next Sunday. So get ready to leave for Assam.*

Marengo's joy knew no bounds. "Assam!" Since then, that word never left his heart. It struck roots. It bore abundant fruits as the following pages will bear ample witness. A new chapter was opening in the life of young Orestes. We shall refer to Orestes from now on as "Marengo".

The thrill that Marengo experienced at the thought that he was to leave for the missions brought back to him vivid memories of the first missionary expedition to Assam he had witnessed exactly two years ago.

The first group of Salesian missionaries under the leadership of Fr. Louis Mathias was given a solemn send off on 23 October 1921. There were also missionaries leaving for South America. The Basilica at Valdocco was witnessing once again what Don Bosco and his successors used to do for missionaries leaving for far away countries.

The send off for Assam was presided over by Bishop Castrale in the name of Cardinal Richelmy. A touching scene it was, when the missionaries, after receiving the crucifix, received the parting embrace from confreres, superiors, relatives and friends. Fr. L. Mathias was asked to say a few words of adieu on behalf of the missionaries leaving either for Assam or for South America. He referred to Assam as the "incomparable" land, "the new Patagonia". He spoke of the many languages of Assam - 167 of them! When they heard of so many languages, the faithful in the audience was wonder struck! Who would manage to speak so many languages ? - many asked among themselves. Fr. Mathias surprised them all, when he added:

*We Salesians shall speak the language of Our Lord and we shall repeat the miracles of the first Pentecost!*

Returning to the sacristy after the function Fr. Mathias was met by Fr. Amadei who asked him where he could find a copy of the grammar of the language which the Lord spoke! Fr. Mathias was equally jovial and retorted:

"Try, SEI - they may have one!"[6]

There was a small little fellow among the boys in the Basilica during that impressive send off. Some days later when Fr. Mathias returned from England and France, he was invited by the Rector of the Mother House to address the boys. Naturally, he spoke of Assam again. At the end of his most exciting and highly interesting descriptions of the Assam mission [7] the boys came around to get still more out of him. Among them there was one - quiet and reserved - who uttered not a word, but who took in every word he heard. That was Orestes Marengo. In God's mysterious and loving ways, Orestes was to follow Fr. L. Mathias to Assam within two years. In the providence of God, he would be the one who would master the several of those 167 languages spoken of by Fr. Mathias besides speaking the Lord's language of love in the most effective of ways.

## Getting Ready for Assam

Marengo returned to Foglizzo. On the following Sunday, 21 October 1923, Marengo received the clerical habit from the hands of Blessed Philip Rinaldi. Soon after that he

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6. SEI (Societa' Editrice Internazionale) was the big publishing house of the Salesians. It had a bookshop just outside the gate of the Basilica.
7. Mgr. Mathias had met more than once Fr. C. Becker SDS (Society of the Divine Saviour) who supplied him with information on Assam where the first group of German Salvatorian missionaries(SDS) had worked from 1890 to 1914. They had to leave Assam due to the outbreak of the first World War. The Salesians came in their place to continue mission work.

went home to wish goodbye to his parents and dear ones. He was accompanied by Bro. Joseph Foglia (1900-1970) from the same area. He too was part of the group which was to leave for Assam.

In later years as Bishop, Marengo recalled with tears in his eyes how on the day in which he was supposed to leave home for Valdocco on his way to India his father had to go very early in the morning on an urgent business when Marengo was still asleep. His father woke him up, gave him a kiss and wished him goodbye. That was the last time he met his father. For, it was only after 28 years that Marengo returned to Italy from India - and that too at the insistence of his superiors to be ordained as the first Bishop of Dibrugarh in 1951. In the meantime, the Lord had called his dear father Lorenzo to his eternal home on 3 October 1943.

For Marengo and his companions the departure for India took place on 2 December 1923. All his friends from Foglizzo meant for India, had studied earlier at the Salesian Institute of Penango. Marengo was the only one from the Latin course at Valdocco.

The group was led by a young, energetic and warm-hearted priest Fr. Stephen Ferrando and Bro. Joseph Foglia. It was Marengo's first sea voyage and he proved quite a good sailor for he never missed a meal.

Marengo recalls that one day as he was on deck reading or writing something during the hottest hours of the day, a kindly Protestant pastor approached him and said in French with a fatherly smile, for he guessed that Marengo would not understand English:

"My friend, the sun is very hot.
You should not be here at this time of the day".

Marengo thanked him and moved away. Recalling that small incident Bishop Marengo recorded in his memoirs:

"A kind word and a sincere concern for me from a total stranger who happened to be a protestant pastor, cannot be easily forgotten." A kind thought for his protestant brethren would become, in later years, the hallmark of Marengo's life: kind and gentle, he would always speak well of Christians of other Churches.

# III. FORMATION TO PRIESTHOOD (1923-1932)

To live where mission takes place is an irreplaceable element of missionary formation. Moreover, to come in touch with missionaries of sterling qualities who, starting from scratch, establish communities in mission lands is another precious experience. Young Orestes was blessed with these and more.

**Bombay, Calcutta, Guwahati, Shillong**

Marengo and his companions, under the leadership of Fr. S. Ferrando and Bro. Foglia, reached Bombay on 18 December 1923.[1] At the Bombay harbour the group was met by Fr. Eugene Mederlet (1867-1934), Superior of the Salesians in South India and later on Archbishop of Madras. He accompanied them to Calcutta and entertained them with a lively description of the panoramic beauty of Assam.[2] A certain Mr. Aranha, a generous and friendly lay person who knew Mgr. Mathias, put them in the train and also sent along food which he thought sufficient to last till Calcutta. But the

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1. From among this first group, Salesian India would receive two Bishops - Bishop Stephen Ferrando and Bishop Orestes Marengo and the first Salesian Provincial of south India, Fr. Eligius Cinato.
2. While Bishop Marengo mentions Fr. Mederlet in his memoirs, Archbishop Mathias, in his memoirs *Quarant'Anni in India*, does not say that Fr. Mederlet was there to receive the first group of novices in Bombay when they arrived there. Instead, he speaks of a certain Mr. Aranha who helped them. See, *Quarant'Anni*, p.119.

young novices with a voracious appetite proved Aranha's calculations wrong. Knowing very little English, all throughout the journey they had something or the other to laugh about. And of course, at every station, the query, "Is it Calcutta?"

At Howrah the group was met by Fr. Joseph Gil. Fr. Gil made them hurry up, since they had to move fast to Sealdah station to catch the train for Guwahati. A bus belonging to the Jesuits carried them through Howrah Bridge and cut across the town to Sealdah station. Since they were tired of the long journey and hungry like wolves, they were only too happy to know that there was a dining car next to their compartment. The Goan gentleman who was in charge of catering was elated to see young people from Europe enjoying his food heartily. When they reached Amingaon the following day, a ferry took them across Brahamaputra to Pandu near Guwahati.[3]

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3. Guwahati occupies a central place in the missionary life of Bishop Marengo as Brother, Priest and Bishop. He came there from Shillong to help out during the absence of Bro. Cinato in 1926. In the same year he made his first visit to Tezpur along with some boarding boys. It was in Guwahati that he spent the two years of his practical training. As a new priest, his first appointment was to Guwahati. In 1934 he became the rector of Don Bosco, Guwahati, when Fr. V. Scuderi was made provincial of the province of North India with Calcutta as headquarters and a month later also Apostolic Administrator of Krishnagar. Guwahati was the base from which Fr. Marengo contacted the Adivasis, the Boros, the Santals, etc.

   Guwahati has a pride of place not only in the life of Bishop Marengo, but also in the whole history of the Church in North East India. The two Portuguese Catholic missionaries - Fr. John Cabral SJ and Stephen Cacella SJ - reached there as early as 1626 on their way to Tibet from Hooghly. After a gap of over 200 years the priests of the MEP ( Foreign Mission of Paris) - Fr. Robin, Fr. Krick and Fr. Barnardi - reached Guwahati in June 1850. In their effort to reach

From the ferry Fr. S. Ferrando had already noticed Mgr. Mathias who was there to welcome them. They waved at each other. As the ferry touched the bank, the joy of having finally reached Assam blossomed bright on the face of the novices and Fr. Ferrando. They forgot their tiredness. They came around Mgr. Mathias and bombarded him with questions. Mgr. Mathias remembers one among them who, coming close to him, just stared at him.

"Why do you stare at me?"- he asked.

"I thought you were bigger"- he answered.

"You mean `taller'?"

"Don't you know", Mgr. Mathias continued, "that Napoleon used to say that people are not measured according to feet or metre?"

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Tibet two of them - Fr. Krick and Fr. Bourry - were killed in the Mishmi Hills. It was in Guwahati that Fr. Jacopo Broy of the Institute of the Foreign Missions of Milan, the first resident priest in the North East, built a small church. He toured alone wherever he could and did whatever was possible then to spread the faith. The entire Brahmaputra valley was his mission area from 1872 to 1890, the year in which the German Salvatorian Missionaries (SDS) came to work in Assam with headquarters in Shillong. Guwahati is linked with the names of great missionaries like Fr. Gallus Schroeb SDS, Fr. Rudolph Fontaine SDS, and Fr. Piasecki SDB. Thousands of Adivasi workers from Chotanagpur have passed through Guwahati before they came to work in the tea gardens of Assam.

Mission work in Dibrugarh, Tezpur, Tura and Garo Hills was launched from Guwahati. Today the Guwahati of old where young Orestes and his group landed in 1923 is the headquarters of an Archdiocese.

With Guwahati is remembered the name of the French Delanougerede family - owners of tea gardens. Perhaps, they were the first Catholic family to settle in Guwahati as far back as in 1848. They were generous benefactors of Fr. J. Broy, of the Salvatorians and later on of Mgr. L. Mathias. They were instrumental in getting the present Catholic Mission land both in Guwahati and in Laitumkhrah, Shillong.

The young novice understood what Mgr. Mathias meant. He didn't ask any further.

The two vehicles put at their disposal by a certain Mr. Pierroz took them to the mission centre at Guwahati. There they had their lunch and proceeded to Shillong without delay. The thought that they would soon be at their long journey's end filled them with joy.[4] They took in everything they saw and heard all along the winding road to Shillong.

When they reached Shillong late in the evening of Saturday 22 December 1923, practically everyone from the Catholic community was there to receive the first group of novices. There were the Salesian Fathers and Brothers, the Sisters of Notre Dame des Missions, and the Loreto Sisters. Among the Sisters of Notre Dame des Missions was the elderly Sr. John, an Italian, who had known Don Bosco. Though Marengo was not the youngest of the group, he must have looked the youngest of the group, and so, one of the Loreto Sisters on seeing him exclaimed:

"Oh, a mere boy".

"Boy"- recalled Bishop Marengo in later years, was all the English he knew at that time!

The boarders of St. Anthony's Orphanage led them to the Church with the help of torch made of bamboo. The parish church, we read in Bishop Marengo's memoirs, was a very beautiful and rather spacious structure of timber covered with

4. Shillong, more than Guwahati, is inseparably linked with Marengo and his missionary formation. Novitiate, philosophical and theological formation, the close association with Fr. C. Vendrame - the apostle of the Khasi Hills - priestly ordination, etc., took place here. The mother diocese of all the dioceses of the North East, Shillong is both the ecclesiastical and educational centre of the region.

zinc sheets on the outside. The main altar and the two side altars were real masterpieces of Tyrolese art in Gothic Style. The Khasi children in red cassock and white surplice, but bare footed and who served at the altar, remained fresh in his memory. The "Te Deum" was sung, and benediction with the Blessed Sacrament was imparted. When the crowd dispersed the novices were entertained by the Salesian community.

"From that day", remarks Fr. O. Paviotti, "a new person had entered the mission", "U Nobis", "the novice" (in the Khasi language). They received all the prayers, especially when the *Litany of the Saints* was sung in Latin: "Ora pro *nobis*"!

After the Night Prayers in the small chapel of the Salesian Community, Fr. Mathias, pointing to a middle sized statue of Mary Help of Christians, told them how the first Salesians on their arrival, were pleasantly surprised and emotionally moved to find the statue of Mary Help of Christians whom the Salvatorian Fathers were venerating under the name of "Queen of the Apostles".[5] The Salesians saw in this an encouraging omen that Mary Help of Christians who had preceded them in their mission work, would ever be their Mother and Guide.

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5. The statue of the "Queen of the Apostles" has a history of its own. Mgr. Mathias was curious to know how the statue of Mary Help of Christians came to be venerated as the Queen of the Apostles in Shillong. In 1929 when he was in Rome, he visited the Salvatorian Fathers and asked them about the statue. He was told that a certain Salvatorian Father, Fr. Ansgar after seeing the painting of Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco surrounded by the Apostles was convinced that it could as well go under the title of Mary, Queen of the Apostles. So he visited Ortisei (Trent) where the statues of Mary Help of Christians were made and purchased one for himself, and brought it to Shillong, when he came to India. This statue was one of the few items saved from the great fire of 1936. It is now kept in the chapel of the Salesian novitiate in Upper Shillong.

How helpful and protective this omen proved to be from that far away 1923 - was something which Bishop Marengo never ceased to repeat. And it must be recorded that the sons and daughters of Don Bosco in Assam - faithful to his advice given by Don Bosco to the first Salesian missionaries to South America - have always endeavoured to spread devotion to the Mother of God under the title *Mary Help of Christians*.

**The Year of Novitiate**

Marengo and his 11 companions began their novitiate on 20 January 1924 about a month after their arrival in Shillong. They were joined by 4 other novices from Tamil Nadu, and cleric Joseph Douglas Wollaston, an Anglo-Indian and the first Salesian from Assam). They were accommodated in an Assam type building close to the present Cathedral parish house. It contained the old Don Bosco press. The building adjacent to the press served as the dormitory, the study hall and the refectory of the novices. This old building was donated to the Catholic Church in Shillong by Mr. O'Brien, a rich and generous Irish tea planter. It was only in 1926 that the newly constructed Our Lady's House - a big complex built by Mgr. L. Mathias for novitiate and philosophy course - was inaugurated. Here it may be remembered that the whole structure which by then served also as the Fathers' House and theologate from 1928 onward was reduced to ashes along with the Cathedral Church on Good Friday 1936.

For the first ten months of their novitiate Marengo and his companions had Fr. John Deponti (1887-1925) as the master of novices. Earlier he was in charge of Raliang mission, the farthest mission station at that time, and the most out of the way place in the Prefecture Apostolic of

Shillong. Fr. Stephen Ferrando who had led the first group of novices from Italy was the assistant novice master.[6] Fr. John Deponti was very fatherly and kind. He taught the novices with his example and heroic patience. But since he was suffering from a very painful ailment, he was the master of novices only for ten months. Then, on the advice of the doctor, he went to Calcutta for medical treatment and later to Italy where he died a year later. After the departure of Fr. Deponti for Calcutta, Fr. S. Ferrando became the master of novices.

Later on Fr. S. Ferrando was appointed also as the Rector of the house of formation of philosophy and theology till the end of 1934 when both Fr. L. Mathias and Fr. S. Ferrando were ordained Bishops in Shillong - the former for Shillong and the latter for Krishnagar in West Bengal.

**Formative and Unforgettable Missionary Impact**

Marengo recalls the names of two persons who were to play a significant role in his missionary life in Assam: Fr. Stephen Ferrando and Fr. Louis Mathias! His first meeting with Fr. Ferrando was when the latter as a cleric had come to replace cleric Emilio de Marchi some time during 1921 in Valdocco when Marengo was doing his Latin course. Fr. Ferrando endeared himself so much to Marengo and his companions that Marengo considered himself doubly

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6. Since the first Salesian houses of Tanjore and Mylapore then came under the province of Portugal, the first 3 novices from India - among whom was Fr. Ignatius Muthu- were sent to Portugal for their novitiate in 1911. Later on when the Salesian works in India came under the Roman province (in the aftermath of political revolution in Portugal) Paul Mariaselvam, an aspirant from the South (who became the first Salesian Bishop of Vellore) made his novitiate in Genzano near Rome in 1919. The group of Marengo that began the novitiate in Shillong in 1924 included also Joseph Sandanam, the brother of Bishop Mariaselvam and the coadjutor Saverimuthu.

privileged to come with him to India about two years later when he was chosen to lead the first group of novices from Italy to Shillong in December 1923.[7]

The other was Fr. Louis Mathias, whose motto *Aude et Spera* (Dare and Hope)[8] became synonymous with Bishop Marengo's *Animas Quaerere* (To seek souls). Fr. Mathias was "young, energetic, with the gifts of vision, courage and leadership to a remarkable degree". He led the first group of missionaries to Assam in December 1921.[9]

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7. Stephen Ferrando was born at Rossiglione (Genova), Italy, on 28 September 1895. He became a priest on 18 March 1923. In December of the same year he led the group of Salesian novices to Assam among whom was also Marengo. Both Ferrando and Marengo were ardent lovers of the Assam Mission. Kind-hearted, gentle, simple and ever smiling, Ferrando wanted to be ever close to the people. From the time of his coming to Assam till 1934 he was in-charge of personnel in formation. In 1934 he was consecrated first Bishop of Krishnagar. Transferred to Shillong the following year he endeared himself to the people of the North East. He founded the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians in 1942. To them he bequeathed his missionary heart. His zeal for the spread of the Gospel continues to find its expression through his spiritual daughters. What he could not accomplish, they are doing not only in North East India, but all over India and even outside. Bishop Ferrando retired in 1969 and returned to Italy. His prophesy that he would return to his dear ones in Assam was literally fulfilled when his mortal remains were brought to Shillong on 3 December 1987, a day consecrated to the incomparable missionary saint, Francis Xavier, the Patron of the missions, as if to indicate that the two hearts of Ferrando and Xavier coincided in their love for Christ and his Gospel. The motto of Ferrando is: *Apostle of Christ*. Bishop Ferrando's influence on Marengo was seen in the latter's missionary zeal. For an excellent account of Bishop Stephen Ferrando and the missionary congregation he founded, see, Jane Mary Thadathil(Sr.), *A Great Missionary Legacy*, Shillong/Guwahati: Centre for Indigenous Peoples, 1997 / Missionary Sisters Publications, 1997.

During the novitiate and later on as students of philosophy, the Brothers used to go out to villages on Sundays to attend the Mass and to instruct catechumens or incipient Catholic communities.

Marengo remembers very vividly an incident which took place when he and his friends went to a village. The village was a pagan stronghold with just two Catholic families. Either by chance, or perhaps prearranged by the pagan friends, a little way off from the site of the Mass a pagan sacrifice was being performed. The priest had killed a pullet and was

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8. After he knew that he had to lead the first group of Salesian missionaries to Assam, Fr. L. Mathias had been praying and searching for a suitable motto that would help to motivate his missionary plans and programmes. It was not easy to find one. One day he was met by Fr. Vismara who had come to Valdocco from the theologate of Foglizzo. He invited Fr. Mathias to visit Foglizzo before leaving for Assam. In Foglizzo during a get-together the students acted a drama *The Young Don Bosco*. At one moment to encourage Johny Bosco to go ahead an Angel said to him *Dare and Hope* (Aude et Spera). Fr. Vismara who was sitting close to Fr. Mathias prompted: "eh, that could very well be your motto!". Fr. Mathias was overjoyed. "Aude et Spera" thus became his programme of missionary life in Assam. Recalling a verse from the Psalms Fr. Mathias renewed his trust and confidence in the Lord. Later on he was so happy to find the verse "*Commit your fate to Yahweh, trust in him and he will act* (Ps 37:5) in the Mass in honour of St. John Bosco. With unbounded enthusiasm he returned to Valdocco with a renewed zeal and a motto. He transmitted this fervour to all his missionaries, especially to young Orestes.
9. Born on 20 July 1887 in Paris he studied at the Salesian boarding school at La Marsa near Tunis. He joined the Salesian Novitiate at San Gregorio near Catania, Italy in 1903. He made his perpetual profession and became a member of the Salesian congregation. He was ordained on 20 July 1913. After a series of successful and brilliant ministry as professor and music master, he was chosen to lead the first group of Salesian missionaries to Assam in 1921. They reached Shillong on 13 January 1922. Fr. Mathias was appointed Prefect

examining its entrails to forecast rain badly needed for the crops. After Mass a peaceful argument ensued on the merits of the pagan and Christian forms of worship. From the discussion Bro. Marengo understood that the pagan Khasis have a rather sublime and pure religion. They believe in one Supreme God and merciful Father whose name they often call upon with respect and devotion. In fact, their wish "Good Morning, Good Evening, Thank you" is *Khublei*, an abbreviated form of "Ka Jingkyrkhu U Blei" or "God Bless you". In their speech and conversation, in their writings, the name, the power and the love of God are often mentioned.[10]

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Apostolic of Assam, Manipur and Bhutan in December of the same year. In November 1934 he, along with Bishop Stephen Ferrando, was consecrated Bishop. At the sudden passing away of Mgr. Mederlet, the first Salesian Archbishop of Madras, Mgr. L. Mathias was chosen to succeed him on 18 March 1935. In November 1935 Mgr. Mathias was transferred from Shillong to the Archdiocese of Madras. He died at Legnano, Italy, on 3 August 1965 before the last Session of the Second Vatican Council.

A great Pastor, Prelate, Defender of the Church, Builder and Planner, Archbishop Mathias, in the words of Archbishop L. Raymond of Nagpur, is "one of the greatest [Prelate] who has adorned the Church in India in our century". He was a "tower of strength". No problem was too difficult for him. Resourceful, he could face any situation. He loved the poor. The promotion of lay catechists was very dear to his heart. He lived his motto "Dare and Hope" in thought, word and deed. Bishop Marengo experienced Mgr. Mathias' love, leadership, organizing abilities and much more his ardent missionary vision. For more information on this stalwart of a Prelate, see, *Quarant'Anni di Missione in India*, his own memoirs 1921-1935, Torino-Leumann: Elle Di Ci,1963 [in Italian], A. Pianazzi, *Dare and Hope: Archbishop Louis Mathias SDB.,1887-1965*,Hugh McGlinchery, transl., Madras: Salesian Publications, 1975, Archbishop's House, Madras, and *A Missionary who dared and hoped: Archbishop Louis Mathias SDB 1887-1965*, Madras: Salesian Provincial Office, 1972.

10. The origin of the Khasis is shrouded in mystery. Etymologically the word signifies "people born [kha] of an ancient mother [si]". The

In one of the Khasi traditions, it is said that the Sun was grieved by the increasing sin of mankind. She (the Sun is feminine in Khasi) refused to shine on the earth causing mankind untold suffering. Then men began to seek among the animals one who would volunteer to go and placate the angered divinity. The cock offered to go. On his journey to God he encountered all sorts of opposition and hardship, he had to shed his beautiful feathers. Only after he had sacrificed himself did God forgive man, and the sun started to shine again. Hence, whenever the cock crows, he reminds mankind of the sacrifice he had made to make the sun shine again on mankind.

That day after the discussion on Christian and Khasi forms of worship, a respectable old man, the Catechist from Shillong asked to be allowed to speak. He said:

> *My dear brothers and friends, we have it in our ancient traditions that our forefathers saddened by the confusion then existing about the worship of God, prayed to Him to enlighten them and from that time the following tradition has come down to us: one day men and women who do not marry will come from far to teach us. Those will be the men sent by God to teach us how we are to worship Him. Now these celibate men and women have come in the*

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"Khasis" comprise the different tribes and sub-tribes of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The main ones are *Khynriam* or the Khasi proper inhabiting the middle ranges of the Khasi hills. The others are the *Pnar* or *Synteng* (in the central plateau of Jaintia hills), the *War* of the Southern Khasi hills and the *Bhoi* who live in the North of the Khasi and Jaintia hills. Matrilineal system [lineage through the mother], the authority of the maternal uncle are endorsed by the force of customary laws. The coming of Christianity to the Khasi-Jaintia hills has given the people a sense of fulfillment, and has helped them towards an all round development.

*person of the Catholic Fathers and Sisters; they are those foretold by our forefathers.*

Marengo and his companions made their first religious profession on 21 January 1925. Mgr. Mathias himself took them to Laitkynsew, an old Mission Centre from the time of the Salvatorian Fathers. It is situated on a ridge of high hills overlooking the plain of Sylhet, now a district of Bangladesh, where the climate is very mild and pleasant in winter. They did the long stretch from Shillong to Laitkynsew on foot, Mgr. Mathias leading the way.

At Laitkynsew they stayed in the mission house. In it one large room served as classroom, common study hall, dining room and dormitory. Every morning after breakfast they would leave the house with a knapsack on their back singing all the way through villages and playing some musical instruments. Curious to know what was happening, people used to come out of their houses and watch the youthful group pass by.

Wherever the Brothers could get a suitable place they would gather the children, Mgr. Mathias would play the harmonium and keep the crowd happy with singing with some interesting items. They made use of different ways to instruct them in the faith. At the Holy Mass, the celebrant, Mgr. Mathias, would accompany them with the help of the small harmonium, resting it on his knees.

The villages they passed through were difficult to reach. But the lively young Brothers were only too happy to prove their mettle clambering down precipitous paths and sweating up steep ascends.

In every village
basketfull of luscious oranges
were waiting for them.
They enjoyed them to their heart's content.

Khasi hills oranges are renowned.
They are something between manderine and orange.
The rind is pealed off very easily.
They are very juicy and sweet.

Remembering those "orangeful days" Bishop Marengo used to ask:

"Who could believe in our days that those delicious oranges after being carried to the markets in the plains of Sylhet through long impossible paths were selling at Rs. 10 for a hundred bhar?"

That is, 3200 of them for just 10 rupees!
They were old days when every rupee fetched much!

The lively group spent nearly a month enjoying their holidays.

They reminded them of the days when Don Bosco used to accompany his boys during the pioneering years of the Oratory at Valdocco.

Reflecting on it Bishop Marengo confessed that the days he spent in Laitkynsew were still fresh in his mind. He was touched by the goodness, the amiability and understanding of his superiors

"who would set aside engagements
of a serious and urgent nature
and forget every harassing preoccupation
to be with the Brothers,
to fire them with missionary zeal
and genuine Salesian spirit."

In the years that followed, a visit to Laitkynsew became an annual feature for the students in Shillong.

Remembering those happy days in and around Laitkynsew, Bishop Marengo recalled how Mgr. Emmanuel

Bars, whose missionary enthusiasm, scholarship, and love for the Khasi language have left an indelible mark on him. Mgr. Bars could walk up and down the steep hills so fast that people humorously baptized him "Fr. Motor Car".[11]

**Philosophy Course in Our Lady's House**

After his first religious profession on 21 January 1925, Bro. Marengo began his philosophy course in Our Lady's House, Shillong. During that year he got a chance to pay a visit to Mawlong. He visited it again only after 65 years when Fr. Peter Schiavon invited him in 1990 to be present for the annual congress, since Archbishop Hubert D'Rosario was absent from the Archdiocese.

As a second year philosophy student Bro. Marengo had a strong attack of beriberi. It was while convalescing from it that he was asked to write an article for the *Salesian Bulletin*. He did it willingly and wrote an article on the Garos.[12] Thus he came to know about them for the first time.

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11. Mgr. E. Bars looked after the Cherrapunji and Laitkynsew mission areas from Shillong from 1922 to 1929. The title of Monsignor (Mgr.) was given to him in later years when he was for a time the Apostolic Administrator of the Krishnagar Diocese from 1929 to 1934. During the Second World War when most of the Italian missionaries had been interned, Mgr. Bars was in charge of the Dibrugarh mission. For quite a few years he helped in Tura, Garo Hills. In 1948 he led the first group of Sisters of the Society of Christ Jesus to Kohima and thus became the first resident missionary in Nagaland.
12. The Garos, who are part of the Bodo family of tribes, call themselves *Achik* (hillmen) or *Mande* (man) or "Achik mande". They inhabit the mountain ranges separating the Brahmaputra valley from the Surma valley. Fr. A. Pianazzi who has worked among them for many years and who has mastered the Garo language narrates how the Garos, on hearing that the English had "arrows made of fire" used to put a thick padding of banana stem on their shield to put off fire and to ward off the English "firearms"!

Once he replaced Bro. Cinato in Don Bosco, Guwahati, and had the chance of coming in close contact with the Adivasi children.

Bro. Paul Sebastian recounts as having heard from Fr. Antony Alessi the following incident. When Bro. Marengo was doing his philosophy in Shillong, a woman who had come from Marbisu told the Fathers that in her dream she had seen a Brother inviting her and her people to come to the Catholic mission. Since no one could identify who that Brother was, the woman herself was led to the study hall of the Brothers. It is said that on seeing Bro. Marengo she pointed him out as the one whom she had seen in her dream.

Fr. S. Ferrando, Fr. Comba and Fr. Gutierrez commented on it and said that Bro. Marengo was known for his love for the missions, and that he used to offer prayers for the spread of the faith.[13]

After his course of philosophy in Our Lady's House, Shillong, Bro. Marengo was sent to Don Bosco Orphanage at Guwahati in 1927 to begin his practical training.[14]

**Practical Training in Don Bosco, Guwahati**

In those early years of Salesian presence in the North East, the Brothers had only two years of practical training by special concession from the Major Superiors. In some cases

13. This incident is different from the one about a lady from Jowai who, in her dream saw Pius XI who asked her to go to the Catholic mission in Shillong. See, L. Mathias, *Quarant'anni in India*, 258-259. Moreover, Bro. Paul Sebastian after narrating the incident of Bro. Marengo narrated also the above incident in my interview with him on 19 April 1995 at Mawlai, Shillong.
14. During practical training the Salesian gets a "deeper living experience" of Salesian life, especially in the Salesian method of education. At the time of Bro. Marengo normally it lasted 3 years.

it lasted only one year, if the Brother was advanced in age. It was from the group that reached India in 1926 that the usual training of three years became a practice. Bro. Marengo had only two years of practical training in Don Bosco Guwahati.[15]

The boarding children in Don Bosco Guwahati were all Adivasis from the different tea gardens and villages of the Brahmaputra Valley. Their parents and grandparents had come to Assam from Chotanagpur in search of work in the Assam tea gardens.

Among the boys who were in the boarding there were the two Topno brothers - John and Joseph. They were brought by Fr. L. Piasecki from their own village of Bokajan in the Sonaibil tea garden area. Both John and Joseph are now Salesian priests. They testify that

Bro. Marengo had a special love for sick children of the boarding. He was very understanding and kind.

His words were convincing, since he spoke with conviction.

> Affable and kind, he was liked by all the boarding children.[16]

The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were conducting a boarding school for poor girls at the other end of the same compound. Soon they started a small weaving department.[17]

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15. From 1922 to 1932 the Salesian institution in Guwahati was known as Don Bosco Orphanage. From 1932, as Don Bosco Technical School and Orphanage or simply as Catholic Mission. It was only in 1948 that the school became Don Bosco School.(Interview with Bro. Paul Sebastian by Fr. J. Puthenpurakal, Shillong 7 September 1995).
16. Interview with Fr. John Topno by Fr. J. Puthenpurakal, Guwahati, 1 December 1994.

During Bro. Marengo's practical training in Guwahati, Fr. Piasecki was the Rector and parish priest of the Guwahati mission. His parish consisted of the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley from Sadiya to Dhubri, a distance of over 1000 kms plus a few Garo communities on the border of what is now Bangladesh. Fr. Piasecki could reach some of his flock only after two nights and two days by train. Under these circumstances, the Rector of the boarding school was very often out. Fr. Marmol would look after the school when Fr. Piasecki was on tour. On his return Fr. Marmol would start his programme of visiting villages. Bro. Marengo remembers the continuous missionary tours by one Father or the other to take care of the Christian communities scattered over the vast parish.

Bro. Prando, an old Valdocco boy, was also doing his practical training with Bro. Marengo. The other two Brothers who were in Don Bosco during the time of Bro. Marengo were Bro. Marocchino and Bro. Zaetta. But soon they were reduced to two again, because within a fortnight both Bro. Prando and Bro. Zaetta succumbed to typhoid in Shillong where they had been taken for better medical care.

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17. The first group of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (Salesian Sisters) reached Guwahati on 8 December 1923. They and the boarding girls were attending Holy Mass in the church together with the Fathers' community, the boys of the boarding and the parishioners. At the end of 1931 the Sisters bought a plot of land in Manick Chandra Road and started to have their own residence. They moved to the new residence in 1932. Following the old Salesian tradition, they and the boarding girls used to attend two Holy Masses on Sundays and holidays along with the boys and the parishioners. On Sundays and holidays they would return to the church in the afternoon for rosary, sermon and Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament or the Way of the Cross.

One morning when Bro. Marengo happened to be alone with the boys an imposing and rather stern looking Assamese gentleman came in and politely asked him to show him around.

> *People in the town,* he said, *seem to think that you are rich and are living luxuriously and I have come to see for myself.*

"Perhaps we were late paying the municipal taxes, or perhaps Fr. Rector had applied for exemption from taxes" - thought Bro. Marengo within himself, for this unexpected visit by some important person of the Municipality".

Bro. Marengo showed him around. Poverty was seen all over. The gentleman saw it for himself. After he had visited every nook and corner of the House, the gentleman thanked Bro. Marengo and left without comments. Later in the day a peon came from the municipality office with an envelop that contained fifty rupees. It was quite a generous donation in those days. It was made personally by the Chairman himself who had come in the morning.

"It is not all people in authority", commented Bishop Marengo, "who have the fairness to find out whether unfavourable reports are true or not". Bishop Marengo never met that gentleman again, but he used to remember him in his prayers. "He was a Hindu benefactor", said Bishop Marengo, "whose stern mien was hiding a kind heart".

On 20 September 1927, at the end of his practical training, Bro. Marengo made his application for admission to perpetual profession. Here is a translation of it as it reflects his missionary heart at this turning point in his life.

> *Guwahati*
> *20-9-'27*
>
> *Beloved Fr. Provincial,*
>
> *The period of my triennial vows is about to be over. During this time I never have had any doubt about*

*the vocation I have embraced. Rather, I find myself very happy and satisfied in the choice I have made. Not only that, I am convinced that it is the vocation in which God wants me to be.*

*Having completed the age required for perpetual profession and knowing that it is my great desire and firm will to consecrate myself entirely to the Lord as a professed member in the Salesian Congregation, I humbly make my request to you to be admitted to perpetual vows.*

*Imploring your blessing,*

*Yours devotedly in Jesus and Mary,*

*(Bro. Emilio Marengo)*

In the Provincial Council meeting held at Shillong on 10 January 1928, Bro. Marengo was admitted to perpetual profession. Among the observations we read:

*Regular in all the practices of piety, zealous in carrying out his duty as assistant and teacher. The boys love him for his pleasing character.*[18]

The perpetual profession document is signed by Bro. Marengo as: *Emilio Oreste Maria Marengo*, dated Shillong, 21 January 1928.

**Theological Studies**

At the beginning of 1929 Bro. Marengo went back to Shillong to commence his theological studies.

He did the first year of theology while attached to the Don Bosco community of Shillong as assistant and teacher. Mgr. Mathias who had been the Rector for the past few years had just handed over that charge to Fr. Joseph Foglia. It was

18. SHTCD-MF, 18.

a large community where the majority of Salesian Brothers were technicians in the various branches of a fast developing technical school.

> The harmony and the cheer reigning in the community, the hard work of the Salesian lay Brothers left a lasting and inspiring impression on Bro. Marengo.

During his second year of theology he was assistant and teacher of the philosophy students in Our Lady's House. Fr. Edward Gutierrez and Fr. Alvin Comba had by then joined the community. They were, in the words of Bishop Marengo, "precious additions" to the staff of Our Lady's House. "One may say", wrote Bishop Marengo, "that the Shillong Theologate was incarnated in them. As professors and confessors they gave the best part of 40 years to the religious and ecclesiastical formation of young Salesians, first in Our Lady's House, then, after the fire that destroyed Our Lady's House, in Woodcot, Bandel and at Mawlai. Both Fr. Gutierrez and Fr. Comba will live long in the heart and mind of the hundreds of Salesians who had the privilege of being taught and formed by them".[19]

During his third year of theology Bro. Marengo was a full-time teacher in St. Anthony's High School where Bro. Joseph

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19. Fr. E. Gutierrez (1886-1976) was born in Spain. A missionary at heart, he always longed to work in some mission stations. But most of the time he had to be content with training missionary priests. He worked in Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong, from 1951. In 1966 he was appointed to the Salesian novitiate at Sunnyside, in Upper Shillong, where he passed away on 8 October 1976.
Fr. A. Comba (1881-1970) was born in Frassasco, Italy. He came to Assam in 1929. Like Fr. Gutierrez, he too spent most of his years in Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong. In 1967 he was sent to Sunnyside, Upper Shillong, where he died on 1 December 1970. Bishop Marengo held both Fr. Guiterrez and Fr. Comba in great esteem and veneration.

Bacchiarello, his companion, was headmaster while doing his theological studies. Bro. Bacchiarello was appointed headmaster already from the time of his regency - a responsibility which he carried on during his theology and for a few more years after his ordination to the priesthood.[20]

Besides teaching in St. Anthony's High School, Marengo was also helping the parish priest, Fr. C. Vendrame with his office work. Marengo imbibed the missionary spirit of Fr. Vendrame, a most zealous and a really charismatic missionary.[21]

> I thank God, wrote Bishop Marengo, for the privilege of having been at his side... This gave me a chance of knowing from close quarters this really apostolic man and picking up at the same time a working knowledge of the Khasi language. Books have been written about this wonderful Apostle of the Khasis and whatever I might say about him, *en passant*, would be very inadequate.[22]

Umlyngka, near St. Paul's Seminary, Upper Shillong, was the centre of Bro. Marengo and Bro. A. Ravalico's Sunday apostolate. Their missionary work at Umlyngka gave them enough opportunity to pick up a good knowledge of

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20. He became quite an authority in Khasi and has several valuable Khasi school text books to his credit.
21. Fr.Constantine Vendrame (1893-1957) was born at San Martino de Colle Umberto, Italy. After his priestly ordination he came to Assam in 1924. His stupendous missionary work earned for him the title "apostle of the Khasi Hills". Due to his heroic effort and holy life, the number of conversions shot up wherever he worked. His zeal and fervour are proverbial. The Shrine of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at Mawlai is the fruit of his ardent devotion. Fr. Vendrame's missionary spirit, coupled with his life of prayer and sacrifice, influenced Bishop Marengo right from his years of formation.
22. SHTCD-MM, vol.I,10.

Khasi. It is said of Fr. Ravalico that he had taken to the Khasi language so much that as a young priest when he was posted in Tezpur, he began the Mass in Khasi instead of Hindi!

Half of the syllabus of the fourth year of theology was covered in Bandel near Calcutta during their holidays, the rest, after their return to Our Lady's House, Shillong.[23]

Just before diaconate, Marengo and his companions went to Bandel. They made their application for diaconate on 14 February 1932. On 24th of the same month they received the diaconate from Archbishop F. Perier SJ of Calcutta in the Shrine of Our Lady of Bandel.

Before he left for Bandel Bro. Marengo was invited to give the Good Night talk to the boys in Don Bosco, Guwahati. Bro. Sebastian Paul who happened to be there remembers the talk given by Bro. Marengo. He spoke in perfect Hindi. The story he shared with the boys was the following:

> *There was an artist who was asked by the Pope to do some works of art. When the order was carried out, the artist and his son were granted an audience with the Pope. During the audience the Pope told the son to take as much money as he wanted and to give to the father.*
>
> *The cute little son then told the Holy Father:*
>
> *"You give. Your hand is bigger".*

23. Fr. J. Dal Broi tells us that Bro. Marengo was endowed with "good intelligence" and a "phenomenal memory". Had he been sent to graduate he would have been surely a success. But such a possibility, Fr. Dal Broi explains, was far from the young Salesian pioneers who were fired with zeal for the salvation of souls. Moreover, there was no institution at hand to graduate from. It was only in 1931 after Our Lady's House was approved as a High School that the young Salesians coming from Europe started doing their High School examinations.

Bro. Marengo concluded by saying:

> *Jesus allows us to take whatever we need from the treasures of His grace. If we allow Mary to receive it for us, we shall receive more than what we ourselves may be able to take.*[24]

They returned to Shillong and made their application for priesthood on 25 March 1932. On 31 March they were admitted. The priestly ordination took place on 2 April 1932 in the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer, Shillong. It was conferred by the same Archbishop F. Perier. Fr. Marengo's companions of ordination were: Fr. A. Anderson, Fr. J. Bacchiarello, Fr. A. Correngia, Fr. W. Haughey, Fr. A. Rocca and Fr. A. Ravalico.

His applications for diaconate and priestly ordination reveal his missionary heart which is humble and ever ready to do God's will.

The one for the diaconate reads:

> *Bandel*
> *14-2-'32*
>
> *Dear Rev. Fr. Rector,*
>
> *Trusting in God's assistance for the graces necessary to my vocation, I humbly ask to be admitted to the Diaconate leaving it entirely in your hand to judge whether I am fit for it.*
>
> *Begging of you to bless me,*
>
> *Yours in Jesus and Mary,*
>
> *(Bro. Emilio Marengo)*

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24. Interview with Bro. Sebastian Paul by Fr. J. Puthenpurakal, Shillong 19 April,1995.

The application for admission to priesthood was written in Italian. Here is a translation of it.

*Shillong*
*25-3-1932*

*Rev. Fr. Rector,*

*Trusting entirely in the Divine Mercy, and aware of my insufficiency, I make my request to be admitted to holy priesthood, leaving to my superiors to judge me worthy for such a great step.*

*Asking you to bless me,*

*Yours most devotedly,*

*(Deacon Marengo Orestes)*

# IV. MISSIONARY PRIEST (1932-1951)

As a new priest, Fr. Marengo was thrown into the thick of missionary adventures. Like gold purified in fire, he went through many a missionary experience from all of which Fr. Marengo emerged as the most beloved of missionaries.

**First Mass at Sohryngkham**

> "Is the altar box ready for the Mass in Sohryngkham", Fr. Marengo asked the Brother in-charge of the oratory[1] there.
>
> "Yes", he assured.
>
> "And what about the Missal?" - "Everything is okay", reassured the Brother.

The village of Sohryngkham is about 10 kms from Shillong. It takes two hours to reach it on foot. At the time of Fr. Marengo Sohryngkham had a beautiful little chapel in masonry. With the fresh enthusiasm of a young, new priest Fr. Marengo along with Fr. Gutierrez and the Brother in-charge did the 10 kms - most of which was a steep climb -

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1. The term Oratory common among Salesians refers to the coming together of young people especially on Sundays and holidays. The time spent at the Salesian Oratory is a time of learning, praying, playing and living together as a family in the Don Bosco way. Oratories were and are now an important factor in faith formation and spread of the Good News in North East India just as they are all over the world where Salesians are working.

on the first Sunday after his priestly ordination. It was his very first "mission-tour" as a priest. On reaching Sohryngkham Fr. Marengo met the people, answered their queries with the affability that was always characteristic of him. When it was time for Mass, he realized that the missal was missing.

Spontaneous prayer or improvisation was unthinkable to make up for the Missal that was left behind in Shillong. And as a new priest just ordained a few days ago, Fr. Marengo could not risk saying the Mass prayers and especially the Eucharistic prayer by heart.

So the Brother had to do the 10 kms back on foot. The Missal was sent through another Brother. It took four hours to go and come back.

But the 4 hours were not wasted. Fr. Marengo went round blessing the houses, meeting people, going up and down the hills.

Fr. Gutierrez who had accompanied him spent the time in the confessional administering the sacrament of Reconciliation.

It was rather late in the afternoon when the Missal was brought and the Mass could start.

Here the reader should remember that from the evening of the previous day Fr. Marengo had not taken even a drop of water. His throat was parched. However, he managed to celebrate his first Mass at Sohryngkham and preach a sermon after dousing himself with cold water. They were days of strict observance of the rules of fast and abstinence.

Today Sohryngkham in the parish of Nongthymmai has a vibrant Catholic community of some 120 families. They also have a community of Sisters, the Franciscan Clarist Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, a dispensary, a boarding

for girls, a Khasi medium High School. A spacious church has been built close to the convent to accommodate the growing community of Catholics. Sohryngkham cherishes the memory of the first Mass of Bishop Orestes Marengo.

**Guwahati : First Priestly Mission**

It was to Guwahati, the first mission centre in the Brahmaputra valley, that Fr. Marengo was sent as a new priest. Guwahati is inseparably linked to Fr. Marengo's first experiences as a young, dynamic and self-sacrificing missionary priest.

Here is a curious incident which took place soon after his coming to Guwahati as a new priest. Fr. J. Dal Broi who was finishing his practical training remembers that the newly ordained Fr. Marengo was invited to give Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament to the school children. During the service a frightened pigeon flew out of the choirloft and after making a round of the church landed on the head of the celebrant, Fr. Marengo.

The fact became the talk of the day. There were many who considered it an auspicious sign of future events.

The Guwahati mission in those far away days comprised the two districts of Kamrup and Goalpara, an area of about 350 by 80 kms consisting mainly of Adivasi Christians who lived in small and far flung villages and tea gardens. Like his predecessor in Guwahati, Fr. Gil, or Fr. Piasecki, Fr. Marengo made use of every opportunity to visit the flock entrusted to him. The other mission centres in the Brahmaputra valley were Tezpur started by Fr. A. Ravalico and Fr. A. Alessi, and Dhubri where Fr. A. Pianazzi and Fr. A. Rocca pioneered the Garo

mission in spite of the fierce opposition from people who were not well-informed about the Catholic Church.

Being also the railway chaplain, Fr. Marengo had a railway pass. He was allowed to travel in first class, carry a luggage upto a quintal and also could be accompanied by two servants in the third class. From any of the railway station even to the nearest Christian community it was invariably always a long trek.

On reaching a village usually in the evening, there was evening service with instruction on some aspects of the Catholic faith. It was followed by confessions during which the Rosary was recited. After night prayers the people used to gather around the priest to ask questions and clarify their doubts. They would sit around in the courtyard in front of the chapel. The chapel invariably was made of bamboo and thatch, a little better than the huts in the village. Mats were spread on the mud floor when people gathered to pray and when they sat around and talked for long hours. When the visit happened to be in winter, the people would light a fire in the centre of the courtyard and sit around it.

"Did we really commit a sin by eating the meat of a wild pig on a Friday?" - Such questions were not strange for Fr. Marengo. For he knew that even the learned Jewish rabbis of old put similar questions to Jesus.

Fr. Marengo's mission tours kept him on the move for two or three weeks continuously. He used to visit all the villages of an area. It took four to six months before he could come back to any of them.

Remembering Fr. V. Scuderi, Fr. Marengo described him as "a giant" of an organizer whose only defect was that he expected others too to be like him. Besides being in charge of the mission centre of Guwahati to which was attached a

rather big carpentry, Fr. Scuderi had to see also that villages of the vast mission area were visited regularly. Fr. Marengo, though he was the prefect of studies of the boarders, was only too happy to move out to the villages and tea gardens and leave the work at the centre to Fr. Scuderi.

Once before leaving for his usual rounds Fr. Scuderi asked his opinion regarding a big meal he was planning to organize in the mission centre for all the beggars and other poor people of the town.

"The other communities like the Hindus and Muslims are organizing meals for poor people", said Fr. Scuderi, "what about us doing something like that?"

By instinct Fr. Marengo felt that people belonging to different castes would create some problem when they come together for a common meal. Besides, there was also taboo regarding certain food items. With all this in mind Fr. Marengo said that it was a fine idea, "but"... After explaining his mind, Fr. Marengo added that he had no objection to having the meal. However, since he had his programme of visiting the communities already planned, he said that he would not be there to help him.

To steer clear of difficulties arising from the use of beef, the menu decided on by Fr. Scuderi was just rice, *dal* and curds. On the day of the big meal Fr. Marengo was out on a tour. Everything was well arranged. The crowd was big. In the hall where the beggars would gather there was also a statue of the Sacred Heart on a high column so that everyone could see it well.

Soon after starting the meal there was some discussion among the beggars which led to a quarrel. A number of them left the place. That was not the end. While the remaining people were busy eating, a sudden gust of wind caused the

statue of the Sacred Heart topple headlong into the big pot of curd just in front of it. It was a bad omen. The remaining people got up quickly and left the place in a hurry. The only ones who carried on enjoying the *bara khana* were the deaf and the dumb and two blind beggars who didn't realize what was happening.

On his return from the tour, Fr. Marengo was told the whole story. Fr. Scuderi and he had a good laugh. Before he enjoyed the laughter Fr. Scuderi vowed: "I'll never forgive this to the Sacred Heart!"

Of his tour in Kamrup and Goalpara districts, Fr. Marengo had a rich stock of recollections. The unpredictable Pagladia is one of them. Pagladia was a mad river. She was unpredictable, precisely because she was mad. She criss-crossed the broad stretch of the flat and featureless area of Kumarikatta along the foot of the Bhutan mountains. During the winter months she was forced to freeze her madness reducing herself to a few streamlets that could be easily waded through. But in the summer months in connivance with the "monsoon" she would swell till she burst in spate causing untold damage to the fields all along her banks. Fr. Marengo had seen this madness many a time, for Kumarikatta and the communities in the area were dear to his missionary heart and he visited them as often as he could.

Work in the vast plantations of jute and sugar had attracted thousands of Adivasis from Chotanagpur. Many of them were Catholics. When the plantations were closed down very few of them returned to their place of origin. Instead, thousands of them took to cultivation and settled in Kumarikatta area. In the course of time this gave rise to several villages all around. When the German Fathers were interned during the First world War, and when only a handful of Jesuits from the Ranchi mission were available to look

after the spiritual needs of these communities, it was not easy to follow them up. They became more and more dispersed in the different tea plantations. Their life of faith became weak. Easy availability of land made most of them rich. Some of them took to drinking. Little by little the habit of uncontrolled drinking crept into many a community. No wonder when Fr. Marengo visited these communities for the first time, he came across the habit of drinking among these otherwise hardworking, honest and generous Catholics. It was very much due to Fr. Marengo's fatherly, patient and lovable attitude that within a few years almost all of them became good and fervent Catholic communities. One community used to help him to discover the location of another community. Thus one by one all the communities of Kumarikatta area were contacted by Fr. Marengo.

A number of families were settled in Nagrijuli tea garden. During the monsoon the *Bor Nadi* (the big river) which marks the border between the Kamrup and Darrang districts would cut them off and would restrict their contacts with the rest of the world.

On a Saturday evening Fr. Marengo managed to reach Nagrijuli. He came to the bungalow of the tea garden manager under whom most of his Catholics were employed.

"You are most welcome, Padre"

- said the tea garden manager, a Scotch, with a young wife and a very young baby girl.

"You can stay with us. Make yourself comfortable in our bungalow. Yes, there are a few Christians among my labourers. I sincerely hope that your visit will do some good to them and to my garden. Some of them drink far too much. They work so little. Today is the pay day. You will see for yourself how sober they are!"

Despite this not so-encouraging compliment Fr. Marengo ventured to the "line".[2] The unexpected apparition of the priest in his long white robe, and that too after almost two decades in the case of most of those Catholics, created some bewilderment which soon disappeared when they knelt down making some sort of the sign of the Cross. They gave vent to their joy by singing and dancing. They were more sober than what Fr. Marengo had expected. His delight knew no bounds to see his flock dancing for joy. That Saturday evening Fr. Marengo's visit lasted only till 8.00 p.m., for the manager had requested him to be back for supper at 8 0'clock sharp!

Before taking leave of his flock that evening, Fr. Marengo assured them that he would return for Mass the following morning. He told them to tidy up one of the houses and not to drink. At the words, "do not drink" their faces fell.

> "Are you not going to stay with us? We shall kill a chicken!" - they entreated.
>
> "My good friends", Fr. Marengo explained,
>
> "my real delight is to stay with you all. I would do it with great pleasure... When I stay in the villages I always share the food which my dear Christians offer me. I sleep in their huts or in the chapel. But in the tea garden I must be the guest of the manager. Please do not take this amiss. Tomorrow, I shall take my breakfast with you. *Jisu ki barhai*".

Fr. Marengo then made his way to the tea garden bungalow of his Scotch Friend. The Scotch are known for their frugality. They are good business men. They have a reputation for being close fisted. It was they who formed a

2. "Lines" were the settlement areas on the outskirts of the garden at different locations arranged for the convenience of the labourers.

high percentage of tea planters in Assam at the time of Fr. Marengo. As for Fr. Marengo who came across several tea garden managers who were Scotch, he found them "exquisitely hospitable".

At the Nagrijuli garden a hot bath and a good dinner was waiting for him when he returned from that Saturday evening visit to the "lines".

"How did you find your flock , Padre?" - enquired the manager.

"Well", replied Fr. Marengo, "after what I had been prepared for by you, it was a pleasant evening!"

"It is good to hear you say so! continued the manager, "as a matter of fact, the people of that line are among my best workers though not above an occasional drinking bout. Not that I care much about it as long as they turn up for work. Their life is hard and they have got no other pastime".

"We try to make them stop drinking completely", added Fr. Marengo, "because when they drink they drink to excess, but I personally would be happier if they knew how to drink".

"There, I agree with you", said the manager.

Then he told Fr. Marengo what had happened not very long before.

Once the people of one particular line were not only brewing rice beer, but distilling liquor. As a result, brawls and fights were the order of the day. After warning them repeatedly to no effect, he arranged a raid by the police, but somehow the people got to know about the impending raid and hurriedly hid the liquor pots in the jungle behind the line.

This however landed them in a far greater trouble than the police would have inflicted on them. The tea garden elephant happened to be grazing in that jungle patch and got the wind of the liquor. After draining a few pots he got into a mischievous mood and pulled down a number of huts while the people scampered away for safety.

The next morning Fr. Marengo was back to the village. His travelling catechist, whom he had left behind, had seen to the cleaning of a hut which was to serve as chapel. All the children had to be baptized, and the adult marriages had to be blessed after the usual enquiries. This naturally took some time. When Mass actually started, it was rather late. During the homily, a late comer made straight for the altar to give the usual "Jai Jisu, Phadar", accompanied by a gentle handshake. Fr. Marengo obliged. But the thing that saddened Fr. Marengo was to realize that a good many had drunk too much. As a result, they forgot their usual prayers even. Though somewhat discouraged, Fr. Marengo continued with the Mass. At one moment the catechist was inspired to start singing the Hail Mary in Oraon. Suddenly all of them joined the singing, though it was far from their usual harmonious song. Recalling this incident Fr. Marengo said that never had sweeter music fallen on his ears and heavy heart as on that day.

One of Fr. Marengo's dear Catholics was Pius Pete. He was an elderly man whose marriage Fr. Marengo could not redress because his first wife was alive somewhere in Chotanagpur. The poor man was inconsolable:

> "Please, Father, forgive me, I am sorry, but what can I do? I have got wife and children; I have mistaken once, but I am also a Christian and want to live as one, why can't you forgive me?" Fr. Marengo tried to explain to

explain to him how happy he would have been to be able to settle his case. But he kept repeating:

"Why will you not forgive me when I am sorry for my mistake?" To console him Fr. Marengo said, "I am going to bless your house and I expect you to go regularly to church, and do not forget to pray".

Bhattabari was another village of the Kumarikata area where Fr. Marengo found many lost sheep. Eventually the whole village came over to the Faith.

To reach Kumarikata from Guwahati, after getting down at Rangya, the nearest Railway station, Fr. Marengo used to engage a bullock cart, and when it rained, a buffalo cart. He preferred to cover that distance by night so that he could snatch a little sleep and reach his destination early the next morning. But sometimes the cartman would fall asleep and the bullocks would stop and in the morning when Fr. Marengo thought that he had nearly reached, he would discover that he was still miles away.

During annual celebrations in the village (*mela*), a bus used to ply between the railway station and the place of the celebrations. Once Fr. Marengo had reserved a seat on the bus looking forward - if not to a joy ride - but at least to a speedy one. But for some reason or other the bus, instead of leaving sometime in the morning, left when it was already quite dark and landed him at about 11.00 in the night in a place from where, following a jungle path, he was to reach Bhattabari where he was expected that night.

He had a boy with him and between the two of them they had to carry the bedding, the altar box and a few other things. The village was only 3 kms away. But it was dark and drizzling. The new moon for all the light it shed, might have been a slice of water melon - as Bishop Marengo

describes it. Finally, they happened to miss the way and went round and round in circles in the jungle for one hour.

> "Let us leave the baggage here", said Fr. Marengo, "and look for the village and then we shall come back for our beddings".

After much wandering they found the village. They woke up the Catechist who was no longer expecting them at that time of the night.

"Why so late, Father?", the catechist enquired.

"Because I came by bus!", replied Fr. Marengo.

"But please", he continued,

"come and help us to find our things which we have left somewhere not far from here". It took them a precious long time to come upon their baggage.

When he reached the village, Fr. Marengo went to the chapel, as his custom was, to get ready for the sleep. He slept on a machang separated by a bamboo wall from the altar.

But this time the catechist prevented him: "It is not at all safe to go there" - he insisted. "Whenever it rains, a bear goes and makes himself comfortable under your bed!"

"Why don't you close the chapel door?" Fr. Marengo asked. The catechist smiled at him: "The door is always closed and locked, but the bear can easily nose its way through thatched wall!"

That night Fr. Marengo slept with goats and hens. Certainly, a more congenial company than a bear! - as he remarked. In the morning they could easily see that the bear had kept up his habit. And, sad to say, that the tragedy overtook the catechist's son a few Sundays hence.

That Sunday morning, as on every Sunday morning the boy had gone to tidy up the chapel for the prayer service. He opened the chapel, rang the bell and then started sweeping. As he was stooping down to sweep, he found himself in the clutches of the bear which, awakened by the ringing of the bell, had come out from behind the altar and pounced on the poor boy's shoulders. Hearing the boy screaming, the people ran to his rescue, but not before the poor lad had been badly mauled. It took two months in the Guwahati hospital before he finally got well.

Fr. Attilio Colussi who worked for a time in the Guwahati mission and had visited Bhattabari and slept in that same chapel was one night suddenly woken up by the roaring of two tigers prowling far too near, recalled Bishop Marengo in later years.

"It was all but a pleasant sleep or conciliating lullaby" - commented Fr. Attilio.

**A One Year Spell in Dibrugarh**

Every time Fr. Marengo returned to Guwahati from his tours he used to narrate all what had happened to him. On one occasion, Fr. Marengo had just come back from a tour in the Kumarikatta area of North Kamrup where the Boros had started coming over to the Catholic Church. During that tour he came across a number of Catholic communities which had not seen a priest for the past 25-30 years. Moreover the Adivasis, who were working in the vast sugar-cane plantation of Topolia (Khagrabari) and jute plantation of Kumarikatta in the same area, had become jobless suddenly since the above-mentioned plantations had closed down. Therefore every time he came back to Guwahati, he had many plans to be carried out to help those communities.[3] He began narrating the experiences of the past days to Fr. V. Scuderi

who listened to him with great interest and joy. Then with a smile of sympathy Fr. Scuderi said: But I also have news for you.

Then he handed him a short note from Mgr. L. Mathias, and proceeded to tell him how the Prefect Apostolic had decided that he should go to take charge of the Dibrugarh mission for a year during the absence of Fr. L. Piasecki who was leaving for his native Poland for a much needed rest and to collect funds to build a church in Dibrugarh. The note red:

> "Dearest Marengo, I want you to proceed to Dibrugarh at once and take charge of that mission in place of Fr. Piasecki who has just left on home leave and will be back within a year, I assume. Go with my blessing".[4]

Dibrugarh was a place which Fr. Marengo always wanted to visit, for he had heard a great deal about its world famous tea gardens - Doom Dooma and other tea estates, the oil wells of Digboi, the outpost of Sadiya, the theatre of Ahom battles - in short, that extreme North East corner which held out unexplored secrets.

It was precisely for the transport of these commodities and development of this region that the first railway in Assam, "The Dibrugarh Sadiya Railway", was built in the eighties of the 19th century. The builders were Italians and the chief engineer was a certain Mr. Paganini from Lido of Venice, Italy. This explains certain names along the railway line which most local people cannot explain, like: "Margarita" in honour

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3. In those days any amount of good land could be obtained at Rs.5 per pura (4 bighas). So Fr. Marengo had plans to settle several families and to help them to be good Christian communities.
4. Ibid.

of the Queen of Italy, "Lido" perhaps suggested by Sig. Paganini because of some nostalgic memories of his native Lido of Venice, and "Lekapani" which sounds like a local name, but which is the faulty rendering of "Le Capanne" (Italian for barracks) to house the gangmen during the construction of a railway line.

Yes, Dibrugarh had long been a dream for Fr. Marengo, but at that particular moment he would have been happier if it had remained a dream a little longer, for he was too much in love with his dear people of Kumarikatta area. However, he went to Dibrugarh in obedience to the wishes of his superior. God alone knew that after a lapse of 18 years the same Dibrugarh would become his most beloved town as he became its first Bishop in 1951.

The name Dibrugarh is derived from the river Dibru on the bank of which stands the town like a fort. Thus Dibrugarh would mean the fort on the river Dibru.

The mission centre was situated right on the bank of the river Dibru. This river was separated from the mighty Brahmaputra by a wide stretch of forest. The mission residence was a rather spacious masonry structure with a few rooms and a hall which served as chapel for the few Catholics of the town. The Sisters of Charity had their cottage less than a furlong away from the mission residence.

Along the river stood also the best bungalows (villas) of the town as well as the head offices of the Imperial State Bank, and several business companies. The planters' club too was there. Once a week the tea planters from nearby gardens used to gather there for socializing. They would enjoy dancing with the accompaniment of the band of the "Assam Valley Light Horse Cavalry", then stationed in Dibrugarh.

Fr. Marmol who had been both a father and a companion to Fr. Marengo in Guwahati was waiting at the railway station as Fr. Marengo accompanied by Fr. A. Ravalico arrived there by train on 13 September 1933. He stayed in Dibrugarh till 24 July 1934.

Fr. Marengo has pleasant memories of Fr. Marmol, a venerable Spanish Salesian. He very humbly ceded to Fr. Marengo, a young priest, the responsibility of the mission where he had already worked for three years. Bishop Marengo later on remarked that Fr. Piasecki and Fr. Marmol were miles apart in temperament, but they got on well and were destined to live most of their life together: in Guwahati, in Dibrugarh and later on in Calcutta where Fr. Piasecki would be transferred to assume the responsibility of the Catholic Orphan Press, during the Second World War when the Italian Fathers were interned.

The Dibrugarh mission territory was very vast, comprising the whole of Upper Assam Valley including North Lakhimpur, an area larger than the present diocese of Dibrugarh. The Catholics numbered about 8000 when Fr. Marengo arrived there. After a few months of touring, the number increased considerably. Some of the tea gardens had very large Christian communities and Fr. Marengo remembers the long hours spent in hearing confessions. When he used to return from the tour, it was the chance of Fr. Marmol to start his. Thus there was continuous village visiting by one or the other of the Fathers.

Both the Fathers had a first class railway and steamer pass graciously granted to them by the Assam-Bengal Railway company with headquarters at Chittagong, and its counterpart the River Steam Navigation Company. They made continuous use of it.

Fr. Marengo always felt it his duty to be grateful to the tea garden managers - nearly all of them non-Catholics - for their very kind hospitality. However, some of them had never seen a Catholic priest before, and in some very rare cases there was bound to be some bias or misunderstanding which would however vanish easily after their first meeting with Fr. Marengo.

Once Fr. Marengo wrote to one of the tea garden managers saying that he had heard there was a good number of Catholic families in his garden and that they had not seen a priest for a long time. He also expressed his desire to hold a service for those people on a particular day. The reply he received was so exceptional that Fr. Marengo never forgot it. It ran as follows:

> Dear Sir,
>
> Yes, there used to be some of your flock in my tea garden, but I found them so undesirable that I had to turn them out. The few that are left are not a very good type either. As for putting you up, that would mean I associate with you and your people which I don't.

This short letter remained ever fresh in Fr. Marengo's memory, not because it created any bad taste in him, but because of what followed. It proved to him that some people have a good heart under a rather harsh exterior and that they are better judged by facts than by words. For, sometime later, Fr. Marmol wrote to that same person that he would be visiting his garden. But he had to leave on his tour before the reply arrived. When in the course of the tour he reached that particular tea garden, the manager was not a little surprised and annoyed:

> "I had written to you not to come, did you not receive my letter?"

"I really had no time to wait for it. I am sorry. Now, I have nowhere to go for the night".

Well, the long and short of it is that the tea garden manager not only allowed the priest to have a comfortable bed for the night, but he even gave him a pair of pyjamas to sleep in!

Despite the practically nonstop touring by both Fathers, they could visit all the communities only twice during the one year that Fr. Marengo spent in Dibrugarh.

While in Dibrugarh Fr. Marengo visited Sadiya twice. Sadiya (in present-day Arunachal Pradesh) was a British advance-post under a political officer, a Colonel, two Captains and a military garrison of Gurkhas. During Fr. Marengo's stay the territory was not yet fully administered. The garrison was there, ostensibly, to defend the plains of Assam at the foot of the hills, from raiding incursions by the Adis and Mishmis. Captain Sherman and his family, including an ayah from Tamil Nadu, were very devout Catholics. Fr. Marengo was their guest at meals. To spend the night he used to go over to the Inspection Bungalow less than a km away.

One night, after supper he stayed on quite late listening, along with his host, to sacred classical music. Even after several years, he remembered that it was the Polyphonic Mass by Boezi and other pieces. When he actually made up his mind to go to the bungalow, Captain Sherman asked:

"Are you sure you do not want someone to accompany you?"

"Well no, thanks", replied Fr. Marengo,

"do not take the trouble. I think I can easily find my way back to the Inspection Bungalow".

It was dark and rather misty. He missed one turn at the very start. Instead of retracing his steps, he thought he would

reach quicker if he cut across the expanse of flat land in which he found himself after five minutes of brisk walking. But soon he realized that he had entirely lost his bearings. Some distance ahead a party was celebrating, dancing, and drinking around a bonfire. He walked ahead and passed clear of them. Some distance away he noticed a small white house with a light outside. He made for that house. But when he was close enough he discovered to his dismay, that it was the powder magazine. Two Gurkha sentries muffled up in heavy military overcoats were sitting on the verandah talking. If they spied him walking fast they might have grown suspicious.

"Before shooting they will challenge me", Fr. Marengo thought to himself. He approached quite close. Taken by surprise they stood up gun in hand.

"Kaun ata hai?"

"Padri Saheb, Padri Saheb from Dibrugarh and the guest of Captain Sherman. I have lost my way to the Inspection Bungalow. Please show me the way there."

At this one of them came forward and accompanied him a little way.

"This path will take you straight there", he assured.

Fr. Marengo had never been too good at finding his direction. His daring to come away at night all by himself brought him enough trouble. Since then he always preferred to be accompanied by someone.

Several times those who were accompanying him during his visit to a new place, in their eagerness to steer him clear of thick jungle and marshes would end up by losing the way entirely, and at times they would turn to him shamefacedly:

"Father, what shall we do now, we have lost the way".

"Which direction is our goal?"

"There" they would point out.

"Then, let's go."

They would then walk straight on. Walking straight ahead often landed them in broad patches of stinging nettles! Sometimes they literally had to wade through it.

"Adventures like these", recalled Fr. Marengo are not easily forgotten.

The tiresome journey to North Lakhimpur from Dibrugarh is worth recording to understand the difficulties of those early days. The missionary had to travel a whole night by train to a harbour on the Brahamaputra called Kokhilamukh (now Newmati) to board the steamer. One full day by steamer would reach him to Subansirimukh. There he had to change over to a smaller steamer in the evening to arrive at Bordutti Ghat early the following morning. From there 4 hours by bus through dusty roads would land him in North Lakhimpur. Still another 7 kms on foot to Balijan village where there was a rather big community of Catholics consisting mostly of ex-tea garden labourers. From Balijan he would continue his visit to nearby communities. In rainy season with rivers in spate the visits were more difficult.

Once when Fr. Marengo was travelling in a tea garden truck from one garden to another in the North Lakhimpur area, he met a group of Apatanis. He stopped to talk to them in broken Assamese, that was all both parties could speak then. He asked them where they were going and offered to take them part of the way. They felt uneasy at the offer, for they had never been on any sort of a vehicle before.

Their answer was:

"Sir, you know, we don't know!"

So they could not be induced to board the truck. Fr. Marengo remembers that on that occasion asking one of them the name of a long sword-like weapon they were carrying.

"Olio", they told him.

That was as far back as 1934. In November 1978 when he went to Shillong for the annual Eucharistic procession in the absence of the Archbishop, then away in Rome, he met a group of catechumens from the Nishi tribe.[5] They had come up to Shillong with Fr. Kulandaiswamy to witness a Christian religious celebration. Knowing that Bishop Marengo was there in the sacristy getting ready for Mass, they came to wish him. The young men in the group were sporting their inseparable dagger. They wanted to dress up Bishop in their tribal coat, head gear and hang their dagger on his waist. As he took hold of the dagger, he spoke the only word he know from their language, "Olio", the word he had learned 46 years earlier. The board smile of those young boys and girls on hearing a word from their language was indescribable, recalled Bishop Marengo in later years.

Towards the end of his stay in Dibrugarh Fr. Marengo made a thorough census. The Catholics numbered 15,000 as against the 8,000 given in the census of the previous year.[6]

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5. Earlier, they were referred to as Daflas by people of other tribes.
6. The chronicles of Dibrugarh, a copy of which was found in the archives of the Salesian Generalate in Rome, shows that Fr. Marengo was touring continuously during his stay in Dibrugarh from 13 September 1933 to 24 July 1934. There were over 14,000 Catholics living in 150 villages/places.

While we attribute the reason for this sudden increase to the hard work of the missionaries - Fr. Marengo and Fr. Marmol and their lay collaborators - it must be remembered that before the year 1930 the labour force that came to the Assam tea estates from the various aboriginal tribes of Chotanagpur and other parts of India, had come without any written agreement. The recruitment terms were rather flexible and disorganized. However, from 1930 onwards there came into force the so-called "Three Years Repatriation Scheme" according to which the labourer had a right - after three years - either to be repatriated at the expense of the Tea Company or to sign for a further three year contract. Besides, the selection of Catholic labour from Ranchi was being done through the mediation of the Catholic Fathers of the various mission centres there. Thus the more organized form of recruitment and the assistance from the part of the Catholic mission afforded greater credibility to the tea planters and greater confidence to the Catholic labour themselves. Many of them began to stay longer in the gardens.

To this may be added that in those early days plenty of good land was available in Assam. Whoever wished to clear the jungle and cultivate it were free to do so on the land that the managers used to provide generously.

This sudden increase in the number of Catholics due to several reasons, and the fact that they were scattered over a very wide area, was work enough for two priests. One of them had to be always on tour while the other stayed at the centre for religious assistance to the Sisters and the small Christian community of Dibrugarh town.

Fr. Marengo's work was, of course, much easier in the villages than in the tea gardens, even allowing for a soft bed and a good meal in place of the invariable plate of rice and a hard straw bed of the villages. In the tea garden where he

had a big community he could only go on a Saturday evening after the payment was done, and come away on Sunday after the Church service, because going on a week day would have meant holding them back from work - a thing which was economically a great loss for both garden and labour.

Sunday always happened to be a market day and going to the market is a must for the tea garden people. Hence the contact with the flock, especially in the bigger communities, was very scant. With hours of confession, Mass and homily, baptism of children, marriages and other problems to solve, Fr. Marengo could break his fast only very late in the morning after going back to the Manager's welcoming bungalow for what his host would jokingly refer to as "Brunch" meaning breakfast and lunch all in one.

The last two months of his stay in Dibrugarh Fr. Marengo was all by himself. In Bandel, Fr. Mazzetti had become suddenly ill and so Fr. S. Ferrando, the acting provincial, in the absence of Mgr. Mathias who was away in France, asked Fr. Marmol from Dibrugarh to go and help in Bandel. With the departure of Fr. Marmol, Fr. Marengo was left alone in Dibrugarh with a parish of nearly 15000 Catholics, the responsibility to look after the centre and to make sure that the Hindi monthly the "*Salisian Khabaren*" was got ready every month. "*Salisian Khabaren*"(Salesian News) was a monthly news bullettin started by Fr.Piasecki.

When Fr. S. Ferrando shortly afterwards received the yearly report on the Dibrugarh mission, he understood the hard work put in by Fr. Marengo. He wrote to him apologizing for leaving him alone there.

During his short stay in Dibrugarh he also experienced for himself the sacrificing work of the Sisters of Charity.[7] He felt sorry when at times he had to be absent from

Dibrugarh and had to leave them without holy Mass. When Fr. Marengo would go to visit them, Sr. Vincenza would guess the purpose of his visit and would say:

> "Oh, I know, you are going to leave us alone again! But you are not going to take away the Lord, are you?"

From 1952 when Fr. Marengo would return to Dibrugarh as its first Bishop, his contact with the Sisters of Charity would be multiplied. He would visit every patient in the Medical College Hospital.

After Fr. Piasecki returned from Poland, Fr. Marengo went back to Guwahati in the end of July 1934. Soon Fr. V. Scuderi became the provincial of the new Salesian province of North India[8] and Apostolic Administrator of Krishnagar. Fr. Marengo was appointed Rector of Don Bosco Guwahati and in-charge of the missions.

### Back to Guwahati from Dibrugarh

Whether in Dibrugarh or in Guwahati or anywhere else, Fr. Marengo was at home with his flock. To be the Rector of

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7. The Sisters of Charity of Saints B. Capitanio and V. Gerosa (SCCG) commonly known as the Sisters of Charity or Maria Bambina Sisters came to Dibrugarh in April 1933 at the invitation of the Inspector General of Hospitals to work in the Civil Hospital. Mgr. L. Mathias was the inspirer behind this initiative. In 1947 when the Assam Medical College Hospital(AMCH) was opened at Barbari, a suburb of Dibrugarh, a few Sisters from the Civil Hospital came there to help. Eventually it became the second community of the SCCG in Dibrugarh. When the first house was washed away in the flood of 1964 the two communities where merged into one in AMCH. The service rendered by the Sisters has been greatly appreciated by the authorities as well as by the patients and students they came in contact with. In 1970 the Sisters opened another house in Dibrugarh under the name "Mercy Home".

Don Bosco, Guwahati, meant being tied down to his community at Guwahati. Hence, he longed to be relieved of it. When it did happen, he called it "his happiest year". But new surprises were in store for him as God had other plans for him.

During Fr. Scuderi's term as Rector, the boarding school at Guwahati had greatly improved and the number of boarders considerably increased. The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians who were housed in very poor premises with a boarding school, tailoring and weaving sections for Adivasi girls, in the same mission compound separated only by a makeshift fence, had moved to Manick Chandra road (the site of the present St. Mary's School).

Most of the boarders in Don Bosco Guwahati were not paying. The boarding fee for those who could afford it, was just Rs. 3/- per month, and Rs. 6/- were condoned to those who paid for the whole year right at the beginning of the year. In those days rice was Rs. 3/- per maund. Even then, it was hard to manage as boys were coming without previous information and it was hard to refuse and send them back home. The following description of facts may give us an idea of the early years of Don Bosco, Guwahati.

In order to find sufficient money to meet the expenses of the boarding and the house, Fr. Scuderi started a *raffle*. Before launching it he went to the District Commissioner

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8. Till then the whole of Salesian India was under one province with Mgr. L. Mathias as provincial (From 1906 to 1912 Salesian India was part of the province of Portugal, from 1912 to 1923 it was under the Roman province of St. Peter. In 1923 Salesian India was made a *visitatoria* with Mgr. L. Mathias as superior. In 1926 it became a province with Mgr. L. Mathias as provincial) In 1934 the province of North India with Fr. V. Scuderi as provincial and the province of South India with Fr. E. Cinato as provincial, were created.

for permission. The D.C. happened to be Mr. C.S. Mullen, a Catholic from Ireland. He suggested that the raffle be called "Private and Confidential" so as not to incur tax on the income. The lottery tickets were printed and made into small booklets of 25 tickets each. Each ticket cost 4 annas. On each was printed "*Private and Confidential, for friends and benefactors only*". Whoever sold a complete booklet got a discount of Re. 1 and 4 annas.

The missionaries were asked to send in names and addresses of people who could be potential buyers. It is said that Fr. Antony Alessi supplied a long list of names with one address at the beginning and all the rest with "*idem*", meaning at the same address. So the boys who were helping with the work of despatch copied the name and put *Idem* for address. To cut the long story short, all those letters were sent to "Aden". From Aden they were sent back to the postal authorities in Bombay. From Bombay they were returned to Guwahati after three months from the date of despatch from Guwahati!

Bro. Paul Sebastian used to take the tickets to the government offices in Guwahati for sale. In every office he was asked a lot of questions about Christians and their work and about the boys who were in the boarding. One day he spent two hours in the Deputy Commissioner's office but did not succeed to sell even one ticket!

The following day he went to the nearby Cotton College Hindu Students' Hostel. There he managed to sell one ticket for 4 annas in one hour! On another day he crossed the river Brahmaputra by a boat and came to the North bank just opposite Guwahati. From there he walked upto Amingaon. On the way he entered several Assamese houses trying to sell the tickets. No ticket was sold the whole day. He took the bus from Pandu Ghat and came back home with as many

tickets as he started with! Bro. Paul used to leave packets of tickets with the shop keepers in Panbazar, Fancybazar and Ujanbazar. The shopkeepers used to accept them gladly. Just a week before the closing date Bro. Paul would go again to clear the accounts and to collect the money. Very often the tickets were forgotten in the drawers with no tickets sold. Only a shop of a Muslim at Machkhowa - says Brother- took two tickets and paid him the money.

When Fr. Marengo and Fr. Marmol were in Dibrugarh Bro. Paul and Fr. Ayuso travelled all the way to Dibrugarh to visit them and also to sell some tickets there. Several people excused themselves from buying, because specific prizes were not given on the tickets. It was only printed that from the net collection 25% would be deducted and the rest would be given out as prizes.

Bro. Paul Sebastian who was posted at Don Bosco Guwahati informs us that there were two categories of boys at that time: students and artisans. Boarding fee was the same for both. If the boys were of the same family, one had to pay full fees and the other only half. If a missionary had put more than ten boys in the boarding, he had to pay only for ten. The rest were kept free.

The boys had rice and curry twice a day: at mid-day and at night. In the morning they had tea with one "hooghly" biscuit (a small bun without sugar). Tea was served without milk, but with salt. On Sundays and feast days meat or fish was served with rice.

For dress each boy was given a white dhoti and a white shirt for Mass on feast days and Sundays and for walk through the town. These dhotis and shirts - Bro. Paul informs us - were kept in a big box and were given out on Saturday after night prayers according to the

identification number each one had. The boys were bare-footed.

Since there was scarcity of water in the house, they were led to the Brahamaputra river for bath and for washing their clothes. In summer they took bath every day morning and evening. In winter, twice a week. Washing of clothes was only twice a week. The boys were accompanied to and from the river by two assistants.

In the words of Fr. A. Pianazzi, it was in conditions of such poverty that eminent Salesian missionaries were formed: O. Marengo, Attilio and Guido Colussi, O. Paviotti, J. Dal Broi, E. Zanon and Mario Ferrario.[9]

Bro. Paul Sebastian tells us that the people in the town did not always look at the boys with kindness. They could not understand what kind of people the Christians were. They used to jeer at the boys as they passed through the town or went to the river. They were like "untouchables" for them.

In the boarding the boys were given remarks every week. The grades were: 10 marks for very good conduct, 10 minus for less good. 9.5 meant just satisfactory. Those we got less than 9 were warned and were to be sent away, if they did not show signs of improvement.

"On the whole", Bro. Paul informs us, the behaviour of the boys was very good. Nobody got 9 in his time![10]

The year 1934 is special for more than one reason:

It was the year in which

Don Bosco was declared a Saint (Easter Sunday 1 April).

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9. A. Pianazzi, *Don Bosco Nell'Assam*, Leumann (Torino): Elle Di Ci, 1983, 107.
10. Ibid.,11.

Some students were given a chance to visit Rome and other places in Europe for the first time.[11]

A monument to Don Bosco was unveiled in Shillong - perhaps the only instance of such honour in the whole of India.

Fr. Vincent Scuderi was appointed provincial in the place of Mgr. Mathias.

Fr. E. Gutierrez became Rector of Our Lady's House, Shillong.

Fr. Joseph Foglia was appointed Master of Novices in the place of Fr. Stephen Ferrando.

Fr. Orestes Marengo was appointed Rector of Don Bosco, Guwahati in place of Fr. V. Scuderi.

And above all,

The dioceses of Shillong and Krishnagar were created with Bishop L. Mathias and Bishop S. Ferrando as their first Bishop respectively.

They were consecrated Bishops on Saturday 10 November 1934.

On December 12 Mgr. E. Mederlet, SDB., Archbishop of Madras died suddenly. Within 3 months Bishop L. Mathias was chosen to succeed him.

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11. Those who got a chance to go were Bro. Francis Diengdoh (the first Khasi Salesian cleric who was studying theology in Our Lady's House), James Biswas from Dumpukur who was a student in our boarding in Krishnagar, Leviticus Rapthap of Shillong who was an artisan in the carpentry department, Bah Shome, a Pnar from Jaintia Hills, who was also a carpenter and Emil Kachua, a Khariya, who was an orphan and who spent his childhood in the Don Bosco Orphanage at Guwahati. When they reached Europe they were given all the attention and were treated like "princes" from India. See SHTCD-MPS, 23.

Bishop Marengo considers the episcopal ordination of Bishops L. Mathias and of S. Ferrando as "*the greatest event*" for Assam mission.[12]

Saturday 10 November 1934. The day of the episcopal ordination. The big pandal with the words *Saint John Bosco* written on its facade with shining electric bulbs along the Laitumkhrah road opposite the cathedral acted as a colossal umbrella housing a huge crowd such as Shillong had not seen till then. There were Khasis, Adivasis, Garos and representatives of many other tribes. Over five hundred people from Tezpur and as many from Krishnagar swelled the number.

The presence of prelates and the other VIPs made the function unforgettable.[13] After the ordination Mass, a group photo was taken near the old Grotto at Don Bosco Technical School by the only photographer of Shillong of those days - M/s Ghosal Brothers. "Deluxe refreshments" in St. Anthony's auditorium with solos from renowned Salesian singers like Fr. Siro Righetto, Brothers Herminegild Boscardin, Guelph Palotti, Berti and Colzani added joy to the occasion.

The Eucharistic procession at 1.30 in the afternoon - all the prelates on foot along with the people - with stops at three places: St. Edmund's College, the Maidan near the fire brigade in Laitumkhrah and finally at the pandal in front of the cathedral for Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament

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12. For a more detailed description of it see, O. Paviotti, *The Work of His Hands*, Shillong: Archbishop's House, 1987,77-80.
13. They included Archbishop F. Perier SJ of Calcutta, Archbishop E. Mederlet of Madras, Mgr. Crowley, Bishop of Dacca, Mgr. Oscar Severin SJ, Bishop of Ranchi, Bishop Anselmo of Dinajpur, Le Pailleur Bishop of Chittagong, Mgr.Dounelle, Prefect Apostolic of Sikkim and Mgr. C. Fernandez, the Vicar General of Calcutta.

was unforgettable. It was the most prayerful proclamation of the Catholic faith in the North East in 1934.

The unveiling of the monument to Don Bosco in Laitumkhrah at 3.30 p.m. by the Governor of Assam Sir. Michael Keane KCSI was impressive. He said:

> I am very happy and privileged to unveil this statue of a great Saint of the Catholic Church, Statesman and Protector and Patron of Youth of all the world.

There were people of many nationalities around Don Bosco symbolizing the international character of Salesian mission. Count Giusti del Giardino representing the Italian government added honour to Salesian India. At the close of the unveiling ceremony a hymn to Don Bosco sung in many languages at the same time had the effect of uniting many cultures into one single hymn of thanksgiving to God.

The gymnastic display that followed delighted the audience.

On Sunday 11 November Bishop L. Mathias sang his first pontifical Mass in the Cathedral. That same day Bishop S. Ferrando offered his first pontifical Mass in the Chapel of Our Lady's House where he had been Master of Novices and Rector for many years.

The sumptuous dinner in the evening in the refectory of Our Lady's House, the singing and the decoration with the mottos of the newly consecrated - *Dare and Hope* and *Apostle of Christ* - displayed in more than one location - no one could forget.

The preparations in Shillong for the celebration were so solemn and so impressive that the non-christians of Shillong and around thought that "Don Bosco" was coming to the city! For the "Catholic Mission" in those days was

known simply as "Don Bosco"- because of the big Salesian technical school.

For Fr. Marengo and his community in Guwahati the great day of the episcopal consecration was saddened by the death, from a cold stroke, of a convent girl who had come up to Shillong for the occasion.

At the end of November 1934 Fr. Marengo, then Rector of Don Bosco, Guwahati, was one of those who made the spiritual retreat in Shillong along with a new group of novices. Among the novices was also Bro. Paul Sebastian who completed his novitiate that year and was appointed to Don Bosco Guwahati after his first religious profession. Soon after the retreat Fr. Marengo left with Bro. Paul for Guwahati.

At Guwahati the other Salesian confreres were Fr. A. Colussi, prefect of studies, Fr. L. Ayuso, confessor, and Coadjutor De Giorgio, manager of the carpentry. That year Bros. O. Paviotti, U. Bordin, A. Visentin and D. Colussi were just completing their practical training in Don Bosco Guwahati.

Big changes were in store for Assam mission in the following months. The death of Archbishop E. Mederlet of Madras on 12 December 1934, as we have mentioned above, brought about the transfer of Bishop L. Mathias to Madras two months later, and the return of Bishop S. Ferrando to Shillong from Krishnagar.

On 9 February 1935, with Fr. Marengo as Rector, Guwahati celebrated the feast of St. John Bosco for the first time. It was the first most suitable day for Guwahati community after Don Bosco was declared a Saint on 1 April 1934. The church compound was full of people - Christians from Tezpur, Doomni, Kumarikatta, Barpeta, Mathiapahar and Goalpara came for the feast. The Eucharistic procession wound its way from the Church to the Judges Field and back

to the church where the solemn benediction was imparted to the faithful.

The presence of many Salesian clerics in cassock was something which Guwahati had never seen earlier.

During the Lenten season of 1935 Fr. Marengo invited Fr. D.J. Wollaston from Our Lady's House Shillong to preach a three day retreat to the Anglo-Indian community of Guwahati. It was the first retreat that the parishioners of Guwahati were having. Fr. Wollaston preached two sermons: one in the morning followed by Holy Mass and another in the evening at 6.00 p.m. followed by Benediction. The people liked the retreat very much. The good effect that followed was such that Bro. Paul Sebastian could say:

> "I had been so long in Guwahati, I could see the change for the better. The people are more regular in church attendance. They have volunteered to have the church painted at their own expense and to supervise the work by themselves."[14]

Towards the end of the retreat Fr. O. Marengo approached Bro. Paul and asked:

> What gift should we give to Fr. Wollaston?
>
> Bro. Paul replied:
>
> "Fr. Wollaston is the tallest man in our province. He wears shoes No. 11. That size is not available in any shop. So let us order a pair of shoes to be made to his size."
>
> Fr. Marengo added:
>
> "Alright. Get his measurement and make a good pair of shoes."

14. SHTCD-MPS, 37.

Bro. Paul took the size of Fr. Wollaston's feet and ordered a black pair of "*glazed kid*" shoes. It cost Rs. 7.00 in that far away 1935.

After a few months when Bro. Paul met Fr. Wollaston, the first thing Fr. Wollaston told Bro. Paul was:

> "Brother, the shoes you made for me are the best and the most comfortable ones I ever had!"

On the last day of May 1935 Fr. Attilio Colussi, three clerics and 40 boys left Guwahati for Tezpur by the night steamer. Fr. O. Marengo and Bro. Paul Sebastian and John Agendro (a Boro boy) remained behind in Don Bosco to guard the house. Fr. Marengo was busy learning Boro from John Agendro. They had no cook. And it so happened that just on that day Mr. Paul D'Costa who had been a cook of some tea garden managers came to Fr. Marengo to ask for Rs. 5.00 to go up to Shillong.

When Fr. Marengo came to know that he was a cook, he told him to cook for a few days and earn Rs. 5.00 before going up to Shillong. The man agreed. Bro. Paul took him to the kitchen and gave him all that was needed for his work.

On the same day an Assamese gentleman from Uzan bazar came to tell them that a poor old man they knew was dead. So Fr. Marengo went to inform the executive engineer and the civil surgeon about it as was the custom before he called the Christians from Bamoni Maidan to dig the grave. Before going he had requested Bro. Paul to prepare a coffin. Fr. Marengo went first to the place where the man was found dead. It was about 5 kms from Don Bosco. From there he went another 5 kms to the civil surgeon and further down to the engineer's house. After that he went to Bamoni Maidan and then came back to the house. All these he did on foot from 9.00 in the morning to 12.00 noon.

When he came home he saw the coffin which Bro. Paul had made. Since it was too small, Fr. Marengo requested him to undo it to make a bigger one.

After lunch Fr. Marengo went to his room to learn Boro, and Bro. Paul busied himself to make another coffin.

"I worked under the heat of the tin roof for over two hours", said Brother, "and got sick. We did not have proper lunch and there was no tea either. I was feeling really bad and did not dare to tell Father Marengo about my illness, not to trouble him."

When it was evening Fr. Marengo and Bro. Paul went to the hill where the old man had died to bring the body to the civil hospital for postmortem. From the hill to the hospital they prayed three rosaries. By the time they returned from the hospital to the house and placed the body in the chapel for the morning Mass and funeral the following day, it was near mid-night. They then went to bed without any supper.

Next morning after Mass, the body was carried by three of them - Fr. Marengo, Bro. Paul and the boy Agendro - to the cemetery about 6 kms from the house. When the funeral sermon was over, Fr. Marengo said to Bro. Paul:

"Brother, I have to take Holy Communion to a sick person at the railway quarters. With the help of these men do the burial and go back home with John. When I reach there we shall have breakfast."

On the way Bro. Paul felt sick and John had to support him to reach the house. There they found Fr. Marengo waiting for them. Immediately Bro. Paul went to the kitchen to see if the cook had prepared something. There he found the "cook" sitting on a chair unconcerned. At that moment Bro. Paul remembered the sausages which a certain Mr. Crizzle, one of

his friends in the telegraph office, had given him. They all ate some of it and drank some water. The consequence was disastrous! Nausea, vomiting, stomachache. Fr. Marengo could not proceed with his Boro lessons.

At two in the afternoon Fr. Marengo managed to come down slowly from his room and sat on a chair on the verandah with exhausted looks and sunken eyes. Just at that moment a certain Mr. J.S. Conquo, a telegraph officer, came to take his motor cycle from the compound. Bro. Paul informed him that Fr. Marengo was not feeling well. After seeing Fr. Marengo Mr. Conquo brought a small bottle of medicine made in his home town in Andhra Pradesh which brought relief to Fr. Marengo within a short time.

In the evening Fr. Marengo paid Mr. Paul D'Costa, the cook, Rs. 5.00 and allowed him to go away. Later on Bro. Paul came to know that Mr. D'Costa never reached Shillong. He was still in Guwahati wandering from place to place. One day the boys who were asked by Fr. A. Colussi to go and find him out, saw him sitting dead on a chair in front of a hut. At night the Fathers had to arrange to bring him to the cemetery for burial.

Fr. Cyprian Sanchez, a Salesian from Krishnagar, joined the Don Bosco Guwahati community as confessor in 1935. It was not always easy to agree with his ideas, as Bro. Paul Sebastian testifies. One day he asked Bro. Paul to organize an Oratory for Bengali speaking children and to let them come and play in the compound. In those days since the Mission was caring for the Adivasis mostly, Bro. Paul explained to Fr. Sanchez that the Bengali and the Adivasi children would find it difficult to mix. But since the latter insisted saying that they [the Bengali children] are "children of God", Bro. Paul

referred the matter to Fr. Marengo, the Rector. But Fr. Marengo, not wanting to take any personal decision, told Bro. Paul to do what he thought was good.

Bro. Paul, therefore, approached a few Bengali children to come and play. They agreed provided Brother supplied them with a cricket set. Brother Paul approached his friends at the telegraph office nearby and requested them to help him procure a cricket set for his "Oratory". They did not know what an Oratory was. So Brother Paul was happy to tell them what an Oratory meant for Don Bosco. In a few days, he got his cricket set and set in motion an Oratory for Bengali children. Everything went off smoothly for some time until the parents of the Bengali children felt that their children might be attracted to Christianity. In the meantime Fr. Sanchez got transferred and the Bengali Oratory came to an abrupt end.

Fr. Marengo was Rector of Don Bosco Guwahati for about an year and a half. It was not easy to discharge his duties as Rector, and Parish Priest and, at the same time, tour the villages to take care of the flock scattered over Kamrup and Goalpara districts. As a result, quite often Fr. Marengo used to be absent from the house visiting the villages. In his own words it was Fr. Ayuso and after him Fr. Sanchez - men of much prayer, but of very poor health - who, besides performing their duty as confessor and catechist respectively, did whatever they could when he was away on tour visiting the Christian communities.

In August 1935 when Fr. Antony Alessi was transferred from Tezpur to Guwahati as Rector, Fr. Marengo became more free for work in the villages. In addition, the house also received an "administrator" in the person of Fr. Theodosio Bonomi.

The year that followed, writes Fr. Marengo, was his happiest year. When this change was made known to the parishioners, they were sorry that Fr. Marengo would no more be their parish priest. In the farewell get-together arranged by them to thank him, the parishioners presented him with a travelling kit. Fr. Marengo was so pleased with it that he thanked them profusely "as he knew well how to do it".[15]

**Mission among the Adivasis Continued**

The year 1935-36, the "happiest" in his life, was also a fruitful year apostolically. He toured from village to village. His contact with Christian communities widened and deepened. His Christians were mostly Adivasis who formed the bulk of his flock.

The term "Adivasi" has more than one meaning. Literally it means "earliest settlers". It also means "tribals" in general.[16] There is yet another meaning. In Assam and in the rest of North East India the term Adivasi stands for the original

15. Ibid.

16. The "Adivasis" or "tribals" are the "earliest among the present inhabitants of the country" before the Aryans entered India. After the Aryans there came others: the Greeks, Scythians, Parthians, Shakas and Huns before the eighth century. Between the eighth and the twelfth centuries, the Arabs, Persians, Turk, Afghans and Mongols... We can identify four distinct racial families of Adivasis in India today. They are: 1. The Negritoes: the Kadi speaking jarawa stone-agers in Andaman and the Pulayans and Irulas in the Western Ghats and the plains of Kerala and Tamil Nadu; 2. The Australoids of the Austro-Asiatic and Indo-European language groups: the Khasis of Khasi Hills, the Nicobarese of Andaman Nicobar, the Santalis of Bihar and Bengal, the Mundaris of Bihar and Orissa, the Hos of Bihar, the Bhils and the Meenas of Rajasthan and the Kuknas, Varlis, Vasavas, Gamiths and Chaudhuris of Gujarat and Maharashtra; 3. The tribals of Dravidian origin: the Tulus, Kodagus, Todas, Kotas and Badagas of South India, the Kuis of Orissa, the Kolams of

settlers of Chotanagpur (the present districts of South Bihar and parts of the adjacent areas now found in W. Bengal, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh) and Santal Parganas who migrated to Assam and North Bengal to work in tea plantations which were being developed at the beginning of the 19th century. Many of them were already Catholic or Protestant before they left their original home.[17]

Today nearly 30% of the Catholic population of the North East is Adivasi. They are found mostly in the Archdiocese of Guwahati, the dioceses of Dibrugarh, Diphu and Tezpur.[18]

The umbrella term "Adivasi", includes many groups, at least 60 of them. Among them there are four which are more connected with the missionary work of Fr. Marengo. They are the Oraons, Mundas, Kharias and the Santals. Though the Santals too are Adivasis, they - being the largest group among the Adivasi tribes - prefer to consider themselves a separate group. They have their own language, dress and customs. Whereas the Oraons, Mundas and Kharias are found in the Brahmaputra valley for the most

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Maharashtra, the Gonds of Madhya Pradesh, the Oraons of Bihar, Orissa and Bengal; and 4. The Mongoloid group of tribals: the Tibetans, Baltis, Ladakhis, Sherpas, Lepchas of the Indo-Kimalayan region and the Bodos, Garos, Adis, Nagas, Kuki-Chin of the Tibeto-Burmese family (Cf. S. M. Michael, *Anthropology of Conversion in India*, Mumbai: Institute of Indian Culture, 1998, 4-5).

17. The land they had obtained through hard labour by clearing forests and which were handed on from generation to generation was grabbed by *zamindars*(landlords) who owed cash revenue to the British. Because they were illiterate, the Adivasis or tribals were at the mercy of zamindars, money lenders and unscrupulous lawyers in their place of origin.

18. See, K. Poovathumkudy, "You shall be my witnesses in Assam," *Indian Missiological Review (IMR)*, Vol. 19, No. 2, June 1997, 17.

part, the Santals are concentrated in Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang districts.[19]

Linguistically the Adivasis come under three groups: the Kolarian language group (like the Munda, Ho, Santal and the Kharia), the Dravidian group (such as the Oraon, the Gond, the Khond and Malpaharia) and the groups speaking Oriya, Bengali and Hindi.[20] The common language among them is Sadri. Whereas the Santals and the Mundas are closer linguistically, the Oraons and the Mundas are closer socially.

By the time Fr. Marengo started to tour the tea gardens and the villages inhabited by the Adivasis there were over a million Adivasis in Assam. Their conditions were so poor and their living so miserable that they were reckoned with the "highly derogatory" name of "coolie".[21] With a view to improve their socio-economic life a number of legislations were enacted over the years by the government of India.[22] However, it took decades before any reform worth its name came into force. And it remains a fact even to this day that: Educationally, socio-economically and politically the Adivasis of Assam are far less advanced than their counterparts in other states of India.[23]

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19. For a detailed study on the Adivasis of the tea gardens of North East India, see, S. Karotemprel and B. Dutta Roy, eds., *Tea Garden Labourers of North East India*, Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1990. For a recent study of evangelization work among the Adivasis of Jharkhand, see *Indian Missiological Review*, Vol 19, No. 2 (June 1997).
20. Cf. Jonas Kerketta, "Evangelization Among The Adivasis In Assam", Shillong: Sacred Heart Theological College, 1987 (unpublished thesis for Master"s Degree in Theology)14. J. Kerketta is an Adivasi from Assam. He hails from the Munda group of Adivasis.
21. Ibid., 42.
22. Ibid., 43-50 for a summary presentation.
23. Ibid., 50.

Fr. Jacopo Broy of the Foreign Missions of Milan (commonly known as the Milan Fathers) who was the first resident priest in the North East from 1872 to 1890, could not have done much for the Adivasi Christians given the vast area he had to travel and the immense work that awaited him. When the German Salvatorian missionaries (SDS = Society of the Divine Saviour) started their work in Shillong in 1890 there were over 400,000 Adivasis in the Brahmaputra valley - several of whom were Catholics. Fr. Gallus Schoeb SDS with his base in Guwahati, in his turn, ministered to them with the help of a few Adivasi catechists. He rebuilt a chapel which Fr. J. Broy had constructed. After four years of ministry he left for Europe in 1906 because of ill health. Fr. Rudolf Fontaine SDS who replaced him began the spiritual care of the Adivasi communities in the Brahamaputra valley in a more organized way. The Jesuit Fathers who took the place of the Salvatorian missionaries when the latter had to leave the North East at the start of the First World War had to see to keeping up what was already existing. However, among the Jesuit missionaries the names of Frs. Bonne, Gringnard and P. S. Carberry deserve special mention.[24] Their work was tough. The communities were scattered in the tea gardens and villages of the vast Brahamaputra valley. Fr. Carberry wrote in 1918: "Catholics in Assam are like the proverbial needle in the hay-stack which it is practically impossible to find unless it sticks in your fingers while you grope in the hay.[25]

The challenging task of ministering to the Adivasi communities dispersed all over the Assam valley and living in conditions of great distress and with poor communication facilities was continued by the Salesians of Don Bosco. The names of Fr. J. Gil who replaced Fr. Carberry in Guwahati in

24. Ibid., 61.
25. Ibid., 61.

March 1922, of Fr. L. Piasecki who because of his non-stop and arduous tours, came to be known as the "lion" of the Brahmaputra valley, and Fr. F. Marmol who assisted Fr. Piasecki were shining examples of single-minded dedication to a worthy cause. All of them in one way or another shaped the missionary fervour of Fr. Marengo.

In 1931 Fr. Piasecki reopened the Dibrugarh mission which had been closed after the departure of the Salvatorians in 1914.[26] He visited Adivasi villages making use of whatever means were available - train, steamer, bicycle, elephants and especially on foot. In his turn, all these except the bicycle became means of transport for Fr. Marengo.

While mission work among the Adivasis of the Southern bank of the Brahmaputra was being carried out from the

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26. The Dibrugarh mission station was opened by Mgr. Christopher Becker SDS on 1 April 1909. Fr. Rudolph Fontaine was put in charge of the mission. Till then Guwahati was the only mission centre for the whole of the Brahmaputra valley. With the departure of the Salvatorians from the Assam Mission in 1914 the house of the Fathers at Dibrugarh and that of the Sisters (opened in February 1915) came into the custody of the government as property of enemy aliens. By the treaty of Versailles after the War it was entrusted to a trustee which in its turn rented it to the post and telegraph department. With the repayment of a loan (Rs. 4000) on the house of the Sisters to the Bishop of Dacca by Mgr. L. Mathias, the property became part of the Catholic Mission of Assam in 1923. The house and the property continued to be rented out to the post and telegraph department till 1927. In November 1930 Mgr. Mathias visited Dibrugarh after Fr. Piasecki had reopened it in 1928. It was Fr. F. Marmol who carried out the repair work, since Fr. Piasecki was ill in Guwahati. At the end of February 1931 Fr. Piasecki returned to Dibrugarh to remain there more permanently and to tour the villages more regularly. On 13 September 1933, Fr. Marengo came to Dibrugarh from Guwahati to replace Fr. Piasecki who was then leaving for Poland, as we have already referred to earlier.

Guwahati and the Dibrugarh bases, great plans were being made for work on the Northern bank by Fr. A. Alessi with Tezpur as his centre.

With the coming of Fr. Marengo to help in Guwahati in 1932 and Fr. A. Ravalico as assistant to Fr. A. Alessi in Tezpur, the Adivasi mission made rapid progress. Fr. Alessi's diary shows that he was out on tour for 221 days in the first year itself. The same also with Fr. Ravalico.[27] As for Fr. Marengo, touring the villages and being with his flock became a second nature to him. The more he came in contact with his Adivasi flock, the more he appreciated their simple and unassuming ways. According to him they were a meek and hardworking lot. As Christians they were good, faithful and generous. Economically they were still rather poor, because of their drinking habit. Literacy was still very low among them.

Fr. Marengo considered their habit of drinking as a real plague, because for most of them drinking meant "getting drunk". He would not blame them since they lived a very hard life. They had no pastimes. Old men could not play football or hockey. None of them could sit down and read. So they found drinking as a way of drowning their worries and anxieties. Apart from this weakness, Fr. Marengo found them to be good. It was worth being patient and kind with them.

In the monthly report that each catechist had to send to the priest there was also the question:

"How many got drunk?"

In one of the reports signed by the catechist it read:

"All. Myself included".

27. SHTCD-MF, 69.

"Sincerity from the catechists is certainly commendable and desirable", remarked Fr. Marengo,

"but on that occasion it hardly drew a smile from me".

Once during his visit to Khagrabari village in North Kamrup, Fr. Marengo could not meet "Daria Joseph" (bearded Joseph). He was a good man, knew his religion well, could read and write and was a very pleasant character. But that day he was on a drinking spree and was dodging Fr. Marengo. Nobody could or would tell him where he could be found. The day Fr. Marengo was leaving the village, he happened to enter an empty hut by the road side on the outskirts of the village. There was his friend Daria Joseph, sodden with drink lying asleep like a log. A piece of rope was hanging from the cabin door. Fr. Marengo tied his right arm to the door and told someone who was with him:

"When he wakes up, please, tell him who did it".

When he visited Khagrabari next after four months, in the chapel stuck on the wall above the alter was a list of names of people who had taken the pledge to give up drinking. Daria Joseph's name was heading the list!

Fr. Marengo had a pleasant memory of an incident in the same area. He was on his quarterly visit to Doomni tea garden, a big tea estate in North Kamrup right at the foot of the Bhutan mountains. There was (and is still there) a very large Christian community. The tea garden manager had built a big chapel for his Catholic labourers.

One Sunday morning Fr. Marengo was offering Mass. The chapel was fully packed. While distributing Holy Communion he happened to pick up two Hosts from the ciborium and as he was giving communion to a woman one Host fell from his hand. Fr. Marengo stooped down to pick

up the fallen Host, but could not find it. The people helped him to look for it. But it was nowhere to be seen. He asked the woman to shake her saree. She did so. But the Host was not found. Rather mystified and without much conviction he thought that perhaps it had fallen back in the ciborium. The people who were searching for the Host also felt the same. And so, Fr. Marengo went on with the Mass.

In the afternoon he went around the garden lines to visit the families. When he returned to the village chapel they had prayer service late in the evening. The next day the people had to go for work, and therefore, he celebrated a very early Mass for those living closer to the chapel. After Mass he folded the Mass vestments and the altar linen, and laid them in the altar box. Then while he was talking to the catechist who was also the tea garden school master, a group of children were sweeping the chapel. He saw the children coming to him with an awed expression on their face:

"Father, there is a Holy Communion on the floor."

One may imagine how Fr. Marengo felt. That a consecrated Host had been lying a whole day and night on the bare floor and that it might have been forgotten there till his next visit after three or four months !

At the altar rail, on the step where people kneel to receive Holy Communion, there was a strip of straw mat. As the children lifted the mat in order to sweep, the Host appeared. Feeling bad and guilty, he told one of the boys to prepare the altar. Just then a young woman entered the church. He knew her because her little son was in the Guwahati boarding school.

"Father," she said, "Yesterday I could not come. As you know, I am living rather far away from the garden

> and there are no houses near by. Yesterday, while my children and their father came for Mass, I had to stay back and guard the house. This morning I tried to come early, but I see I am late. Please, will you hear my confession?"

Not only could she make her confession, but receive communion as well, thanks to that Host which had slipped from the fingers and which could not be found again until then!

> "Call it a happy coincidence", remarked Fr. Marengo, "as for me I was overjoyed, that what might have been a sad incident, ended well...". Rather, Fr. Marengo was inclined to think that Jesus had wanted to wait for that soul eager to receive Him.

One day, during a mission tour, Fr. Marengo and his catechist had to break journey because it was getting dark. They took shelter in a small settlement of Moholi Christians.[28] That evening Fr. Marengo was very tired. He was eagerly looking forward to a restful night after the usual meal of rice and curry. When everything was ready, he spread his bedding and hitched the mosquito net over a string bed. He soon fell asleep. But he must have slept barely half an hour when suddenly he woke up. He could not fall asleep again since his body began to itch and smart all over. At first he thought that during the long march under the scorching sun he might have brushed against some stinging bushes. After tossing about one sleepless hour he began to feel a peculiar sting. He sat up quickly to find out what was the cause of the itching and smarting. He flashed his torch and, as he had feared, he saw a host of bed bugs cruising all over his bed

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28. The Moholis are a part of the Santals. They speak Santali. But the Santals, being a large tribe, are inclined to look down upon the Moholis.

sheets and mosquito net. Here it may be recalled that the name for bed bugs is a word he learned in quite a number of languages. In his great humility he would say that just because he knew the word for bed bugs, many people might have thought that he knew several languages!

"Even bugs are a help", used to say Bishop Marengo, "to create my fabulous renown as a polyglot".

During the many years as a touring missionary Fr. Marengo had made close acquaintance with bigger and more formidable animals like elephants, tigers, leopards, bears, cobras and pythons. But in his experience, none of these is so bloodthirsty as mosquitos, bugs and leeches.

Fr. Marengo did most of his touring on foot. He never rode a bicycle. The manager of the Doomni tea garden was kind enough to put the garden elephant and its mahut at his disposal when he was visiting the Christian villages around his garden. So did the manager of the Nagrijuli garden.

On the back of an elephant one is always safe, crossing rivers and marshes, climbing up and down steep and slippery ascents. One is safe even from an evil intentioned tiger. The elephant knows its weight and will never take risks. It will never walk over a wooden bridge. It makes straight for the river, easily wades and if necessary swims across an impetuous stream without being told by the mahut. A mahut can really talk to his elephant.

"After riding elephants for long distances through all kinds of tracks", Bishop Marengo felt, "that one could not but help develop a feeling of great liking for this animal with such bulk and prodigious strength and yet so gentle and helpful. It can easily move at a speed of 8-10 kms per hour. It could, no doubt walk much faster. But then it would no longer be a joy ride!"

Unlike the horse and nearly all other quadrupeds which will alternatively lift fore right, hind left, fore left and hind right leg, observed Bishop Marengo, "the elephant, like the camel, moves at the same time both legs of each side, a movement which, if it is carried out too fast, is apt to make one feel sea-sick".

The elephant stops at every stream to have a drink and then it would douse itself and the riders, unless forewarned by the mahut. Without stopping it breaks a tree branch to eat its leaves or beat away the flies with it. On one occasion the elephant Fr. Marengo was riding stopped. After waiting a while the mahut ordered it to proceed. It did not. The mahut shouted. But it was of no avail. Then, losing his patience he struck it with the "ankus" (the prodding iron). The poor brute screamed but it would not move. The mahut turned to Fr. Marengo and said:

"Have a look, Sir, perhaps some thing has fallen down".

Indeed, Fr. Marengo's breviary had fallen; neither he nor the mahut had noticed it.

The elephant gently lifted the breviary from the ground with its trunk and the mahut allowed him to receive it back from the elephant's trunk. A similar thing happened on another occasion when the breviary case had fallen, and there too immediately the elephant stopped. When ordered to pick it up, it was hesitating. It appeared to be scared of that black glossy piece of leather which it was suspiciously feeling with its trunk. It took some sharp order from the mahut to pick it up and give it to him.

Still on another occasion after eating his snack on the elephant's back Fr. Marengo threw away the paper taking care to fling it behind as far as he could lest the elephant

should see it, and stop. But the moment the ball of paper touched the ground Hiralal ("Red Diamond" - for that was its name) stood still.

"It is nothing. Go ahead," said the mahut.

And Hiralal continued its march.

Once it stopped for apparently no reason and would not proceed despite the shouting and the prodding of the mahut. On the ground in front of him was an empty bottle which somebody had lost on his way to the market. The elephant connecting it with something useful had stopped and, on being told, obligingly reached it up to the mahut. On another occasion Fr. Marengo saw an elephant which, after foraging in a swamp, came out with its load of grass, its legs covered with huge leeches. With its trunk it got hold of a stick and proceeded to peel off the leeches from its legs!

Hiralal, the Doomni garden elephant, was the second biggest tusker in the whole of Assam, a gigantic fellow, but was unpredictable at times.

Some time in 1936 Bishop Ferrando came to administer Confirmation to a large number of Christians in Doomni, and Fr. Tonello had come along with him. After a late breakfast both of them went for a ride on Hiralal. When they came back and the elephant squatted to discharge its riders, Fr. Tonello slipped down comfortably from its side. To make the descent more comfortable and dignified for the Bishop, the Manager ordered a chair to be brought, the elephant stood up at once and refused to squat again.

Sometime earlier during the trip, the mahut had entertained the Bishop and Fr. Tonello with a little story of how Hiralal had once refused to squat and some people had to remain about 24 hours on the back of the stubborn animal

which was evincing signs of becoming furious. The Bishop was not scared, but neither was he very happy, while Fr. Tonello, by way of encouragement kept repeating:

"Remember, Monsignor, 24 hours!"

However, the elephant was more sympathetic than one could imagine. Although it would not squat down, it did not object to a ladder being brought and mopped against its side for the Bishop to climb down.

While we are on the subject of elephants, here is a thriller. It took place in the same year, 1936.

Mr. Hamilton, an English racing motorist, had come out to see his mother who, after the death of her husband, had married the manager of the Doomni Tea Estate. While in Doomni the young man expressed his desire to bag a tiger before going back to England.

"That will be easy," replied Mr. Chaston, the Manager.

"A tiger has been reported lurking in the big patch of thatch grass not far from the tea estate bungalow. We shall go hunting next Sunday, and make sure we have it".

Fr. Marengo had heard the whole story with every detail from the mahut himself who had accompanied the party on the elephant for that unforgettable hunting spree.

That Sunday morning, the manager with his wife and stepson went out to hunt for the tiger with a number of beaters. They did not ride Hiralal, but the "makna" (an elephant with short tusks). Though smaller in size, it was more courageous. Mrs. Chaston had told her son that it would be safer if he fastened himself on the gaddi (the mattress on the elephant's back). The young man thought that would encumber his movements and told his mother not to worry. The elephant

was moving slowly up and down the tall grass patch to beat up the lurking tiger. Suddenly the tiger sprung up from nowhere and landed right in front of the elephant. Immediately the elephant stood on its fore legs to prevent the tiger from reaching the riders. That is how elephants are trained.

But with the unexpected jerk that was created all of a sudden, Mr. Hamilton lost his balance and slipped down from the elephant, the gun fell from his hand and, to make the predicament worse, his feet got entangled in the ropes of the gaddi so that he was now hanging from the elephant, head down. The tiger was crouched a little distance from the elephant's head confused as to its next move.

> "Racing motorists," added Fr. Marengo, "are obviously men with cold blood and quick reflexes. Young Mr. Hamilton must have been especially gifted with both these qualities: cold blood and quick reflexes".

In the most awkward position in which he found himself, Hamilton managed to retrieve his gun and from a few yards distance shoot the tiger dead.

On hearing of this miraculous escape, Fr. Marengo thanked God and remembered with gratitude the many acts of kindness he enjoyed at the hands of Mrs. Hamilton whenever he called on her family after long and tiring tours and strenuous church services.

Fr. Marengo was very much saddened when he came to know that Mr. Hamilton after a few months of his almost miraculous escape, died in a motor race in Switzerland when his car dashed against a tree near Bern.

**Mission among the Bodos**[29]

In March 1992 Bishop Marengo wrote in the Silver Jubilee Souvenir of the Catholic Mission, Bengtol : "The Boros at Bengtol are one of the most pleasant memory of all my missionary life. I have been praying for them everyday without fail. I am sure that our dear Gendra from heaven will be with us also, and his intercession for us all will make this joyous day a great success."[30] Fr. Joseph Palamthattel SDB speaks of Bishop Marengo as "the heart and soul of the movement [of Catholic Christianity]" among the Bodos.[31] In a recent article "Christianity among the Bodos", Sebastian Ayilookunnel reechoes the same conviction.[32]

The name Bodo means "man".[33] Some see it as related to Tibod or Tibet, the place of their early migration.[34] The Bodos are known as Dimasas in North Cachar, Mech in Goalpara and North Bengal, and Bodos in Brahmaputra Valley.[35]

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29. The term "Boros", it is said, applies to the purely Boro speaking peoples, whereas, the term "Bodos" or "Bodo-Kacharis" is larger and includes communities like "the Rabha, Koch, Garo, Sonowal, Lalung, Deori, Dimasas, Saraniya, Barman, Hojai, Hajong, Tripura, Chutiya and Moran and even the Rajbongshis" (See, B.G. Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent*, New Delhi: Konark Publishers Pvt Ltd., 1996, 53).
30. *Silver Jubilee Souvenir 1966-1991*, Bengtol: Catholic Mission, 7.
31. Ibid., 17.
32. Pulloppillil T. and Aluckal J.(eds), *The Bodos: Children of Bhullumbutter*, Guwahati, Delhi: Spectrum Publications, 1997, 46.
33. Ibid.,1.
34. See, Joseph Palamthattel SDB, "Evangelization among the Boros," Silver Jubilee Souvenir, Catholic Mission Bengtol,1991,11.
35. For a recent presentation of the Bodos, see, Thomas Pulloppillil and Jacob Aluckal, eds., *The Bodos: Children of Bhullumbutter*, Guwahati, Delhi: Spectrum Publications, 1997.

The first communities of this tribe in the Goalpara and Kamrup districts came over during Fr. Scuderi's time. Almost at the same period there started a movement among them in the Mangaldai area of Tezpur mission where Fr. Alessi and Fr. Ravalico were working at the time.

Some of the very first Boro converts were in the Kumarikatta area where Fr. Marengo had the following unforgettable experience.

One day he received a delegation of Boro neophytes from one of the villages of this area. They were visibly upset and were convinced that a Catholic priest had all the solutions to their problems.

"Father, cholera has broken out in our area", said the neophytes, "and the situation is so bad that the Government has forbidden to hold the market. People are dying in every village. Many people ran away from their homes, and villages are completely deserted. So far there have been no case in our village, but all the people are afraid and have sent us to you. What shall we do? Please give us medicines".

Fr. Marengo went out with them and bought what medicines were available. Then remembering what Don Bosco had said and done to his boys during an epidemic of cholera in Turin, he gave those frightened poor people a quantity of medals of Mary Help of Christians and told them to distribute them one each to the village people and to gather in the chapel every evening to pray and to recite all together three times the *Hail Mary*, and to be particularly good during those days.

"If you do what I have said," reassured them Fr. Marengo, "not I, but Don Bosco, promises you that no one from your village will contract cholera".

Not long after that, Fr. Marengo was free to go on tour in that area. In most of the villages people had died, several

villages were even abandoned by the survivals, but none of the neophytes of that particular village was touched by the epidemic. It was Fr. V. Scuderi who christened it "Don Bosco Berha" or "Don Bosco Village".

Soon the converts from the Boro tribe, both in the Tezpur and Guwahati mission grew in number and it was easy to forecast a bright future for the Church among the Boros.

Once Fr. Marengo returned from a tour very late in the night. Awaiting his arrival was Philip Phulsing, his first Boro Catechist of Goalpara district with a young man looking at him with a shy smile:

"Father, I have brought you this boy, he is an orphan".

"I am afraid," replied Fr. Marengo rather impatiently,

"our financial possibilities are stretched to the utmost and even one boy more would add considerably to our burden".

"But he is not a boy any more..."

The young man understood that Fr. Marengo was not willing to accept him so he himself knelt before Fr. Marengo and implored:

"Please, Father, accept me, I came here with great hope."

With a tone that clearly belied his helplessness, Fr. Marengo muttered:

"patience".

The boy remained. And it is amazing to realize that he became the apostle among the Boros. Six months after his meeting Fr. Marengo, he was baptized and chose for himself the name of "Guido" out of sympathy and gratitude to Bro. Guido

Colussi who, although only a Brother, was the acting administrator of the house, and was very popular among the boys. Guido's former name was Gendra, a widely known name among the Boros - both Christians and non-Christians alike.

Fr. Marengo took him along in all his tours, especially among the Boros. The boy taught him the language and was of great use and very good company to him. His association with the Father whose mouthpiece he often was gave him great authority and prestige among the people.

In one of their long marches he asked Father:

"Do you remember the night I first met you in Guwahati?"

"Yes, how well I remember it," said Fr. Marengo and added,

"how nearly I made a big mistake wanting to send you away ... but why do you ask?"

"Because now I want to tell you why exactly I came to Guwahati. In my village there are a few Lutheran families. I used to go occasionally to their church meetings, though I never became a Lutheran. One day, shortly after the Catholics had just begun to work in our area, our catechist to caution us against falling into the snares of the Romans told us how in the Catholic churches the Catholic priests write the list of the various sins with the relative fine one has to pay to be forgiven, and that is how you Fathers become rich and build big schools and churches. So once I entered your church in a nearby village to see for myself what sins Catholics committed and what fine would exonerate them ...

"I did not see anything of the kind and when I next met the Lutheran catechist I frankly told him he had told me a big lie. He called me names for having entered your church."

"You fellow," the Lutheran catechist told Gendra,

"these things are not written in the village churches, but in their big churches at the mission centres".

"I wanted, however, to satisfy myself and that is why I asked Ada Phulsing (my big brother Phulsing, a term of respect) to take me to Guwahati. In the big church there also I did not see what I had come to look for, and so I decided to stay on... and to tell you the whole truth, Father, I must add that during my first month in Guwahati I would invariably sit at the bottom of the church as close as possible to the confessional box to discover whether any of the people who went to confession slipped secretly any money into the hands of the priest".

"And now are you convinced" asked Fr. Marengo, "that it was all a made up story like a few others you may have heard about the Catholic Church from some misguided simple people?

"Yes," Gendra continued, "and that is why I decided to become a Catholic".

Thirty years later when Bishop Marengo was transferred to the new diocese of Tezpur from Dibrugarh, his old Boros and the many new ones who had entered the church in the meantime, became part of his flock again. Fr. J. Zubizarreta, the "Father of the Boros" of the Goalpara District, was not slow in inviting Bishop Marengo to visit the Boro communities. That first tour was a triumphal one. Father Zubi

had arranged with his friend, a forest officer, for an elephant to take Bishop Marengo. He visited many of his earlier Boro communities. In each community he offered Mass, visited their houses and made the people happy. Everywhere Bishop Marengo would meet some Catholics or other from the communities he had ministered to decades earlier when he was stationed in Guwahati. To meet them after so many years was something which he could not do without being deeply moved. When he reached Akshiguri, Guido Gendra's village, Bishop Marengo was visibly moved. By then Guido Gendra was a prosperous farmer, with a large family, but above all a zealous head catechist, almost a byword among the Boros.

Gendra and another of Bishop Marengo's first Christians, Daniel, had built at their own expense a big and beautiful chapel which must have cost them a few thousand rupees. Guido made sure that he entertained Bishop Marengo and Fr. Zubi, his dearest guests, to the best of his Boro style. Before they left, he spoke to Bishop Marengo. He too was visibly moved:

> "Bishop", he said amidst sighs,
>
> "you helped me. You were a father to me when I was a poor boy. Now, by God's kindness I am in a position to help you".

Saying this he gave Bishop Marengo a generous donation.

Here is an unforgettable incident from the early years among the Boros.

The remembrance of Ranisundri was ever fresh in Bishop Marengo's mind. What happened to him there many years ago when he visited Ranisundri as a young touring missionary priest cannot be easily forgotten. He remembered

that particular village not because he had some sort of a confrontation there with the Lutheran pastor who a few days prior to his visit had threatened to have Gendra beaten up, if he again ventured into that village. An old lady from that same village had invited the missionaries. In course of time her whole family was baptized, and they were doing quite well. So Fr. Marengo was genuinely surprised and saddened when one day he was told that the old lady had gone back to her pagan rites and as a sign that she had given up her Christian beliefs, she had planted in the courtyard of her house a conspicuous "tulsi" shrub. No one knew exactly why she had decided to go back to her old beliefs. Most probably there must have been some family problems.

Gendra who knew the beliefs and superstitions of the pagan Boros told Fr. Marengo that he should pull out the tulsi plant. This would make the old woman and her family realize that after becoming Christians they should not become pagans again. Accordingly a few months later when Fr. Marengo visited Ranisundri, he made straight for the old woman's house and when she came out to greet him, she was distinctly ill at ease. Fr. Marengo spoke at first very mildly:

> "Look here, grandma," he said, "you yourself called me into your house, you yourself had asked me to receive you and all your family into the Church, you have cooked for me and I ate your food and your salt. Do you think I can just let you go back to the evil spirit you had renounced and to whom you have returned in fear? If you think so, you are mistaken".

Then pretending to be very angry, Fr. Marengo pulled out the telltale plant adding:

> "And if you are going to plant it again I would pull it out a hundred times again, if necessary".

He then left the village. During his next visit the old grandma was in the Church with the rest of the community and the episode was happily concluded and never mentioned again.

Some thirty years later when as Bishop he visited Ranisundri again, Fr. Zubi who accompanied him told him a very touching story of her last days. She was reported to have suffered from very severe burns from fire from which she did not recover. One day she called the Father and wanted him to anoint her. She received the sacrament sitting on a chair and died a few days later. In Ranisundri there is now a large and fervent Christian community.

For Fr. Marengo touring meant strenuous marching most of the time, under scorching sun or pelting rain, accompanied by his faithful Guido and, on occasions, one or two others, when he had to cross impetuous streams in spate. As he looked back after several decades, he felt that he "dared" doing it with "more rashness than courage".

Once after spending the night in the big forest reserve centre of Kachugaon, Fr. Marengo was travelling by one of the trollies belonging to the Forest Department. It was put at his disposal by a very kind Divisional Forest Officer, because he was aware that Fr. Marengo was looking after several big communities of Christians in that forest zone. During that trip by a trolley Fr. Marengo came across something which, in his own words was "unbelievable".

All the country on the southern bank of the river Hel was flooded as far as he could see. But he had to reach a community of Boros received newly into the Church, and help them settle some disagreement which had arisen between the Christians and the pagans. Since it had been raining heavily during the previous night on the Bhutan hills

and a torrent of water with huge sheets of slush from the hills was just reaching the plains, he had to cross the river on the trolley line bridge. Fr. Marengo was afraid that he would have had to wait for hours until the flood subsided. But that was not necessary. He waded through, and where the water was highest it reached only his waist. He had to wade his way through for nearly five hours.

> "But it was a pleasant going", he recalled
> "both because of the novelty, and because the water was cool despite the merciless July sun".

It is then that he witnessed a very interesting sight. The water had disturbed countless ant hills and the ants were clinging together in perfectly round balls. These balls were being carried by the water now flowing gently back to the river, swinging round and round so that no portion of those living balls was submerged long enough for those wonderful creatures to get drowned. He then asked himself:

"Why can't humans learn from the ants, as the Bible admonishes us, and save each other from drowning, instead of drowning each other?" That indeed was an opportune reflection to help settle the dispute he was going to handle.

In the Goalpara District, Ranipur was by far the most numerous and fervent community, thanks to Mathias its wonderful catechist. It is situated in the big Forest Reserve of Kachugaon only a little way off the Sankos river which marks the border between Assam and Bengal. At the time Fr. Marengo was touring those areas there were more than one thousand Catholics in that Forest Reserve area alone. Each family had enough land allotted to it by the Forest Reserve authorities. The people were bound to give each year a few days of free labour. They also had to work for the Reserve a number of days on payment. They were then allowed

to cultivate the very fertile paddy field which they had themselves opened in the Reserve area. The people were also entitled to get firewood and timber and thatch for their houses.

In March 1936 the Catholic community of Ranipur agreed to have a large convention. They had invited Bishop Ferrando for the occasion. Fr. Marengo went to Ranipur a few days in advance after arranging for a group of boys from the Guwahati Don Bosco Boarding School to go and help at the religious service. He had left behind his catechist to accompany Bishop Ferrando. Fr. Marengo had also arranged with the forest authorities to send a special trolley to bring the Bishop from Fakiragram Railway station to Kachugaon, a distance of thirty kms. From Kachugaon Bishop Ferrando was supposed to cover on foot the rest of twelve kms to Ranipur. However, the catechist instead of waiting for the Bishop came away on his own two days earlier with the boys. He had deputed two boys to bring the Bishop from Guwahati.

The Bishop and the boys got stuck at Fakiragram station, not knowing that they could phone from there to Kachugaon for the trolley. Most probably the Bishop must have fasted the whole day thinking that he could reach Ranipur on time to celebrate holy Mass. In the meantime Fr. Marengo and the others were eagerly waiting for the Bishop. They had no way of knowing what had happened. They waited till 8 p.m. Then Fr. Marengo decided to go and find out at Kachugaon what might have happened. The people were for dissuading him, because the Forest Reserve being also a game sanctuary was infested with tigers and elephants. But seeing that he was determined to go at all cost, three young men accompanied him.

On reaching Kachugaon he learned that the Bishop had been waiting at the Fakiragram Forest Bungalow and a trolley

had been sent for him earlier in the evening. He was expected to reach any moment. When he did arrive it was after midnight. But he did not know that a thirteen- km- trek was still ahead of him!

From somewhere a pony was produced and they started in right earnest, though the Bishop was dead tired. After about two kms it was clear that the poor beast overwhelmed by both the weight and the dignity of the rider, as Bishop Marengo put it, would never make it. So the Bishop was quite happy to proceed on foot with the rest of the group.

As they went along they could see clearly footprints of elephants and tigers. Nevertheless they mustered courage and trudged along in silence subdued by something more than awe. A big dog had joined them from nowhere. Seeing him Bishop Ferrando remarked cheerfully:

"Here is Grigio"[36]

"But evidently", added Fr. Marengo, "the poor thing is not here to defend us. Just look at its meagre shape.

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36. Evidently, Bishop S. Ferrando is referring to the "Grigio" of Don Bosco's life. At the time of Don Bosco (end of 19th century) the path from the city of Turin to Valdocco was often deserted. It was not safe to walk alone at night. Once when Don Bosco was returning to Valdocco from the city at night he was attacked by two men. At that moment from nowhere there appeared a fierce looking big dog of "grey" colour (hence, the name "l Gris" in Piedmontese given to it by Don Bosco or "Grigio" in Italian). The dog helped Don Bosco to free himself from his attackers. The same "Grigio" used to accompany him at other times when Don Bosco was returning home alone. No one knew from where it came. In 1872 when Baroness Azelia Fassati asked Don Bosco what he thought about Grigio, he replied: "to say that it is an "angel" would make one laugh. Still, one cannot say that it is an ordinary dog". For more details on Grigio, see, Teresio Bosco, *Don Bosco*, Leumann, Torino: Editrice Elle Di Ci, 1979, 220-222.

It is keeping very close to us for its own safety".

The party reached Ranipur at 4.00 in the morning! None of them had a wink of sleep. Fr. Marengo did not dare ask the Bishop where, when and what he had eaten! This, of course, was long before the new regulation on Eucharistic fast, though there was a special privilege which allowed missionaries, in circumstances more or less like the one we have described so far, to take something between midnight and Communion. So Fr. Marengo had a pot of cocoa and biscuits brought for the Bishop. The good Bishop Ferrando never uttered a word of complaint for all the mess that happened in the arrangement of his travelling programme. He had only words of sympathy for Fr. Marengo. Both were overjoyed that they were at last among an exultant crowd. Everything else - from the Pontifical Mass in the morning to the Confirmation Service in the afternoon - went off perfectly well, despite the suffocating heat inside an over packed chapel.

Bishop Ferrando, as we know, was Fr. Marengo's Novice Master and Rector. Whenever Fr. Ferrando saw the novices busy and distracted, he used to remind them to work for God alone by repeating often:

"Martha, Martha, *sollicita es et turbaris erga plurima...*" "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things..." (Lk 10:41).

In Ranipur as Fr. Marengo was assisting the Bishop in the confirmation service, among the names he had to call out there was also a "Martha".

The poor Bishop who was sweating profusely repeated quite loudly:

"Martha, Martha *signo te signo crucis...*" ("Martha, Martha I sign you with the sign of the Cross..."). After the

service both the master and the pupil, remembering "the old Martha, Martha" of Our Lady's House, Shillong, recalled the days spent together in the novitiate there.

The highlight of the celebrations at Ranipur was to be the torchlit procession with the Blessed Sacrament, late in the evening. The catechist came to Fr. Marengo for money to buy a tin of kerosene to prepare the torches for the procession. Fr. Marengo went to the bamboo cell where he was put up for the night, opened his handbag and looked in vain for his money purse. It had disappeared. And with it had vanished also an orphan youth who on the way from Guwahati had besought Fr. Sanchez, who had come with them from Guwahati. The money purse with few rupees in it was too great a temptation for him to resist. He quietly got away with it when the Church services were going on.

Nevertheless, the procession started according to programme. Instead, what was not according to programme was a cyclone, which, amid lightning and thunder, burst upon them not long after the procession had left the church.

"The gale," described Fr. Marengo, "tore to shreds the decorations along the road and the canopy. It threatened to blow away also the flower children. The people hardly managed to get back to the church before the real storm broke loose".

In the church the people had an hour of adoration. The melodious singing of the congregation was barely audible in the din of the storm raging outside. The gale soon abated. They were blessed by the Lord with a starry sky and a cool night. The sound sleep that followed was the most welcome reward for all the adventures that Bishop Ferrando, Fr. Marengo and his band of lay helpers had.

Among the people whom he baptized during the convention at Ranipur was a young man of 18 years who

afterwards accompanied Fr. Marengo for part of the tour carrying his luggage. He impressed him as a very nice boy, simple and obliging. He was Jerome Panna, an Oraon, who became the father of Cornelius Panna, a Salesian priest.

The next day Bishop Ferrando left on his long journey back to Shillong while Fr. Marengo continued on his tour.

Dumbajar is a big Boro village, quite close to Ranipur. Most of its inhabitants were Lutheran Christians when Fr. Marengo used to visit that area. On seeing the priest the people would wish him from far. Once a young mother with a child in her arms picked up enough courage to approach him as he was passing by. Fr. Marengo used to be a rather fast walker, but the young woman crossed his path and so he had to stop. She showed him her child. He was an uncommonly beautiful baby boy, but to look at him made him sad, for the poor little child was blind, not blind from birth, but, very probably, from neglected conjunctivitis.

The woman hoped that Fr. Marengo had medicines that would cure her child. As gently as he could he told her the hard truth; but perhaps she knew it already and wanted to ask him something else:

> "People say," she said, "this has happened because of my sins". "I may be a sinner," she continued, "but I am not conscious of any big sin to be punished like this."

Noticing that tears were streaming down her eyes, Fr. Marengo was indeed hard put to find the right words to speak to her. He said very few words. But he showed his concern for the little child by placing his hands on it and praying for the mother and her child. She touched his feet and went her way.

"This is a common thing among these Boro Christians", Fr. Marengo's faithful Guido said to him, after the woman who had brought her child for a cure had gone away.

"In fact", Guido continued,

"when someone in the community is visited by any big misfortune, the elders of the church meet, bring the Bible, open it casually and should they by chance hit upon the episode of the woman taken in adultery they would conclude that this sin is responsible for the misfortune of the person that stood on trial".

"Well, my friend", explained Fr. Marengo,

"if you ask me, I can only tell you that this is a very wrong use of the Bible, besides being unjust and cruel to people".

The last community he visited on that tour was a large Boro community in a new village quite close to the Bhutan Hills belonging to the district of Bugrikhuti. The land in Bugrikhuti was very fertile and the poor people after the gruelling work of cutting the jungle, levelling the ground and preparing the fields, were looking forward to a rewarding crop of paddy. But alas, to their misfortune, a huge herd of elephants which had their habitat in the woody slopes of Bhutan, came crashing down the hills every night to feast on the luscious paddy fields, when the paddy grew, and began to ripen. One can easily understand the enormous havoc that a herd of some fifty to sixty of these colossal animals can cause within a few hours in a rice field. The people were brave enough, pursuing and driving away the elephants with fire brands, even poking them with spears from behind. Most elephants are scared of fire and the shouting of the people and the beating of drums, but the stragglers are dangerous. They easily turn back against you. Then there is the occasional "gunda hati" or rogue elephant that fears nobody.

Only a few days before Fr. Marengo arrived there, an elderly man whom he had received into the church a few

months earlier and who had requested him to give him his own name in Baptism, had been trampled to death by a "rogue elephant". The poor man was watching over his paddy field sitting on a *machan*, (a high platform raised on sturdy poles). An elephant came. Neither shouts nor fire dropped on him scared him away. He became infuriated. He pulled down the machan, and crushed the poor man to death.

Now-a-days, to make the machan more secure, the Bodos dig a broad trench around it, and spend most nights on the machan when the crop nears the time of harvest.

Bogrikhuti was the last Christian community in Assam which Fr. Marengo visited for the next ten years. On the last day of his stay in Bugrikhuti, which was also the last day of his tour, Fr. Marengo got malaria. Generally it was on his return from a tour that he used to become a victim of malaria. But this time since the tour had been longer than usual, malaria had got him while on tour. Luckily he was due to go back to Guwahati that very day.

His sorrowing Boro friends managed to get a horse for him from a Nepali. Since it had no saddle, they folded a blanket, placed it on the horse back and Fr. Marengo rode it to the nearest railway station from where he took a train for Guwahati, even though he was in the throes of a high fever.

Whenever he got malarial fever, he would take his own blood slides, send it to the hospital for examination . He would then be told what type of malaria it was. Accordingly he himself would treat it. Fr. Marengo must have been one of the very first in Assam to experiment the efficacy of the then new anti-malaria drugs like *atabrine*, *plasmoquin*, etc.

**The Saddest News For Salesian India**

Shillong, Good Friday, 10 April 1936. Time 6.30 p.m.

The Good Friday Services were just over, and the people were coming out of the Cathedral Church. The novices and the students of philosophy and theology were reaching Our Lady's House. As they came down the steps, some of the brothers noticed smoke coming out of the ceiling. They ran up to the attic to find out what it was. The whole area was in flame. Immediately everyone was alerted. Since the whole construction was in wood and that too pine wood with a coating of oil for conservation, the entire building became a conflagration before anyone could realize it.

Everyone tried his best to save whatever he could. The people who were just coming out of the Cathedral came running to help. So too the soldiers from the nearby Governor's House. At great risk to their lives they climbed up the roof of the church and poured water to cool the corrugated iron sheets, and to put out the fire below. Everyone without distinction of caste or creed gave a helping hand to pull out whatever could be saved: the confessionals, the way of the cross, some furniture, a few statues, etc. Nothing could be done to salvage the beautiful altar in wood made by the Salvatorians and the precious organ set up by Mgr. Mathias hardly an year ago.

By 10.00 p.m. Our Lady's House, the Cathedral, the offices of the Bishop and of the Parish Priest were reduced to a heap of ashes despite every effort made to save them.

Signs of solidarity started reaching the Fathers and Brothers almost immediately. The soldiers sent 100 blankets, and others, whatever they could. The Fathers and the Brothers spent the night in different homes in the locality.

The heartbreaking news reached Fr. V. Scuderi, the provincial, in Krishnagar, Mgr. Mathias in Madras, the superiors in Turin and the Pope in the Vatican.

Fr. V. Scuderi received the following telegram from Bishop Ferrando:

> "Our Lady's House and the Cathedral *bruciata completamente* [reduced to ashes completely] - Ferrando."

Without delay Fr. Scuderi left Krishnagar for Calcutta to meet the Archbishop. On coming to know the saddest news ever for the Salesians in India, the Archbishop at once offered the holiday home of the Jesuits at Tung called *Woodcot villa* to be occupied by the Salesians as long as they were in need. In addition he also asked the Rector of St. Mary's Theological College, Kurseong, to provide whatever was needed for the Salesians at Woodcot villa.

After making these arrangements, Fr. Scuderi trunk called Bishop Ferrando and requested him to send all the Fathers and Brothers to Woodcot villa on Easter Monday morning, 13 April 1936.

At the departure of the Fathers and Brothers from Shillong, Bishop Ferrando exclaimed:

> "The burning down of the Cathedral and of Our Lady's House has caused me great sorrow. Yet, to see all the Fathers and Brothers leave Shillong causes me more sorrow than the big conflagration of Good Friday. May God's holy will be done!"

The Holy Saturday service the next morning had to be held in the open, in front of the charred remains of the Cathedral. It began, as usual, with the blessing of the fire. Bishop Ferrando who was conducting the service could not help muttering: "And still must I bless you?"

Telegrams of solidarity, assurance of prayers, blessings and help were received in Shillong from the Vatican, from the Superiors in Turin, from the Apostolic Delegate in Bangalore, and from others.

Mgr. Mathias and Fr. Scuderi met the Brothers in Woodcot. Then, from Woodcot they proceeded to Shillong. Both of them along with the Bishop swung into action to organize help for building the study house and the Cathedral.

It is said that the publicity given and the help solicited were such that a Cardinal in Rome meeting a Salesian asked him what it was that was destroyed in Shillong: *The Universal Church*? - such was the publicity given to the incident.

On the day of that disastrous fire Fr. Marengo happened to be with his flock in Doomni area for Easter week. When the evening service was over, he came back to the manager's welcoming bungalow. There the manager passed on to him a copy of *The Statesman* he was reading:

"I am afraid there is bad news for you, Father", he said handing him the newspaper.

It was very sad news, indeed, for Fr. Marengo. It read:

> "Our Lady's House, the Salesian House of formation in Shillong that housed the theology and the philosophy students and the novitiate, the Bishop's House and the parish premises had all been destroyed by fire on Good Friday evening."

The newspaper described the disaster with alarming details. After retiring to his room Fr. Marengo could not help crying.

The next morning, since he did not trust himself to break the sad news to the Christians, he asked the catechist to do so. The reaction was not in the least what he had expected.

Yes, they were sorry. But naturally Fr. Marengo could not expect them to see the loss as he saw it.

To have one's house destroyed by fire is a pretty common event among the people. When one knows that their small, poor huts with a very low straw roof, wattle and daub walls, and often a naked cooking fire or at the most, enclosed in a mud stove, one understands that houses being destroyed by fire is not anything very unusual. Moreover there is very little in the way of clothes and scarcely any furniture in a new house in the days of Fr. Marengo's missionary tours. Each family had a patch of thatch grass and bamboo bushes around the house. With the willing help of their neighbours they could rig up a new hut in a matter of two or three days. They knew, of course, that at the mission centre the buildings were quite different and that they were expensive structures. But even so, they could not fully grasp the enormity of the loss suffered in Shillong.

**An Unexpected "Babylonian Exile"**

On reaching Guwahati from Burgikhuti late in the evening, Fr. Marengo found a telegram awaiting him. It was from Fr. Scuderi, his Provincial. Fr. Scuderi had reached Calcutta a few days earlier on his return from Italy where he had been on a begging tour after the Shillong fire. The telegram said: "Come to Calcutta, I want to meet you".

Fr. Marengo had Baptisms and Confirmations to be entered into the Parish records, and he was feeling weak after the high fever and the long horse ride. However, he thought that updating the parish record could wait till his return from Calcutta. Since the fever had abated, he left for Calcutta by the evening train the next day. He remembered taking with him the proof copy of the Boro Catechism which he had found on his return from the tour. He was correcting it in the train as she was speeding towards Calcutta.

Naturally, Fr. Marengo was trying to guess what would be the reason of the sudden call to Calcutta. He thought that the Provincial might have wanted him to preach the retreat to the Brothers, students of Theology, Philosophy and the Novices. He had been asked to do that the year before, but was prevented by one of his frequent malaria bouts.

Fr. Marengo reached Calcutta early in the morning and made for the COP (Catholic Orphan Press). Fr. Scuderi, the Provincial, was in the refectory with the COP community. He was informed of Fr. Marengo's arrival. Immediately he came out to meet him. His greeting was:

"Oh Marengo, I am glad you have come. You are not going back to Guwahati. This very evening I will take you to Bandel where the new novices who have come with me from Italy are waiting for you, and you will start right away as Master of Novices".

Commenting on his unexpected turn of events, Bishop Marengo wrote:

"Of course that was 45 years ago, when dialogue was not much in vogue!"

**A New Chapter In Fr. Marengo's Life**

It is true that Fr. Marengo's heart was with his flock in the villages of Assam. He preferred to be with them, to lead them closer to Christ. But, being a genuine missionary - humble and obedient - the Lord could call on him for any mission, anywhere. Fr. Marengo took life "in its stride" and proved that he could still be a genuine missionary even in places far removed from Assam. In the words of Fr. Dominic Jala, the years Fr. Marengo had to spend away from his dear

Assam "solidified in him the heart of a religious, a priest and a shepherd".[37]

The day Fr. Marengo arrived in COP Calcutta, Fr. Scuderi accompanied him to Bandel and presented him to the novices. Fr. Marengo was so confused that he admitted later on that he could not remember on which date it all took place.[38]

He had never even dreamt that he was cut out to be a Master of Novices. Fr. Marengo thought that the only reason for his new appointment must have been the provincial's concern for his good health. For in Assam he was very often a victim of malaria and used to get frequent spells of fever. And in his heart he prayed to God that his physical well-being should not in any way come before the spiritual welfare of the novices.

Though Fr. Marengo threw himself heart and soul into the new mission he was given, it was hard for him to get the Boro communities out of his mind. Once when the manager of the Catholic Orphan Press wrote to him asking what kind of border he would like to have for the cover of the Boro Catechism he had given for printing, he replied that the border he liked best was the one between Kamrup and Goalpara districts! It appeared that the provincial did not easily swallow that type of jokes!

Just before the starting of the novitiate year, Fr. Marengo had to go to Woodcot to preach a retreat to the confreres. He

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37. See, *Circular 32*,Guwahati: Salesian Provincial (16 August 1998).

38. With the death of Fr. Efisio Sanna in Sahrampur in June 1936, Fr. J. Foglia, who was Master of Novices till that time, had to go to Sahrampur to take the place of Fr. E. Sanna. Fr. E. Gutierrez took the place of Fr. J. Foglia till Fr. Orestes Marengo was appointed Master of Novices.

felt that Fr. Scuderi, who could see far and plan even the minutest details, had surely meant that having to preach to others about obedience and submission, would help Fr. Marengo to overcome any remnant of reluctance for the new appointment he had given him.

Fr. Marengo began his work as the Master of Novices in Bandel on 24 November 1936. Among his first group of novices were Louis Gobetti, Noas Topno, Fiorenzo Zola, Angelo Bongiorno, Luigi Del Nevo, Silvio Tronconi, J. Klick and Fortunato Giacomin. The Bandel Church chronicles show that on the day of starting the novitiate year the novices were met at the Church gate by Fr. Scuderi, the Provincial. He led them into the Church. A hymn of thanksgiving was sung and with a brief exhortation, he solemnly inaugurated the novitiate year with Fr. Marengo as the Master of Novices.

The first group of novices made their religious profession in Bandel on 8 December 1937. On the same day there were also some perpetual professions among whom was also Bro. Paul Sebastian. Soon after the religious profession Fr. Marengo, the novices and Bro. Paul Sebastian went to take part in the inauguration of the Salesian House at Liluah.

The copy books of one of the novices help us to open a window into Fr. Marengo's heart as a Master of Novices. Here are some of the remarks he wrote:

1) *Make with great fervour the visit to the Blessed Sacrament. That will help you to remain united with God during the day.*

2) *A stronger interior life will be a remedy for you.*

3) To the one who was writing letters home when he was feeling dejected, Fr. Marengo's advice was:

*You should not write home when you are in that frame of mind.*

4) When someone indulged in commenting on the remarks his friend had received, Fr. Marengo advised:

*Such giving vent to your feelings will be beneficial neither to you nor to your companions.*

5) When one of the novices was unhappy for the correction he received, Fr. Marengo remarked:

*As you see, a small thing is enough to upset anyone who is not humble. Only he who is humble can enjoy true peace.*

6) His advice to the one who was not enjoying the practices of piety was:

*Start off the day with enthusiasm from the moment you get up.*

7) To another who was too much attached to his own ideas:

*Exercise yourself in acts of humility.*

8) On another occasion to the one who received some unpleasant news, Fr. Marengo wrote:

*Pray and put everything in the hands of God.*

9) When someone was elated in his own act of humility, Fr. Marengo's advice was:

*Repeat to the devil: "I have not started this work for you, nor will I stop it for you".*

10) The advice to the one who received an unjust correction:

*What a wonderful occasion to practise mortification and humility.*

11) Encouraging one who needed to be more pleasant:

*To make an effort to become more pleasing to others is indeed praiseworthy.*

12) Regarding devotion to Mary, the Mother of Jesus:

*Ensure that you remain attentive to this valid help. It is not enough to pray to her, but do something for her.*

Fr. Marengo's talks centred around the essentials of Salesian religious life. He also instilled in the novices both in Bandel and in Sonada a strong missionary spirit as well as several practical aspects to remain happy as religious.

The students of theology and philosophy after having enjoyed about ten months of generous hospitality of the Jesuits at Woodcot and the cool of the pre-Himalayan hills came to the steaming heat of Bandel in their heavy black cassocks. To their relief white cassocks were soon provided.

In 1938 when the theology students went back to Shillong, the philosophy students and the novices left Bandel for Gorabari, a hamlet about one and a half km before reaching Sonada in Darjeeling District. There in the old ram-shackle premises of a brewery both the communities found a new home.

"Gorabari" means "abode or settlement of the white people", because for many years a battalion of white soldiers had their barracks there. After the goras (white soldiers) moved from there, the brewery had no scope and so it closed down. The place was for sale and was waiting for prospective buyers. Fr. Scuderi came to know about it. By a stroke of good luck and business genius he secured it by a last moment instant decision. The structures that were suitable for a brewery were far from being ideal for accommodating students. In the words of Fr. O. Paviotti:

> "The 'brewery' was then in total disrepair, with nettles growing profusely everywhere". [39]

39. *Golden Jubilee Souvenir of Salesian College Sonada, 1988*, n.p.

That was in 1936 when Fr. O. Paviotti and his companions had a glimpse of the brewery, the future Salesian College, on their way to Woodcot after the great Shillong fire. Even nearly two years later when they actually came to stay in Gorabari, near Sonada, "none of the buildings was habitable".[40]

In fact, the Salesian community was first settled in St. Theresa's villa, in Sonada.

> "The Brothers and the staff walked down four times daily from Sonada to the Brewery to clear the debris, remove the wreckage, dispose of heaps of bottles, cauldrons, etc. and cut down the ubiquitous nettles".[41]

Soon the old Brewery was transformed into dormitories, class rooms, chapel, etc. to meet the requirements of a studentate.

> In Gorabari the staff consisted of Fr. A. Pianazzi, Rector, Fr. O. Marengo, Master of Novices, Fr. L. Ayuso, as confessor, Bro. V. Mauri, prefect. There were also the three deacons: Buccieri, Bordin and Paviotti.[42]

It was hard going the first few years, but the Brothers were young, ready and willing to put up with all sorts of discomfort and hardship. The climate was healthy, even though the days were seldom bright and sunny.

The name "Sonada" (meaning bear's cave in Lepcha language), has superseded that of Gorabari. Situated at a height of over 6,000 ft. above sea-level, Sonada is misty most of the days of the year. It rains practically everyday

40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.

during the rainy season. Hence it is an unwritten practice that the first sunny day is set aside for "walk". For, nothing can substitute a few hours of walk for exercise and to breathe the fresh and pure air of the hills. The first sunny day arrives invariably only after a long series of drab days. "The best we can say about Sonada", remarked Bishop Marengo in later years, "is that it surely is an ideal place for study with very little to distract you".

The people are Nepalis, and language they speak is Nepali. They belong to a number of different Mongolian tribes like the Rai, Tamang, Limboos, Lepchas with a sprinkling of Bhutanese and Tibetans in the bigger centres. They are mild and friendly. It is pleasant to deal with them. Most of them are Buddhists with the exception of the Nepalis who are very orthodox Hindus, presumably because their kings were, and are today, from some Rajput dynasty.

The *Lamas* (the ones who are above or superior) with their prayer wheels and tambourines are a common enough sight. They come up to the doorstep and start singing some monotonous religious song swinging their tambourines and turning round their prayer wheel as they ask for alms. They go away happily after bestowing a blessing on you.

Once an old Tibetan beggar, a woman, came and prayed for Fr. Marengo. The prayer wheel is a hollow copper or bronze cylinder on which is engraved a prayer. The prayer is supposed to have been said at every turn of the cylinder. After giving a dole to the beggar Fr. Marengo said: "Granny, let me also pray a little".

She readily obliged giving a smile, but immediately after Fr. Marengo had started turning the wheel, she in utter consternation besought him to stop. He was wondering, why! In the eyes of the granny Fr. Marengo was committing an

act of profanation. Instead of turning the prayer-wheel from left to right, Fr. Marengo was turning the cylinder from right to left, as it was more natural for him.

In every Buddhist village one may see a forest of prayer flags - long strips of white cloth with prayers printed on it, attached to a high pole. The prayers on the flag are recited by the wind swaying the flags. Likewise one may see prayer drums along streams flowing down from some altitude: the water causes the drum to revolve and thus "pray".

Once Fr. Marengo was in the small town of Sonada on a business. A Lama came to him. He must have been an important man, dressed up with all the insignia of his rank. As he saw him he wished him. He came close to Fr. Marengo and produced a long scroll:

> "Sir," he began, "I am collecting funds to build a lamasery in my village, would you not like to contribute?" Fr. Marengo smiled back and pointing to the church construction then on its way at the Gorabari Salesian College, said:
>
> "See there, I am building that house for God", then stretching his hand to him he said:
>
> "Will you not like to contribute?"
>
> He smiled quite pleased then added:
>
> "But surely you will give me something to eat, I have not yet eaten today. A plate of rice would be more than enough!"
>
> "Of course, I shall be most happy", reassured Fr. Marengo, "if you do not mind walking down with me". They both started walking down together - a Catholic priest and a lama in their respective garbs.

On the hillside of the road there were some large boulders with Tibetan inscriptions in very gaudy yellow, green and red colours.

"Sir, do you know, it is I who have written those prayers?"

Fr. Marengo was duly impressed and replied:

"Do you know I can read what you have written?" The lama was astonished. With a look of bewilderment and unbelief he exclaimed:

"No! that can't be! Let me hear you reading them!"

In his free time Fr. Marengo had been dabbling with Tibetan. Besides, those were the words most commonly written and uttered in their prayers. He read it without a trace of hesitation

"Om Mane Padme Om" (pronounced "Om Mene Peme Om").

The good man could not believe his ears or think that a "profane foreigner" could pronounce the most mystical words of his religion! He embraced Fr. Marengo there and then in the middle of the road and with closed eyes and rapt countenance repeated several times:

"O Sir, what piety, what merit!"

Fr. Marengo was moved at seeing the simple faith of that lama.

Only 14 kms separate Sonada from Darjeeling, a famous health resort. The hillside below Sonada and Darjeeling are cultivated with tea, the famous Darjeeling tea. About 12 kms North of Sonada is Tiger Hill- the cherished spot of tourists to catch the first glimpse of the rising sun as it sprays its

colours over Kanchenjunga. The Tibetan name for it is "Kang chen dzong nga" which means the "Five abodes of the great snow" alluding to the five peaks of that more than 25,000 ft. high mountains.

The view from Tiger Hill is one of the most spectacular mountain views of the world. One can see this awe inspiring mass from head to foot, almost like a mass detached from the Himalayan range. Before you see the sun rise in the East you see the five peaks of the majestic mountain light up one after another in pink, rose and then dazzling white. Fr. Marengo and his community used to go several times a year to enjoy this extraordinary view. They were not always lucky, the sky being so unpredictable.

The Nepali population of Sonada and around consisted of very orthodox Hindus. However they had a great respect for the Fathers and Brothers and their religious celebrations. They willingly took part in the yearly procession with the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary under the title of "Help of Christians". Once some of them after admiring the picture of Mary Help of Christians were struck by the bull by the side of the Apostle St. Mathew and asked whether the Christians too were worshiping the cow.

During the Second World War the "enemy subjects" in the community, i.e. the Italians and the Germans were restricted within a radius of one mile. One day there came to Salesian College, Sonada, the highest Police Authority of Darjeeling district. When he saw that the inmates of the College belonging to so many different nationalities, he was surprised and pleasantly remarked that he had visited a veritable "League of Nations". Fr. Marengo countered his pleasantry with:

> "No, Sir, there is a world of difference between your League of Nations and ours. Here we all agree!

Fr. Marengo thought that his banter was resented, but then the officer laughed loud and quipped:

> "I am sure you must be right, Father, rejoined the Police Officer, "but these are difficult times, and I may have to carry out unpleasant duties".
>
> "I understand, Sir, added Fr. Marengo, and understanding helps make painful duties bearable".

Soon the non-enemy subjects, as non-Italians and non-Germans were defined, had to be rushed to take the place of the Italian confreres who had been removed from their field of work and were interned in Shillong.

Fr. Marengo was awaiting from the Rector of Don Bosco Guwahati a word to the effect that the four Brothers Marengo had sent to him in Guwahati had reached and as to how they were faring. That reply reached Fr. Marengo after four months. The reason was simple. The short reply which fell into the hands of the police contained so many equivocal expressions that they smelled a rat. He held back the letter for further verification. Fortunately, Fr. Attilio Colussi, the Rector, was well known to the authorities and a great friend of the Indian Superintendent of Police. So after examining it for nearly four months, it was despatched to its destination, Sonada, where it arrived with record delay of four full months.

This is what Fr. Attilio had written giving the news about the four boys Fr. Marengo had sent him:

> "My dear Fr. Marengo, your four champions landed here safe and sound, three days ago, and they are now making their first contact with the boys. The Shillong bound squadron are still here waiting for marching orders."

Marching orders came sometime later for all the Italian Fathers and Brothers too who had been left behind in Sonada

under restrictive measures. Since Fr. Marengo had already been more than 16 years in India (or as a British Police Officer might like to put it, "he had not seen the glories of Mussolini!"), he was not considered "dangerous". And restricting his movements within a one mile radius was considered enough security for him.

Hence, Fr. Marengo was left behind to look after the aspirants who had come up to Sonada from Bandel the year before, that is in 1941, with the help of Bro. Deneault, Bros. Patrick Sheehy, Patrick Burns and Daniel O' Sullivan. Bro. Deneault was a French Canadian who had joined the Salesians from the Holy Cross Brothers. He was Fr. Marengo's last novice.

Fr. A. Pianazzi, who knew how much Fr. Marengo was longing to get back to his dear Assam Missions, aptly remarked that God had to send a war to end Fr. Marengo's career as Master of Novices! With the war the novices stopped coming from Italy. And so the novitiate at Sonada had to be closed. The novices who came from the aspirantates in India were sent to Tirupattur (in the Salesian Province of Madras) to do their novitiate.

In 1942 the Fathers at Sonada began to receive from Italian war prisoners, particularly from the camp at Yol, Punjab, requests for books on different scholastic subjects, in Italian. Most of those Italian young officers captured in the Middle East and brought to India were University students who had interrupted their studies when they were recruited. In Yol Camp a "study centre" was opened in the hope that the programme covered in the camp would be recognized in Italy when they returned.

Through their chaplains these young men had come to know about the Salesian College at Sonada and turned to the Italian fathers there for help to continue their studies. So at

the cost of practically emptying the library of Italian books the Fathers managed to help hundreds of young men thus rendering their life, within the barbed wire, more bearable.

In early 1946, the last year of Fr. Marengo's stay in Sonada, he was one of the three Salesians who visited the war prisoners' camp at Yol. The invitation to visit had come from the old Salesian boys who were many in that camp and the permit to visit the camp had come from the camp commandant through the Apostolic Internuncio in India.

Yol, in North West Punjab, is only a short distance away from Kashmir. Fr. Pianazzi, Fr. Attilio Colussi and Fr. Marengo reached there after three days' and three nights' journey by train.

When they came to Amritsar early one morning a train full of soldiers had just steamed into the station. A very young Gurkha soldier on seeing the three Fathers, came to them and asked:

"Any Italian among you?"

"The three of us are Italians".

That seemed to have opened a valve somewhere in him and he started speaking to them in Italian:

"I am coming from Rome, I have seen the Pope, I also want to become a Catholic".

He then sang for them:

*Mamma son tanto felice ...* !

At Amritsar Fr. Marengo, Fr. Pianazzi and Fr. Colussi boarded the train for Patankot. From there on a narrow gauge train they proceeded to Nagrota and from Nagrota by car to Yol. It was 30 January 1947, the eve of St. John Bosco's feast when they reached Yol.

In the camp there were 8,000 officers from the rank of colonel down, and 3,000 other ranks. In the evening of 31 January, Fr. Marengo was deputed to celebrate the Mass of Don Bosco and preach before a large audience. Later he attended a grand concert in honour of St. John Bosco staged by a large and masterly choir which earlier had been accompanied by a British Officer to offer concerts in different cities of India. Advocate Nicola Ciancio, an old boy from the Salesian College of Castellamare di Stabbia and who was later to become the National President of the Salesian Past Pupils, preached an impressive panegyric on St. John Bosco.

They spent five weeks in Yol visiting the various camps, giving lectures on different subjects. The large halls were always packed. After 23 years in India at that time and with so many Indian languages in his "heart", Fr. Marengo found it not so easy to speak fluent Italian before an audience which consisted of university students and not a few professors, and doctors in different branches of learning. And they were easily satisfied, and very appreciative of whatever the Fathers did for them.

Many of those youth, nay most of them, had already spent five years in the camp and felt the strain of wasting away uselessly their best years, for they were young men between the age group of twenty to thirty.

Yol was a healthy place, but absolutely bare and desolate, yet in front of the barracks one could see rich vegetable plots where all kinds of vegetables grown in Italy were thriving. Those enterprising and hard working young men had dug out the stones and prepared deep and broad trenches which they had filled up with rich soil brought from miles away in their knapsacks.

There were several young artists among the prisoners and the many chapels in the camp were extremely beautiful

and artistically decorated. Fr. Gallo of the White Fathers, Fr. Clemente, a Franciscan and a few other chaplains were in charge of the spiritual care of the war prisoners.

When the Salesian Fathers left Yol after five weeks of stay in that exiled little corner, "Italy", they were given a moving send off by an exceptionally large crowd. The farewell function was presided over by Col. Maria De Lovera (if Fr. Marengo's memory was correct here) of Turin. He addressed the Fathers with heartfelt words of praise of Don Bosco and his Salesians. Fr. Pianazzi replied with a stirring speech and many of those who came to wish them had tears in their eyes.

Fr. Marengo came back to Sonada from Yol camp and prepared to go back to the Assam Mission. At the end of 1947 Fr. Marengo left Sonada to return to Assam after ten years of absence. If he felt having to leave the House of Formation of Sonada where he had spent the best part of 9 years as Master of Novices and later on as Rector, his regret was greatly assuaged by the joy of going back to Assam again.

After Fr. Scuderi was interned, Fr. M. Uguet had succeeded him as Provincial. Fr. Marengo had always a high regard for Fr. Scuderi. He felt it his bounden duty to put on record his gratitude towards him, for his unfailing help and fatherly care of the confreres in Sonada while Fr. Marengo was in-charge there. As for Fr. Uguet, Fr. Marengo considered him more as a friend than a "superior" during the difficult times of the War. Thanks to their kindness and generosity, Fr. Marengo and his community in Sonada were looked after well in those hard days.

Recalling his years in Sonada Fr. Marengo is greatly indebted also to Frs. Dal Zovo, Lopez and Ayuso who from the start of the formation house in Sonada were prefect of studies, bursar and confessor respectively. Their utter

dedication lightened his burden and made his work easy and pleasant.

Fr. Marengo has not seen a confrere more tossed about by obedience and circumstances and still ever ready to start again, anywhere in any work, with the utmost devotion and selflessness as Fr. Thomas Lopez. Fr. Lopez was an uncommonly gifted man with both acumen and practicality. His great spirit of poverty and his unassuming perfect religious observance were easier admired than imitated, observed Fr. Marengo.

Shortly after the outbreak of the war certain commodities were hard to get and beyond the slender financial possibilities of the community at Sonada. One day when Fr. Marengo told Fr. Lopez that it might become necessary to ask the Brothers to do without toothpaste - the price of which they could no longer afford - and use instead either soap or charcoal or hibiscus twigs, Fr. Lopez smiled his approval calling it a step in the right direction and added:

"Leave that to me".

To the Brothers gathered in the study hall the same day Fr. Marengo mentioned that circumstances were such that it was necessary for him to ask the Brothers the sacrifice of a few things not strictly necessary. And after adding that Fr. economer (Fr. Thomas Lopez) would explain everything to them, he sat down.

Fr. Lopez then got up and in ten minutes with easy eloquence and strict logic convinced everybody that any tooth paste, apart from its more palatable taste, was actually harmful to teeth and digestion. From that day very willingly, all gave up the use of tooth paste and not a few ceased to shave, to spare in blades, and grew beard!

**Back to His Beloved Flock in Assam**

The eleven years Fr. Marengo spent in Bandel and Sonada instilling missionary spirit in the hearts of future priests and religious gave him a good respite from his earlier missionary work. Now returning to Assam, he was ready to launch into the deep for a bigger catch.

As mentioned earlier with the closure of the novitiate in Sonada, Fr. Marengo got the chance to go back to Assam, his previous mission field. Journeying to Assam from Sonada with him were some of the aspirants who were going to enter their novitiate in Shillong. After preaching a spiritual retreat in Mawlai (Shillong) where there were the Salesian theologate and the novitiate, Fr. Marengo stayed on for a few days more there. He was eager to know where would be his new mission field.

While Fr. Marengo was in Mawlai biding his time, Bishop Ferrando and Fr. Uguet decided that he should go to Tezpur and from there look after the mission work in Nowgong district. At that time Fr. Dal Broi was in charge of the vast and promising Tezpur mission assisted by Fr. Battaglia and Fr. Tronconi.

Fr. Marengo was happy to go to Tezpur. In Tezpur he was out on tour for a minimum of 20 days a month looking after his flock in the Nowgong area. When he was not on tour, he gave a helping hand in the parish. However, recalling those difficult days of touring the vast Nowgong district from Tezpur, he remarked that for him Tezpur was on the wrong side of the Brahmaputra, for he had to cross the mighty river to and fro every time he was on a missionary tour.

The Catholic community of the Nowgong mission district consisted mostly of Adivasis. Less than half of them were in villages, and the rest in tea gardens. Each

community was not very big. So he could manage to visit his Christians regularly every two months.

> Fr. Morra who after working for a time in Tezpur was put in charge of the Barpeta Road High School and Farm worked there for over 30 years. Once during his visit home Fr. Morra was asked about the church attendance of his community. Without the least exaggeration, he replied: "A hundred percent attendance",
>
> but, to the further query:
>
> "What is the secret of such an amazing attendance?", he coolly replied:
>
> "Mass once in four months!" Fr. Marengo too was glad to say, without the least exaggeration, that his Nowgong community too was a hundred percent present at their monthly Mass.

**Mission among the Karbis**

When he was assigned to the Nowgong mission, Bishop Ferrando had expressed to Fr. Marengo his great desire that Fr. Marengo should do something also for the Karbis.[43]

In 1948 a very humble beginning was made among the Karbis by Fr. Marengo. Most of the Karbis today have been included in the new circumscription of Karbi Anglong District of Assam, with the exception of some 15,000 of them who live in the North Bank of the Brahmaputra.

The Karbis did not come over to the Faith as easily as the other tribes of the same stock. The American Baptists too,

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43. Now-a-days the Karbis(formerly Mikirs) have their own administration in the district called "Karbi Anglong". At the time of Fr. Marengo's touring, the Karbi Anglong area was part of Nowgong District.

who had been working among them many years before the Catholics, have not made much headway. Fr. Marengo felt the need of being grateful to the American Baptist missionaries for what they have done especially for translating the Gospels and other books of the New Testament into Karbi.

The Karbi language is sweet, rich in beautiful idioms and similies. The Karbis, Fr. Marengo used to remark, are on the whole cleverer than many other tribals. At the same time they are among the poorest, if not the poorest. Reflecting on the situation of those early days, Fr. Marengo felt, that their economic condition was disastrous. In each village there were just three or four somewhat well-to-do individuals. The rest of the population had to eke out a miserable existence cultivating the land of the rich.

> "Why don't you strive to improve your condition and get out of this kind of slavery?", once he asked a group of Catholics.
>
> "Can a sapling develop and grow at the foot of a big tree?" - was the reply.

Neither can they easily start elsewhere and become independent, because to subsist they need the little the landowners give them. Unhappily a considerable number of them were opium addicts and this enslaved them far worse than the unscrupulous land owners.

Once someone became addicted to drugs, he would sell everything : pots and pans and fields and implements to appease their craving for more drugs. There were some who even sold themselves and pawned their sons and daughters to the merchant who provided them with the drug. This was the plight that prevailed among these "otherwise good and nice people" when Fr. Marengo was working among them. Since then several mission centres have been opened among

the Karbis. They cater to them and other tribals. At present there is a movement towards the Church, thanks to the enlightened zeal and hard work of missionaries like Fr. Balavoine and Fr. John Mariae and others after the example of Fr. Marengo.

**Mission among the Garos**

About the same time that Fr. Marengo started work among the Karbis, there stared in some forest areas of the Nowgong District, an influx of Garo immigrants from Sylhet. These had not been persecuted or driven away by the Muslim majority. But life for them was hard in Sylhet and they came in search of better prospects in the Nowgong plains at the foot of the Cachar Hills.

News reached Fr. Marengo that many Garo families had settled in that particular area and were almost starved to death. He took with him what little money he could spare and went to visit those displaced Garo families at a place called Watriguri, some 12 kms away from the Jamunamukh railway station. Some of the families had already managed to build a few huts while others were living in shelters set up hastily with tree fronds and branches. Many of the people were down with malaria. At the time Fr. Marengo did not know Garo, but with scraps of Garo and broken Bengali he managed to communicate with them.

Shortly after his arrival there he was called to a pagan house where an elderly woman, was lying in a very advanced stage of tuberculosis. They begged him to give her some medicine. Fr. Marengo gave them a little help he had brought. He had no medicine and any medicine would have been of no avail. Then he spoke quitely to the sick woman:

> "Granny, he said, I am afraid there is nothing I can do for your body, but I can do much for your soul, so

that you can go happily to our Father in heaven, if He calls you".

She had already heard about Our Lord and had been living among Christians. When Fr. Marengo asked her if she was willing to become a Christian, she said she was quite willing. But she added, that it would be better to have some understanding also between her husband and her sons. Immediately those who were present there said:

"If she is willing, why should we object?"

After a short preparation Fr. Marengo baptized and anointed her. He thanked God for having so mercifully brought that soul to Jesus' offer of salvation.

Very early the next morning someone came hurriedly to call Fr. Marengo. He had come from the other end of the settlement where Fr. Marengo had spent the night. There a poor woman had been mauled by a tiger. Scared by the shouting of the people the tiger had left her after mauling her cruelly. Her throat had been slashed open by the claws of the tiger. Fr. Marengo could not judge how serious her case was. He gave the husband a few tablets for her and prayed for her recovery.

He would have wished to be on the safe side, and wanted to baptize her. But something which had made his words convincing the evening before in the case of that old woman whom we have mentioned above, was not working and his words, he felt, had no convincing efficacy. Fr. Marengo said to himself that God's grace alone works in the soul. Both that poor woman and her husband, because of some superstitious fear, could not be persuaded to accept Christ.

The people who had settled at that spot were mostly non-Christians. They had only very recently arrived there and had

no time as yet to construct for themselves a proper house, but were spending the night in rudimentary structures. Reflecting on this particular incident Fr. Marengo remarked:

> "Many must be the instances in the life of a missionary when he is made to realize that the least has been reaped where he may have worked the hardest; whereas an abundant harvest may be waiting for him where he has not toiled at all".[44]

**The Door to Manipur**

It is always wonderful to unfold history, to enjoy how God works his marvels and carries out his designs through little incidents which in themselves are too small to catch attention. Perhaps, there is nothing "small" in God's plan. Everything is big, provided we know how to put it in proper perspective in relation to the whole.

The impressive growth of the Church in Manipur, the "land of gems" is an example of it.

It all began with the late Mr. K. Haorei of Ukhrul going to Dibrugarh to take a compounder's degree in 1939-41. During his stay there he came in contact with the Catholic Father of Don Bosco School. He also found that there was the possibility of getting admission for his nephew Phanit-phang Hongrei in Don Bosco boarding.

Hongrei came to Dibrugarh along with his uncle in January 1940 and got admitted in Don Bosco boarding school. In the boarding Hongrei was fortunate to come across great missionaries like Fr. A. Cerato, the parish priest, Fr. H. Boscardin and Fr. Daniel who were assistant parish priests. Later on when Fr. Cerato and the others were transferred, they were replaced by Fr. E. Bars (parish priest) and Fr. L. Kerketta

44. SHTCD-MM, I, 45.

(assistant). Little by little Hongrei found meaning in the message of Jesus as taught by the Catholic Fathers. One day he expressed his desire to be a Catholic. At first Fr. Bars was not eager to baptize him since there were no Catholics yet in his village of Ukhrul. But at Hongrei's insistence he was baptized by Fr. Bars on 15 August 1942 and took the name George, thus becoming the first Tangkhul Naga Catholic.

When George Hongrei was at home for holidays he received a letter from Fr. Bars requesting him to come to Guwahati rather than to Dibrugarh to continue his studies. George came along with some of his companions - C. Peter Chinaoching, C. Paul Yuishi and H. James. Fr. A. Colussi, the parish priest, and Fr. A. Cerato welcomed them and made them feel at home in Don Bosco, Guwahati. All of them except H. James were admitted in the Assamese School while H. James was sent to Barpeta. In 1943 C. Peter Chinaoching received baptism, whereas H. James received it an year later.

George Hongrei and his friends stayed in Guwahati from 1943 to 1945 and came to Shillong in 1946 to study at St. Anthony's School. In the same year, A.S. Shomi too came to Shillong for his studies.

A.S. Shomi was the son of the late Mr. A.S. Lungshi, a pastor of Hundung Baptist Church. From his early years Shomi seemed marked out for something very significant in life. He loved his companions. He was gentle and kind-hearted. He liked to sing. Shomi did his studies upto class VIII in Jorhat and in 1946 he came to St. Anthony's High School, Shillong, where his friend George Hongrei had secured a seat for him. In 1950 Shomi was received into the Church and took the name Dominic.

Dominic Shomi's initiative to invite Fr. H. Marocchino to Hundung in February 1952, the help he rendered to

Fr. A. Ravalico and to Bishop O. Marengo in their tours in Tangkhul area in the following years, the social work Shomi organized for the benefit of his people and the missionary enthusiasm he evinced all through, and the efforts he put in to qualify himself with useful degrees are things for which the Tangkhul Catholic community is indeed proud of. His death in the hands of his assassins was the death of a martyr for the cause of faith and the welfare of his people.

In a meeting convened on 1 September 1966 in his village he expressed his feelings of an impending tragedy:

"My loving people," he said,

"never grieve over my death. Let the outflow of my blood bring fruitful showers of blessings upon the entire village. Never bear in mind feelings of revenge against those who inflict treacherous acts against me."[45]

Hardly five days passed before the most unexpected happened. On 6 September 1966 he was returning from a meeting held in the parish house of Hundung. As he reached the Government L.P. School the assassin's bullet put a sudden end to a promising life. The entire Catholic community of Manipur, and especially the Tangkhul Catholic Church were plunged into inconsolable grief. Fr. Mathew Planthottam who reached the spot within minutes administered the final absolution. Shomi was rushed to the hospital. But on the way he breathed his last.

Bishop Marengo writing in 1971 has the following to say about Shomi, his dearest friend:

"I cannot end this brief relationship without paying homage to the memory of the young man who first

45. *Silver Jubilee Souvenir* of the arrival of the Catholic Missionaries in Manipur: Hundung 1952-1977, 36.

> brought the Faith to Hundung and worked so hard for its spread. I feel I have a big debt of gratitude towards Dominic Shomi for the great help he gave me during the two years I personally looked after the first Tangkhul Communities, for lack of priests.
>
> I am especially indebted to him for the valuable help he gave me in forming our first Catechists and in compiling the first Prayer and Hymn Book in the Tangkhul language.
>
> He was well loved by everybody because of his kind ways, his readiness to help endeared him to all.
>
> His sudden and tragic death was a great sorrow for all the Tangkhul Catholics and a great loss for the Church.
>
> I feel sure that in Heaven he rejoices seeing the mighty tree into which the seed that he planted has developed, and from up there he will pray for the further headway of our Holy Religion among his dear people and for us to remain steadfast in the Faith of which he has been a shining example to us".[46]

The cause for which Dominic Shomi and others laboured in Tangkhul area has its roots in the enterprise of a few Tangkhul students of Don Bosco, Guwahati, who took the initiatives to obtain permit for the Salesian Fathers of Don Bosco Guwahati to visit Manipur. The news that they succeeded to get the permission from the Maharaja of Manipur was brought to Guwahati in October 1948 by a certain Mr. K. Haorei. Immediately Fr. Uguet, the provincial, sent for Fr. O. Marengo from Tezpur and asked him to accompany Fr. A. Colussi to visit Manipur.

The two Fathers along with K. Haorei and G. Hongrei left Guwahati by a jeep on the 1 November 1948, and reached

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46. Letter of Bishop O. Marengo to the Parish Priest of Hundung dated 5-2-71. See, SHTCD-MF, 46.

Imphal, the capital of Manipur, two days later. On Thursday, 4 November, they were granted an audience by His Majesty, the King of Manipur. It happened to be a very propitious day, because a long awaited heir had been born to him the day before.

The Maharaja received them very kindly and when they told him about the purpose of their visit he said that he had no objection to their carrying on missionary activities in the hills of Manipur. That was exactly what the Fathers wanted and had hoped for.

The next day they availed themselves of the permit to visit Ukhrul, the native village of George Hongrei and his friend. The 70 kms road was a nightmare. Only a driver with plenty of courage and much imagination could take a vehicle up and down that rutty winding track with yawning chasm now on one side, now on the other. The road had been kept up during the war, but little was done to repair it after each rainy season. Vehicles seldom plied between Imphal and Ukhrul and only jeeps specially manufactured with a high clearance could risk it. Occasionally they had to stop and dig so that the jeep could proceed.

The Japanese had held this area and the whole of Manipur for two years. Later on when Fr. Marengo was touring the Tangkhul area he could not believe his eyes when he came across relics of Japanese trucks in places, which to all appearances, were inaccessible.

Once Fr. Marengo asked some people how they fared under the Japanese. They candidly admitted that the Japanese were very strict and particularly hard when someone cheated them. However, they were just and well behaved, never was there a report of molestation of any one. They even taught them the use of certain edible shrubs and plants.

Just before reaching Ukhrul, they saw a neat little hut a few yards off the road and George Hongrei volunteered to tell Fr. A. Colussi and Fr. O. Marengo that an English Botanist and his wife were at the moment living there. They got down from the jeep to meet them. They learned that the botanist was the renowned Mr. Kingdomworth. He was doing some research assisted by his wife on behalf of the Indian Government.

Mr. Kingdomworth was rather elderly and sedate. The lady was quite young and one could not help thinking how she had fallen in love with and married "the Botanist". They were classifying in the poor light of a hurricane lamp the specimens they had collected. They invited them to stay on for supper. But they had to decline the invitation as some friends were awaiting to welcome the first Catholic Fathers ever to reach Ukhrul.

Mrs. Kingdomworth in her book *My Hill So Strong* mentions the two Catholic Fathers who visited their hut near Ukhrul in November 1948. The Shiroi Lily ("Shiroi" the highest hill of the Tangkhul area) is a discovery of the Kingdomworths.

The two missionaries spent the night in Ukhrul in the house of Mr. K. Haorei and on the following morning, Saturday 6 November 1948, they offered Holy Mass in the same house. It was the first Mass in Tangkhul area. Before taking leave of the people Fr. A. Colussi and Fr. O. Marengo assured them of their prayers and promised that the Lord in his good time would plant the Catholic faith among them and make it grow.[47]

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47. Letter of Mrs. Solomi Phachang, youngest sister of A.S. Dominic Shomi to J. Puthenpurakal dated 25 March, 1996. In the author's interview with her on 7 May 1996, she affirmed that she has never seen anyone so kind as Bishop Marengo. See, SHTCD-MF,46.

They also visited Phungrei and other places near Ukhrul.

With ineffable joy they returned to Guwahati carrying in their hearts many dreams for the Church in Manipur. They were sure that whatever they had seen and heard would gladden the heart of both the Bishop and the Provincial.

Securing the Maharaja's good will to work in the hills of Manipur was only a preliminary step. The big question was then, as it has always been for the North East, and will ever be: "Where to get the personnel?" Fr. Marengo was all alone for the whole of Nowgong district and Fr. Colussi was both Rector of Don Bosco school and parish priest of the vast Guwahati mission and parish.

It was four years later that the magnificent dreams for Manipur began to materialize.

**Oraons in Dokmoka**

Assumption Day, August 15, 1950, found Fr. Marengo celebrating Our Lady's Feast in Dokmoka some 160 kms from Tezpur where there was a large community of Catholic Oraons. Earlier they had been working for a few years in the Rangamati Tea Garden where too there was a rather sizeable large Catholic labour force. Originally they were from Jaspur, a small state in Chotanagpur.

Reliable, generous and very affectionate, these communities of recent conversion were very attached to the Church and to the priests. The people were poor and somewhat primitive. Drinking was an inveterate habit with them, not in the sense that they were seldom sober, but in the sense that they would just not give up drinking, and drinking to excess occasionally.

Once during a Saturday evening instruction Fr. Marengo made it very clear, at least so he thought, that it was of no use accusing oneself of drunkenness, if he did not mean or try to stop getting drunk, because that would be lack of true sorrow without which sins cannot be forgiven.

During the next visit Fr. Marengo noticed that an old man, who was often getting drunk never went for Confession, and yet was regularly receiving Communion. So he told the catechist about him. The catechist had also noticed it and dutifully asked the man why he had given up going for Confession.

> "Well, he explained, I remember Father telling us that one ought not to go to Confession, if one does not mean to correct oneself!"

**The Rangamati Community**

The Rangamati tea estate is at the foothills close to Bhutan. Since many years the Catholic community of that area had been working without ever renewing their three-year agreement with the tea garden. Hence, if they wanted, they were free to leave the garden and return to their native land in Chotanagpur. But they preferred to settle down in the Rangamati area where there was plenty of good land available, not far from the garden.

So different groups of people at different times absented themselves from the garden taking casual leave in order to look for suitable plots of land where they could settle down together. Most of them were interrelated.

Since the whole area was at the foot hills and sparsely populated by the Karbis, all what they had to do was to give a remuneration to the Karbi headman of the area who would allot all the land they needed. Therefore one night about 50

to 60 families left the garden stealthily, and went to settle down across the hills where they proceeded to clear the forest to turn that virgin soil into fertile paddy fields.

The following morning when the line *chowkidar* (watchman) reported the matter to the manager, did he discover that a very large number of his best workers had escaped. To say that he was annoyed and angry is to put it very mildly. He was a good friend of the Fathers and had always been good and fair to his labourers. Nevertheless, for a time his relation with the Fathers became very strained.

Apart from the impropriety of those Catholics who left on the sly without informing the manager and without obtaining his good will, Fr. Marengo knew that they had done him no real injustice. Legally speaking, they could have left long before, the manager having no right to prevent them.

In the course of time this newly formed Rangamati community became the special object of Fr. Marengo's pastoral care.

**The Community at Lumding**

While he was in Tezpur Fr. Marengo was also in charge of the Lumding Railway Colony. Lumding was an important railway junction where an appreciable number of the employers were Catholics. The Catholic community was small. But it was indeed a cosmopolitan one. Since Lumding was part of the Nowgong district at that time, Fr. Marengo who was ministering to the whole of Nowgong area was told that he had to visit Lumding at least once a month, especially, every first Sunday. He kept up this programme whenever he could, even though he felt that it was scarcely fair that he should devote a Sunday every month to that community which, old and important though it was, was not as urgent as the several other communities under his care at that time.

One of the Lumding parishioners was Mr. D. L. Gomes, originally from Goa. He was the Train Examiner at Lumding. His second child was a baby boy born to him on 4 July 1947. He was given the name Edmund and was baptized by Fr. Marengo at Lumding on Sunday 10th August of the same year. That baby boy with the name Edmund Gomes became a Salesian priest, held major responsibilities - Rector Christ King College, Shillong, Administrator Archbishop's House, Shillong, and Rector Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong. Fr. Edmund holds a doctorate in theology. At the time of this writing he is the Economer of the Salesian Province of Guwahati.

Fr. Edmund recalls how when he was still a small child Fr. Marengo used to call him from afar as he came to visit the family, and how he enjoyed sitting on his lap and pull at the thick, black and long beard of Fr. Marengo!

The Lumding chapel was a decent enough masonry structure built by the American soldiers during the war. In order to speed up the transport of war material and commissariat to the North of Assam (which was then in the hands of the American Army), they had taken up the running of the Railway in that corner of the North East. From there the American army was fighting the Japanese who had occupied part of China.

The little church of Lumding had been built in a corner of the *maidan* (open ground) that stretched along the railway line. A Catholic place of worship in a place so conspicuous was an eyesore to the predominant Hindu population. The railway big bosses who were mostly all Hindus had made it clear to the Catholics that the church should be removed from there. On the other hand, the legislation was very strict about interfering with places of worship. Therefore, they dared not

do anything directly to have the church removed from there, though window panes had been broken several times, and a statue of Our Lady was smashed to pieces. They were just waiting hopefully that the rather frail structure of the church would crumble by itself with an occasional encouragement by some *goondas* or unprincipled elements. But one of the Catholics who was working in the railway workshop, set to work inside the church and within a matter of months the slender pillars and the roof were reinforced with thick iron rails. Naturally, as Fr. Marengo himself remarks, he never bothered to ask from where and how these iron rails had found the way into the House of God!

Soon after the Independence of India, although Fr. Marengo's railway pass was stopped, he continued to be a Railway Chaplain. He could no longer afford to travel first class. So he used to purchase an "Inter class ticket". The inter class coaches, on that particular line were just third class coaches. But with an "inter class ticket" it was easier to find accommodation. These tickets cost a little more than the usual third class ones.

Fr. Marengo quite often travelled in third class, sitting with and talking to all kinds of people. Many of them used to look askance or shyly at him, a saheb, (European) mixing with them in a third class compartment! Fr. Marengo instead, considered it a very enriching experience.

Occasionally he met people who wanted to start a religious argument. But generally Fr. Marengo preferred to avoid such encounters. He never willingly pursued such a conversation. Some people who thought they know everything about Christianity, at times, would butt in with the most absurd assertions. For the sake of simple people who were listening and who would believe anything they heard, it was

necessary to clarify even what appeared to be "stupid". It was only in those situations that Fr. Marengo found it useful to carry on a conversation.

Once he was at a loss to refute an interlocutor who blatantly maintained that God cannot be a pure spirit, because in that case we would be superior to him since we have, besides the spirit, a body which God does not posses. Though Fr. Marengo followed the man's arguments, at first he thought that it was better to keep quite without entering into any lengthy conversation. But since the people around him too expected an answer, Fr. Marengo making an effort to avoid any impression of irony, said calmly:

> "But following your reasoning, my friend, I should conclude that a monkey is superior to you since it has a long tail which you do not have!"

Except for such rare cases in which an argument was forced on him, Fr. Marengo was of the opinion that the best way to win an argument was to avoid it. Salesian kindness and amiability, he used to say, always stood him in good stead.

On another occasion Fr. Marengo was coming down from Shillong. On the way he was stopped by a party of Assamese young men:

> "Sir, you are not supposed to travel today. We have declared a *bandh* (prohibition for any sort of vehicle to be on the road."

> "You see, he explained, I left Shillong very early this morning and it is only now I learn about the *bandh*. Who am I to defy what you have agreed upon? I shall wait here a few hours until the *bandh* is lifted".

All this he said in excellent Assamese. When they heard him talking to them in Assamese they looked at each other

and became very apologetic. They started discussing among themselves how they could make an exception and allow him to proceed.

"Sir, if you do not mind, come and speak to our chief". They led him to an improvised office shack where again he explained to a soft spoken Assamese gentleman how he happened to be on the road at that particular hour. The chief then called some young men and spoke to them. Soon Fr. Marengo could proceed.

"Thank you, sir," he said, "you are very kind!"

In fact, Fr. Marengo's amiability was so impressive that the chief sent those young men in a jeep ahead of him to inform the other check posts along the high way, that Fr. Marengo had been allowed to proceed.

**The Terrible Earthquake of 1950**

Earlier mention was made of Fr. Marengo's visit to Dokmoka on Assumption day 15 August 1950. It may be recalled that the Dokmoka Catholic community consisted of ex-tea garden labourers, all of them Oraons.

In the morning of 15 August there was the usual flag hoisting with prayers for peace and well-being in the country. In the evening Fr. Marengo was standing in the vast grass patch in front of the chapel, when, without the usual rumbling which instantly precedes an earthquake, the earth began to rock under his feet and the grass patch started waving violently. He felt giddy and sat down. He had experienced many earth tremors earlier but this was beyond anything he had ever experienced, both in intensity and duration. He was trying to figure out where the epicentre might be, and said to himself:

"The earthquake of 1934 which had caused more than 5,000 casualties in Monghir and Muzafarpore, was nothing

compared to this". He prayed to God that the epicentre might not be in some populous city. The quake continued unabated all around him.

Later on he learnt that seismographers recorded six and a half minutes of tremor. It was something unbelievable. A little less than one hour afterwards they began to hear very loud explosions. Fr. Marengo remembered to have counted eight of them. He had no idea as to what they might have been. To the people who had gathered around him he said they might be explosions of subterranean gas. Afterwards he learned that the loud noise had been caused by colossal landslide which immediately followed the earthquake in the Mishmi mountains nearly 500 kms away from where he was. He remembered telling the scared people:

> "Let us be prepared for continuous earth tremors tonight, but do not fear, the worst is over."

A week later when he had the chance of reading newspapers in a tea garden bungalow, he learned that there had not been much loss of human lives, for the regions where the earthquake had been strongest were the very sparsely populated pre-Himalayan hills beyond North East of Assam. What brought about greater loss of lives and damage were the floods that followed the earthquake. They were caused by the landslides which had blocked river beds and forced the water to find other course.

The Mission residence in Dibrugarh was badly damaged, the school building in North Lakhimpur collapsed and the mission compound sank considerably in several places. Many tea garden factories sustained heavy losses and long tracts of the Railway lines were badly twisted. The botanist, Mr. Kingdomworth and his wife who happened to be working in the Mishmi hills were trapped by the upheaval.

Mrs. Kingdomworth broke a leg and had to be carried all the way back to the Assam plains.

Back in Tezpur from his long tour, Fr. Marengo saw that the plaster of a whole panel of ikra wall (wall made of bamboo and mud) had fallen on his bed. He also noticed a lot of driftwood floating down the Brahmaputra. The first year they were taken unawares and did not think of collecting this driftwood. The following year however Fr. Marengo happened to read in the Assam Gazette an article by Mr. Kingdomworth, with the information that in the higher reaches of Brahmaputra, its banks were strewn with an enormous quantity of wood that would come floating down once the monsoon started. Fr. Marengo showed the article to Fr. Dal Broi and they decided to be ready to gather them. When the time came the children of the boarding arranged to haul in all the wood they could.

One early July morning the wood started drifting down the Brahmaputra on the bank of which stands the Tezpur mission. The boarding children were given two holidays. Though the approach to the water was steep and slippery, the boys - all of whom were good swimmers - set to work with a will and within those two days they easily salvaged more than one thousand quintals of firewood that kept the mission going for the next 3-4 years! Those logs which were big and which could not be easily carried up to the mission compound were left on the river bank. But they disappeared during the next few nights.

One day Fr. Marengo was on his way back from Watriguri, the village which we have mentioned earlier and where Garo immigrants from Sylhet had settled. His train was due to arrive only at 11 p.m. So, on reaching Jamunamukh somewhat early he made himself comfortable in the

Inspection Bungalow a little way off the railway station. Supper was not in the programme as nothing could be got there beyond a cup of tea and a few biscuits.

Not long after he had taken possession of the only decent room in the Bungalow, two Assamese gentlemen, probably some high ranking government officers on tour, arrived and seeing the one good room of the Bungalow already occupied, must have been rather disappointed and began a conversation outside. Fr. Marengo came out of the room, wished them and said:

> "I am not going to spend the night here. I am leaving by the next train. So you are welcome into this room. For a few hours only and I will be alright in the other room".

They thanked him, but did not like to inconvenience him. But Fr. Marengo insisted and forthwith vacated the room for them. From where he was he could distinctly follow their conversation that ensued about him and about others. Finally, they invited him to share their supper, a delicious meal of curry and rice prepared by their servants.

**Aunty, "Jesus" has Come!**

Fr. Marengo always remembered how a little Mohammedan girl reminded him of what his true identity ought to be.

On one occasion he was travelling by bus to Nowgong town. He had told the driver to stop at Lichubari, a village on the outskirts of the town where he used to spend the night with a Catholic family. The man was a Nepali and his wife a Khasi. Fr. Marengo used to go to them whenever he had to stay overnight in Nowgong, before proceeding early next morning on his tour to Karbi Anglong.

Unfortunately, the driver forgot to stop at Lichubari. So Fr. Marengo called out from the back of the bus to stop. By

the time the bus actually came to a halt, it had travelled another kilometre from the point where Fr. Marengo wanted to get down.

Finally he got down. It was a lonely area. He had quite an amount of luggage, and there was no one to help him. That day happened to be also the high point of Durga Puja. Trucks with the statue of the goddess were moving fast with a din that deafened the bystanders. Fr. Marengo hoped that some rickshaw pullers would come by to take him to the house where he was supposed to spend the night. It seemed that all the rickshaws too were engaged. He stood there for quite some time with "no good disposition towards anybody and with a grudge against the driver".

At last he got a rickshaw and reached the Catholic family at Lichubari. The first one to see him was "Munna", the little Mohammedan girl, who used to be delighted every time she met Fr. Marengo. As soon as she realized that it was Fr. Marengo, she ran to the Catholic house next door and shouted:

"Aunty, Jesus has come!"

From the usual greeting "Jai Jisu" the little Munna had concluded that it was none other than "Jesus" himself!

As for Fr. Marengo, after all that experience of waiting on the roadside with not a few pieces of luggage, and after what that driver had done to him, the little Munna's innocent greeting helped to erase the "scowl" he wore on his face for the past one hour. He forced himself to smile. It drove away all gloom from his face. He was back again with his usual loving kindness in the midst of Munna and the large hearted Catholic family.

**I cannot accept**

Fr. Marengo worked in the Nowgong Mission nearly 5 years when his term there came to an end in ways he could never have suspected, let alone expected.

At the beginning of July 1951 Fr. Marengo went to Golaghat to preach a retreat to the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, a Religious Congregation founded by Bishop Stephen Ferrando SDB.

After the retreat Fr. Marengo was crossing the Brahmaputra on his return journey to Tezpur. Sister Nellie Nunes FMA who was then in-charge of the Missionary Sisters travelled by bus from Golaghat in the morning and joined him on the ferry boat that was daily plying between Tezpur and Silghat. As they reached Tezpur steamer ghat, the girls of St. Joseph's convent were there to welcome Sr. Nellie. They greeted Fr. Marengo too and said "Jai Jisu, Father". One little girl however, said: "Jai Jisu, Monsignor". On hearing that some of the bigger girls frowned at her and told her to shut up. Fr. Marengo did not know what to make of that strange incident.

He engaged a cart, and went his way. The man who was pushing the cart was a poor Catholic. He almost took away Fr. Marengo's breath when he said as a matter of fact: "Father, I heard that you have been appointed the Bishop of Dibrugarh." Fr. Marengo connected it with the little girl's "Jai Jisu, Monsignor". He walked the rest of the way to the mission, in a daze. His head was spinning and his legs sagging.

On reaching his room he found piles of letters and telegrams on his writing desk. He sat down unable to think. Fr. Ribaldone who had succeeded Fr. Dal Broi as Rector of the Tezpur school and Mission came in to congratulate him.

He thought that Fr. Marengo had known everything, and was keeping it to himself. The truth is that he had never known anything.

The letter or the telegram from the Apostolic Delegate in Bangalore, if any had been sent, had failed to reach. For Fr. Marengo the whole thing was mysterious. Everybody else in the diocese and in the province knew of his nomination as Bishop of Dibrugarh for which he "had neither been consulted nor informed". He was confused. He did not know what to do and how to go about it. However, he felt strongly that he could not accept it.

After a sleepless night the first thing he did on getting up was to write to his Bishop:

> "I have only just returned from giving a retreat to the Sisters in Golaghat. I have learned of my nomination as Bishop of Dibrugarh, but I am afraid that my acceptance is out of question altogether. Please do the needful and kindly write to the Apostolic Delegate that I cannot accept. Tomorrow, I am resuming my tour".[48]

Fr. Marengo thought that it was as simple as that, and left the next day on a long tour.

"Some people with a flair for fiction", remarked Fr. Marengo, "gave out that I had absconded".

Fr. Battaglia who was attached to the Tezpur mission, but happened to be in Shillong at the time, set out to find him. It was not difficult, since he had left in Tezpur a programme of his tour.

Fr. Battaglia found him at Rangagora, a part of the Amlaki Tea Garden where he was the guest of his great friend and benefactor, Peter Atkins.

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48. SHTCHD-MM, 53.

> "You are expected in Shillong," he informed him, "the Bishop and the Provincial [Fr. A. Pianazzi] are calling you there".

Mr. Atkins, then drove him in his car to Nowgong. From there Fr. Marengo proceeded to Shillong by the Assam State Transport bus. In Shillong he pleaded with both the Bishop and the Provincial his incapacity to accept the nomination. He also wrote to the Apostolic Delegate imploring him to bear with him, and release him from the appointment.

While he was in Shillong, he spent a few days in Mawlai closing himself up in a room and almost refusing to see anyone. Fr. A. Victor who was an aspirant remembers that he was appointed to bring food to the room of Fr. (Bishop-Elect) Marengo. On entering the room with the tray of food for supper, he in all his simplicity wished Fr. Marengo:

"Good evening, Bishop".

In the words of Fr. Victor, Fr. Marengo was visibly "upset". He told him that he was not Bishop! The frightened little Victor left the food on the table and cleared off.

On that day, says Fr. Victor, he never imagined that one day this "upset" Father would become for him the best model of a missionary: his sympathy, generosity of heart, his deep piety and many other virtues have impressed Fr. Victor who was closely associated with Bishop Marengo for almost 25 years!

Naturally his superiors - both religious and ecclesi-astical - tried to persuade him to accept the nomination. Finally, they promised to write, on his behalf, both to Rome and to the Major Superiors in Turin. But Fr. Marengo wondered, if they really did write. Perhaps, they thought that with the passage of time he would gladly accept the nomination.

From Shillong Fr. Marengo went back to Tezpur somewhat relieved. He resumed his programme of village visiting.

Letter from different quarters and influential friends like Mgr. Perier, the Archbishop of Calcutta to whom he had become quite close during his rectorship in Sonada, wrote with kind understanding and encouragement. Even that failed to change his mind. They only added to his unhappiness and mental uneasiness.[49]

Fr. Marengo adds that all this had nothing to do with a show of humility. He felt that he would never come up to the task. He had no courage. He was afraid that he would be a "misfit and a failure". Most of those who wrote to him thought it their duty to remind him that Rome would never change its decision and that he had better accept it without delay.

But his feelings were somewhat stronger than all that reasoning. In the meantime his superiors both in India and in Turin were very patient. For quite a long time Fr. Marengo did not hear anything, either from Rome or from Turin. So he thought that the matter would not come up again.

Then one day one of his old novices, Brother George Sungmur, a Lepcha, wrote to him quite bluntly and to the point:

> "You have frequently taught us to be obedient by your words," he wrote, "we expect you to do it now by your example".[50]

But with the silence from the part of his superiors, Fr. Marengo thought that the matter was over. Then one

49. Ibid.
50. Ibid., 54.

day he felt confused again, and somewhat unhappy about the stand he had taken. He felt that he might have caused unnecessary trouble to his superiors. In Turin the only one who knew him well at that time was Fr. Peter Ricaldone who was the one who admitted him into the Assam group some 28 years ago. At that time he was the Prefect General of the congregation. Now as Rector Major and the successor of Don Bosco, Fr. Ricaldone would be the right person, Fr. Marengo thought, to write to. So he picked up courage and wrote:

> "... You know my mind, and though I am still of the same mind, grieving you is the last thing I would do. If you think and say I should accept, I will do so whatever the cost".[51]

The reply from Fr. Peter Ricaldone was not late in coming [perhaps his last letter, for he passed away on 25 November 1951]:

> "My dearest Marengo, I think that you should accept and I wish that you would accept. Have confidence in Mary Help of Christians and Don Bosco. I bless you".[52]

There and then Fr. Marengo offered his belated consent.

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51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.

# V. MISSIONARY BISHOP (DIBRUGARH 1951-1964)

God's ways are marvellous. Fr. Marengo who preferred not to be a "Bishop", but wanted to continue his humble mission as a touring missionary, was destined to be a founder-father of not one, but three dioceses!

**Episcopal Ordination**

The official communication of the erection of the new diocese of Dibrugarh and the nomination of Fr. Marengo as its first Bishop was made on Monday 23rd July 1951. When this was known in Shillong, the provincial, Fr. A. Pianazzi, was away in Italy. Bishop Ferrando and Fr. Igino Ricaldone (the acting provincial), decided that Fr. Marengo should go to Italy and be ordained Bishop in Turin.

True, Fr. Marengo had given his consent, but peace had not yet come to his mind, and it was with a very heavy heart that he left for Italy in early December 1951. His heart was heavy, also because he received the sad news that the Rector Major, Fr. Peter Ricaldone who was his superior when he was a young student at Valdocco from 1919 to 1923 and who was the only one he knew very intimately, was no more. He passed away on 25 November, 1951.

> *No departure,* Bishop Marengo wrote,
> *for any tour had ever been so painful.*[1]

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1. SHTCD-MM, I, 54.

Fr. Joseph Parippil, who was a young aspirant in Bandel in 1951, remembers the visit of the Bishop-elect to the Marian Shrine there on his way to Italy. This Marian dimension characterized Bishop Marengo's entire missionary life. He had unlimited confidence in her intercession. As we have noted earlier, he added the name "Mary" to the perpetual profession document when he signed it on 21 January, 1928 as "Emilio Oreste Maria Marengo". The Rosary never left him. It was his constant companion. He made use of every occasion to speak of Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

Fr. Marengo reached Turin on Friday 7 December 1951, the eve of the feast of the Immaculate Conception. He considered it a 'good omen!' He was kindly received by the new Rector Major, Fr. Renato Ziggiotti, and the other members of the Superior Chapter. Since the canonical time allotted between the nomination and ordination was to expire soon, with fatherly solicitude the Rector Major arranged everything for the episcopal ordination.

The Bishop-Elect spent a few days with his dear mother and relations whom he was meeting after 28 years. He discovered several nephews and nieces for the first time! He went to Bollengo to spend a few days under the spiritual direction of the saintly Fr. Zolin and to make his spiritual retreat in preparation for the great day. From Bollengo he reached Valdocco on the morning of Thursday, 27 December 1951, the day of his episcopal ordination. He was vested in purple accompanied by a festal cortege as he made his solemn entry into the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians. The Bishop-elect, a tall figure and with black beard stood out in the grand procession.

The chief celebrant and main consecrator was His Eminence Maurilio Card. Fossati, Archbishop of Turin,

assisted by the two co-consecrators, Monsignor Charles Stoppa Bishop of Alba and Monsignor Angeleri, Auxiliary Bishop to the Archbishop of Tortona. Concelebrating at the Mass were also Monsignors Baravalle and Garneri and Canon Passera. Present at the ordination were his 80 year old mother accompanied by his elder brother, Fr. Joseph (1904-1975), then 47 years old, and Sr. Agnese (1897-1985), his elder sister and a member of the Sisters of Charity of St. Antida de Touret. There was also his old teacher Sr. Catherine Zannone FMA, as old as Bishop-elect's own mother. She came all the way from Naples, sent by her Mother General at the special request of the Bishop-Elect. The members of the Superior Chapter of the Salesian Congregation as well as those of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians along with the Mother general, the provincials of Central, Subalpine and Assam provinces and a large crowd of faithful from his own parish of Diano d'Alba led by the parish priest made the celebration more memorable.

After the reading of the letter of appointment (the *Bull*), the Bishop-elect made the profession of faith. The Mass began. The singing of the Litany of the Saints at which the Bishop-elect prostrated, the impressive imposition of the hands by the Cardinal and the assisting prelates, the prayerful singing of the *Veni Creator* invoking the assistance of the Holy Spirit, the anointing of the tonsure and of the palms with the holy Chrism, the giving of the crosier and the Bible were salient moments of the sacred rites.

Once the ordination rites were over, Bishop Marengo continued the Mass together with the Cardinal and the other concelebrants. After the reading of the last Gospel, the Cardinal put the mitre on the newly ordained Bishop and gave him the crosier. Then he made him sit in the main celebrant's chair while the choir intoned the solemn thanksgiving hymn, the *Te Deum*.

The entire congregation was emotionally moved when Bishop Marengo accompanied by the two co-consecrators proceeded from the sanctuary towards the place where his loving mother and relations were seated to impart to them his first episcopal blessing. It was a unique moment in that historic Basilica of Mary Help of Christians where about thirty years earlier he, a small boy, used to pray and assist at the Mass, and where before the picture of the Madonna of Don Bosco he offered himself most generously to go and work in the vineyard of the Lord as a missionary. His episcopal motto *Animas Quaerere* (To Seek Souls) encapsulated his life's programme, the programme that unfolded itself so generously and so marvelously in North East India.

When Bishop Marengo returned to the sanctuary, he concluded the solemn service with the last prayer and the episcopal blessing which sealed his determination to 'seek souls' in the footsteps of his Father and Founder, St. John Bosco, and not to worry about the rest.

During the next few days he offered Mass at the altar of Don Bosco and of Mary Help of Christians. The Oratory where he had been a pupil reverberated with the name of 'Monsignor Marengo' as he attended several programmes of welcome and congratulations. On Monday 31 December, he left for the Salesian theologate of Monteortone (Padova) to ordain new priests, thus having the joy and the privilege of exercising his episcopal office almost immediately. On the feast of the Epiphany he was given a grand welcome at his native place of Diano d'Alba.

Bishop Marengo was present at Valdocco on 31 January 1952 for the Feast of St. John Bosco along with Salesian Bishop Michael Arduino sent out from China by the communist government. While Bishop Arduino presided over the feast

day Eucharist at 7.00 a.m. in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, Bishop Marengo celebrated that of 7.45 a.m. Both the Bishops concelebrated along with Mgr. Gilla Gremigni, Bishop of Novara at the 10 0'clock Mass. The Basilica was filled to capacity. A 200 strong choir consisting of the boys of the Oratory and the singers from the Salesian Pontifical Atheneum rendered the celebration exceptionally solemn. The entire Mass was broadcast over the radio.[2]

During his stay in Italy following the episcopal ordination, he had an audience with Pope Pius XII to whom he mentioned his hopes and fears regarding Nagaland and Manipur and asked the Holy Father to bless his flock there.

> *"Go, and do not fear,* assured the Pope,
> *the road to Nagaland and Manipur will open out."*[3]

His desire to get back to his flock in Dibrugarh intensified as the date of his departure from Italy came closer. The faithful in Dibrugarh in their turn were anxiously waiting to receive their Shepherd and Father whose unstinted dedication they had experienced over the past several years as 'Father' Marengo.

**Installation at Dibrugarh**

Bishop Marengo returned to Dibrugarh on Friday 16 May 1952. An immense crowd of faithful - some of whom who had walked nearly 30 kms from their villages to reach Dibrugarh - lined both sides of the road waving colourful flags and pouring out their joy through shouts and dances as he, accompanied by Bishop S. Ferrando of Shillong and Bishop L. Morrow of Krishnagar, reached the Cathedral from the airport. The Cathedral which suffered visibly from

2. Salesian Bulletin, (Italian Edition), 1 March 1952, 89.
3. SHTCD-MM, I, 55.

the earthquake of 1950 was done up and decorated magnificently to welcome its Pastor. After the official reading of the decree of the erection of the new diocese, the clergy and the faithful approached the new Bishop to pay their respects by kissing his episcopal ring.

Sunday, 18 May 1952 was the solemn installation. Already from early morning the people were in the Cathedral after spending the night in temporary pandals or in open verandah or class rooms. The sound of drums and the familiar tunes of the dances filled the festive air throughout the night. The enthronement in Dibrugarh took place on the 16 May 1952. Bishop S. Ferrando, Bishop L. Morrow from Krishnagar and Fr. A. Alessi, the new Salesian Provincial, had come for the occasion. Present among others were also Fr. M. Uguet, the former Provincial who was appointed Rector of Bishop's House and the first Vicar General of the new diocese. Fr. A. Ravalico and Bro. Pancolini who had preceded Bishop Marengo to Dibrugarh to set up the diocesan Procure Office were busy with preparations.

The faithful who arrived from far and near for the long awaited day filled the mission compound. They had never seen a similar celebration. So many concelebrants at the Mass! Religious belonging to several Congregations! Sisters in various habits! On that day the Cathedral of Dibrugarh seemed to the people from far away villages the most beautiful edifice in the world! They spent hours inside praying and admiring the altars, the statues, the doors and windows, the pictures and the decorations. The well-prepared choir, the loud speakers - all of which were new for the people - and the whole service kept them spell-bound and attentive.

The huge gathering in the playground in front of the school after the pontifical Mass to welcome Bishop Marengo

was indeed an affectionate display of love and unlimited enthusiasm. Munda and Oraon dances to the beating of drums, Tangkhul and Lotha representations to ask the Bishop to open centres in their respective areas, the presentation of gifts including a new vehicle followed by goats and chicken, eggs and vegetables, fruits and flowers and multicoloured shawls were all part of that long and unforgettable 'Jai Jisu, Bishop Swamy'. The Eucharistic procession through Dibrugarh town in late afternoon was an impressive manifestation of Faith and a proof that the Catholic communities had grown considerably over the years. By the time the procession returned to the Cathedral compound it was already dark. But in and around the Cathedral everything was flooded with light. The Blessed Sacrament was placed on the magnificently decorated altar. The newly ordained Bishop in his fatherly exhortation spoke of Jesus as the Saviour of all. He invited his flock to work hard for the spread of Christ's Kingdom especially in the immense valley of the Brahmaputra and among the many tribes and tongues of Nagaland and Manipur.

Mr. G.C.Bradley recalls one of the several felicitations given to Bishop Marengo in Dibrugarh. It was organized by the Dibrugarh parishioners. They staged the little drama 'The Bishop's Candlesticks'. It was a very simple performance, without any 'professionalism', but with hearts filled with love and gratitude. Bishop Marengo, Mr. Bradley remembers, was quite appreciative of the efforts the people had made and never failed to recall that little event even long afterwards.[4]

Bishop Marengo sensed the great harvest that awaited him. It offered limitless scope for his episcopal motto : *To Seek Souls*. The then districts of Sibsagor and Lakhimpur in

4. SHTCD-MF,16.

the vast Brahmaputra valley, Lohit and Tirap in NEFA and Nagaland and Manipur were large enough for his intrepid missionary heart. It was touched by the affection of his dearest Adivasis of long standing association. The reassuring words of the Vicar of Christ on earth, Pope Pius XII:'Go and do not fear: the road to Nagaland and Manipur will open out' continued to resound in his ears. They would give him courage in the years that followed to undertake many a missionary tour among the myriads of tribes like the Tangkhul, Mao, Maram, Karbi, Lotha, Angami, the Zeliangrong and a host of Kuki-Chin groups like the Paite, Mayol, Monsang, Thadou and the Anal, and later on, to the Meiteis in the Imphal plains - all these and much more were part of his missionary dream that became a reality.

The pages that follow bear witness to Bishop Marengo's undaunted enthusiasm as the Bishop first of Dibrugarh, then of Tezpur and finally of Tura.

When Bishop Marengo came to Dibrugarh as its first Bishop the mission centres were Dibrugarh (opened in 1909 and reopened in 1931), Golaghat opened in 1941, Digboi in 1948, Naharkatiya in 1950 and Kohima where Catholic presence existed from the close of 1948. The congregations of Sisters who were ministering in the above places were the Sisters of Charity in Dibrugarh (from 1933), the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians in Dibrugarh (from 1948) and in Golaghat (from 1949) and the Missionaries of Christ Jesus in the Naga Hospital in Kohima.

From 1952 (the year of installation of the Bishop) to 1964 is a period of intense missionary activity both in the Brahmaputra valley and among the hill tribes of Manipur and Nagaland. There was no respite. Bishop Marengo represented a new Pentecost giving birth to Christian communities

even in the remotest corners of his diocese. In his own words, he was a 'tramp at large' in the Brahmaputra valley as well as in the hills of Manipur and Nagaland.

In Fr. A. Ravalico, his mission procurator for the first 4 years, in Bro. F. Pancolini and Bro. M. Cahoj who were with the Bishop from the start of the diocese, and in Fr. P. Bianchi, Bishop Marengo had valiant and enterprising helpers in the first few years of the fledgling diocese. When Fr. Ravalico went to Manipur to take a more on-the-spot charge of the mission there, the procure office was looked after by Bro. Pancolini. Remembering them Bishop Marengo notes that he can never appreciate adequately and thank enough these precious collaborators God put at his side to lighten his burden. The services of Bro. Michael Cahoj from 1963 to 1964 in Dibrugarh and from 1964 to 1968 in Tezpur were treasured by Bishop Marengo.

The effective and generous help rendered for two years by Fr. M. Uguet as the first Vicar General of the new diocese and after him by Fr. Dal Zovo, Vicar General from 1956 to 1965, are affectionately and gratefully registered by Bishop Marengo. Fr. Dal Zovo came to help him after he had completed his term as Rector in Sonada. As Vicar General of the diocese, Rector of Bishop's house, and as Parish Priest of Dibrugarh town parish Fr. Dal Zovo was 'incomparable'. Though exteriorly a very strict person he had a '*heart of gold*' and 'all the parishioners especially the poor had a very high regard and deep affection for him'.[5]

5. SHTCD-MM,I, 85a. According to Bishop Marengo Fr. Dal Zovo, his Vicar General for nearly 10 years, organized in an admirable way the relief work in the diocese reaching a vast number of poor people in the town and outside... the American lady in-charge of CRS programmes all over India was very much impressed by the efficiency of Fr. Dal Zovo particularly during the difficult days of

After starting off a pioneering mission work among the Tangkhuls and among the Chin communities (Zous and Thadous) of Manipur, Fr. Ravalico left for Europe and America in search of more funds. It was during his absence that Bishop Marengo visited the communities in Manipur and Nagaland, first alone and later with the help of Fr. P. Bianchi. A new era opened with the return of Fr. Ravalico when he and Fr. Bianchi (both having Indian citizenship) organized mission work in Manipur on a more permanent basis. In the meantime work among the Lothas and Angamis of Nagaland were looked after by Fr. J. Larrea and Fr. H. Marocchino respectively.

**The 'Lion' of the Brahmaputra**

One cannot speak of Dibrugarh without speaking of Fr. L. Piasecki SDB from Poland, the 'lion' of the Brahmaputra valley. He was one of the four missionaries who came to Assam in the second group of Salesians to North East India. They arrived in Shillong on the last day of October 1923.[6] The other three were Fr. Raygasse (French), Fr. Tormo (Spanish) and Fr. Mazzetti (Italian).

Soon after his arrival in 1923 Fr. Piasecki was appointed Rector of the Salesian community in Guwahati and missionary in-charge of the Brahmaputra valley. His parish extended from Dhubri to Sadiya including a few Garo Christian communities at the foot of Garo Hills in the plains of the Goalpara and Mymensingh Districts. He was helped at different times by Fr. F. Marmol and Fr. M. Uguet. In the words of Fr. O. Paviotti:

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erosion and floods in the Brahmaputra. In the middle of 1963 Bishop Marengo stayed back from attending the sessions of the Second Vatican Council because Fr. Dal Zovo was seriously ill. Fr. Dal Zovo passed away in Shillong on 8 July 1972.

6. L. Mathias, *Quarant'Anni in India*, 91.

> *"though harassed by malaria, he crisscrossed the valley from Goalpara to Doom Dooma."*[7]

Fr. Piasecki received into the Church an average of 1000 people a year. Wherever he could, he established Catholic communities and built chapels. He organized the work by appointing head catechists. On 24 May 1926 he opened a small school with some 20 boys and an orphanage (Our Lady's Orphanage) in Guwahati. As we have seen, the Guwahati mission was the first field of apostolate of Bro. Marengo during his practical training.[8] The Adivasi communities which he [Fr. Marengo] visited as priest and as Bishop were the first beneficiaries of his missionary zeal, a zeal which he received partly also from Fr. Piasecki.

In 1931 Fr. Piasecki reopened the Dibrugarh mission centre where, as we have seen, Fr. Marengo had his first missionary stint in 1933-1934. From 1940 to 1954 Fr. Piasecki worked in Calcutta, Bandel and Sonada. When he returned to Assam in 1954 he was assigned first to Doom Dooma and then to Digboi. Fr. Piasecki passed away in a tragic accident in Digboi on 10 September 1957. He was knocked

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7. O. Paviotti, *The Work of His Hands*, 50.
8. Fr. Pianazzi describes its beginnings: The number of students jumped to 120 from a mere 20 because every time Fr. Piasecki returned from his tour he used to bring a few. From September 1926 till the second World War the school also had a carpentry and for some time also a press attached to it for the benefit of poor children. Of course, everything was at its initial stages. It is not clear why the school started in Hindi and not Assamese medium. There were days when the Fathers had no money even to buy food for the children. Fr. Pianazzi narrates how one day Fr. Scuderi sent two of his best boys to pray in the Church and himself went to get some rice on credit from the market. He returned empty handed. But he was surprised to see the children having their meal. On enquiry he found out that during his absence some unknown persons had sent rice for the boys!

down from his bicycle by a speeding truck. By then he had 'trebled his flock in the plains of Assam'.[9] To cite Fr. Paviotti:

> "Stocky, with a ready smile and wry humour and reticent about his achievements, he devoted his life to the spreading of the faith. The tea planters liked him, because of his simplicity and bonhomie and affectionately named him 'Peg of whisk', by alliteration with 'Piasecki'".[10]

Right from his days in Guwahati, Fr. Piasecki was a great inspiration to Bishop Marengo along with his counterpart in the Khasi Hills, Fr. C. Vendrame.

Soon after Fr. Piasecki's tragic end, there appeared in the papers an article entitled *His Last Wish*. It stated that Fr. Piasecki, true to his Christian spirit, had expressed before he expired, the hope that the driver of the truck that killed him would be 'forgiven'. Till today it is not known who might have been the real author of the above-mentioned article.[11]

In the funeral Mass on 11 September 1957, at the Cathedral Church Bishop Marengo delivered a very touching speech to the large crowd that had gathered. He recalled Fr. Piasecki's arrival in India in 1923, his pioneering work in the Brahmaputra valley and his inspiring missionary spirit, his trip to Europe to collect funds for the building of the Church in Dibrugarh, his stay in Calcutta, Bandel and Sonada and his readiness to accept the new responsibility in Doom Dooma and Digboi.

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Similar instances are not wanting in the early years of Don Bosco, Guwahati. Marengo, first as Brother in practical training and later on as a new priest lived those wonderful years of missionary spirit and trust in Divine Providence.

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 50-51.
11. See, *The Assam Tribune*, September 13, 1957, p. 1.

His mortal remains were laid to rest beside the Church he had built in honour of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, in Dibrugarh.

**Mission Centres**

The establishment of mission centres is a sign of the vitality of mission work. Each centre becomes a power house for further expansion. Hence, the new Bishop took special care of Dibrugarh, Doom Dooma, Naharkatiya, North Lakhimpur, Digboi, etc.

**Dibrugarh**

The first mission centre at Dibrugarh where Fr. Piasecki and Fr. Marmol went to live was the old residence built by the German Salvatorians on the North end of the town on the bank of the Dibru river. The Dibru river which ran parallel to the great Brahmaputra was separated from it by about a km of sandy soil 'sparsely covered by brushwood and straggling trees'. Not far from the mission centre and the residence of the Sisters of Charity of Maria Bambina, a few hundred yards away were the Anglican Bishop's House, the Anglican Cathedral and the Planters' Club. These and several other buildings were washed away in the flood and erosion of 1954-55.

Already in August 1936 Fr. Piasecki had exchanged the old land and building along with a sum of Rs. 16,000 with the land of a certain Mr. Mitra. The contract was signed by Bishop S. Ferrando and Mr. Mitra in the court of Dibrugarh. From 12 August of the same year the missionaries had left the old building and had come to stay at the new location which is the present site of the Cathedral, Bishop's House and Presbytery.

The blessing and laying of the foundation stone of the future Cathedral Church took place on 27 March 1938.

Present on the occasion were also Fr. A. Pianazzi and Fr. A. Alessi. The Church was blessed on 4 November 1939 by Archbishop F. Perier of Calcutta in the presence of Bishop S. Ferrando, Mgr. V. Scuderi and Mgr. E. Bars and over 4000 Catholics from Dibrugarh district.

The new Church building became a symbol of unity for the nearly 150 communities that were cared for from Dibrugarh mission centre. The statistics for 1940 shows 19078 Catholics, 241 sub-stations, 127 chapels, 136 catechists, 36 village schools and 623 school going children. The same year records a one-month training for catechists.

As Dibrugarh became the headquarters of the new diocese it stood on the missionary labours of great missionaries like Fr. Krick of the Foreign Missionaries of Paris who reached Dibrugarh in September 1851 and who along with Fr. Bourry was killed in 1854 in the Mishmi Hills; the first German Salvatorians who opened Dibrugarh mission in 1909, Fr. Piasecki, Fr. Marmol who reopened it in 1931, Fr. Marengo himself who reaped a rich harvest of several thousand baptisms during his one year stay in 1933-34, Fr. Cerato, Fr. Visentin, Fr. Ayuso, Fr. Cyprian, Fr. Boscardin, Fr. Sanchez, Fr. Vago, Fr. Nyens, Fr. Troncana, Fr. D. Colussi, Fr. Daniel, Fr. L. Kerketta, Mgr. Bars, Fr. Bennet, Fr. Mellino, Fr. Killermann and Fr. Varga - are some of the pioneers of Dibrugarh mission.

As the new diocese was started, there was Fr. Visentin who in the words of Bishop Marengo had been 'a real pillar both of Dibrugarh mission and of the Don Bosco School from its inception.'[12] He was 'a simple man and a steady worker full of zeal for souls whether working directly in the mission or in the school'.[13] When he was called to take

12. SHTCD-MM, I,85c.
13. Ibid.

charge of Don Bosco School he was replaced by Fr. Righetto from N. Lakhimpur in 1961. Fr. J. Fantin took over from Fr. Righetto in 1963.

Bishop Marengo remarks that Fr. J. Fantin 'in his quiet unassuming ways was a very zealous missionary as well as very methodical in his work'.[14] He was patient and persevering. In the words of Bishop Marengo again, he got the most out of his catechists and brought many to the Church through his winning manners.[15] The silent but effective contribution of Fr. T. Lopez to the Dibrugarh mission is gratefully acknowledged by Bishop Marengo.

The establishment of the convent of the MSMHC in July 1948 in Dibrugarh, and the coming of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA) in August 1952 are some of the other highlights.

**Doom Dooma**

October 1952 saw the opening of the Doom Dooma Mission Centre where Fr. G.Mandeville, the former Rector and Parish Priest of Dibrugarh was appointed Parish Priest in November of the same year. Much of what Doom Dooma parish was during the time of Bishop Marengo in Dibrugarh, we owe to Fr. Mandeville who laboured for over 15 years there. Fr. C. Billi was sent as his assistant. Both of them went through many difficulties especially in the first year when they had to live in two very primitive *bashas* (huts made of bamboo and thatch) of which one served as the Fathers' residence and the other a multipurpose one including church services. Soon Doom Dooma with its many vast and flourishing tea gardens became the mission centre with the

14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.

highest number of Catholics, nearly ten thousand within a radius of about twenty-five kms.

In 1959 the Church and in 1964 the convent cum school were blessed by Bishop Marengo. The MSMHC started an Assamese medium school and boarding. In August 1968 Fr. Mandeville was transferred to Jorhat. His place was taken by Fr. M. Uzhunnalil. Frs. M.M. George, M.A. Jacob, P.P. George and later on Fr. M. Narimattam. Fr. Andrew and Fr. P. Chempalayil are also closely associated with the earlier years of Doom Dooma mission centre. Along with them are the Sisters, the catechists and lay leaders who have put in their best missionary efforts to build the Doom Dooma mission with its over 15,000 Catholics.

The history of Doom Dooma mission goes back to the 1940s when Fr. H. Boscardin and Fr. L. Kerketta began work there as touring missionaries. The villages of Doom Dooma parish were fortunate to have the first missionary journeys of the zealous Sisters of the newly founded congregation of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians in January 1947.

**Golaghat**

The mission centre of Golaghat was started in August 1941 by Fr. J. Neyens, a Belgian Salesian who had joined the Shillong diocese from Congo. Later Fr. F. Mellino came to help him. Within a year the number of Catholics reached about 7000 with nearly 100 sub-stations. By 1945 Fr. Mellino had to leave Golaghat because of the Second World War. A small school with 30 children was started around the same time. Fr. F. Bollini came to work in Golaghat mission in 1946. The Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians opened their second convent there in 1948. Till 1951 the Sisters lived in a bamboo and thatch hut. When mission work among the Lotha Nagas was at its initial stages under

the guidance of Fr. Larrea, the Golaghat school and boarding served to accommodate some 40 children from the Lotha area. The big *basha* that was serving as a school was completely destroyed by a storm in early 1953. The new school that was put up by Bishop Marengo was the first work of Bro. Michael Cahoj, Bishop Marengo's precious helper in Dibrugarh and later also in Tezpur.

The Golaghat church and several chapels in masonry structure came during the time of Fr. Bollini. Not only did he supervise the work, but he also provided much of the finance. He was a real builder, a builder not only of churches, but of Christian communities. He was an indefatigable missionary with an incredible spirit of poverty and sacrifice. The vast mission of Golaghat would not have been what it is today had it not been for the 20 years of dedicated and silent work of Fr. Bollini and Fr. E. Frassy. Bishop Marengo always remembered with great appreciation the work put in by Fr. M. Calligaris both in Golaghat and in Naharkatiya. So too the labours of Fr. F. Matta.

The contributions of Frs. H. Marocchino, G. C. Guidotto, F. Matta, J. Aguilar, J. Larrea, S. Harold, F. Zanghellini, J. Edakudan, R. Mariaselvam and Bro. Barnabas are part of what Golaghat parish is today. It has given rise to other parishes like Dimapur, Jorhat and Sorupathar.

**Naharkatiya**

The origin of Naharkatiya mission goes back to the missionary tours undertaken by Fr. L. Kerketta, Fr. H. Boscardin and Fr. C. Billi from Dibrugarh. Fr. H. Boscardin took charge of it as a mission centre in March 1950 and developed a systematic training of catechists. Later on Fr. Cerato was transferred to Naharkatiya to take care of the Catechist Training Centre there and to replace Fr. Boscardin

who was sent to the new mission of Dhekiajuli. When Fr. Cerato had to leave Naharkatiya due to illness it was Fr. P. Taverna who was put in charge of the Naharkatiya mission. He worked there from 1951. Fr. Taverna continued to serve there until he was asked to go and help Bishop Marengo in the diocese of Tezpur when the latter was transferred there from Dibrugarh in 1964. Fr. Frassy replaced Fr. Taverna in Naharkatiya.

In 1958 Bishop Marengo blessed the MSMHC convent. Naharkatiya mission centre has given rise to Jorhat, Moranhat and Sonari.

**North Lakhimpur**

The N. Lakhimpur mission centre from which came several others (like Silapathar and Doolahat, and from Silapathar Dhemaji and from Doolahat, Harmutty) was founded by Fr. L. Cerato assisted by Fr. A. Visentin and later on by Fr. H. Boscardin. Fr. S. Righetto replaced Fr. Cerato. He came there after working in Krishnagar diocese for more than 30 years. He was assisted by Fr. J. Svirnelis and Fr. U. Turco. Fr. Svirnelis was called by the Provincial to be bursar in the new Don Bosco boarding school until he had to leave India for health reasons.

**Digboi**

The Catholic community of Digboi consisting mainly of the employees of the Assam Oil Company was ministered to from Dibrugarh until it got a resident priest in 1949 in the person of Fr. F. Fossati. A small chapel was blessed by Bishop S. Ferrando in February 1947. In 1958 a small school that was run by a certain Mrs. Bell was given to the parish. In 1966 the Apostolic Carmel Sisters came to look after the school.

**Memories of Ministry in AMCH**

Bishop Marengo is distinguished for his love for the poor and the sick. In Dibrugarh it was his practice to visit the Assam Medical College Hospital (AMCH) two or three times a year to bring his blessings, prayers and comforting words to every sick person. The fact that the hospital had nearly one thousand beds and that Bishop Marengo visited every one of them despite his other engagements as Bishop, speaks volumes for the goodness of heart of the Bishop. Moving from one bed to another he would talk to each one with the love of a father. He did it irrespective of the patients' religious affiliation. The doctors testified that it did a lot of good to their patients.

Since Bishop Marengo had the gift of switching from one language to another - Hindi, Assamese, English, Tangkhul, Lotha and some other tribal languages - it was a pleasant surprise for the patients to meet Bishop Marengo who conversed with them in their own language. They would forget their pain when he came to say a 'hello' and to pray for them.

On one occasion Bishop met a Tibetan mother, a refugee laid up with palsy in the hospital. Along with her was her three year old child, 'an extraordinarily beautiful one'. Bishop addressed her in the few words of Tibetan he remembered from his Sonada days.

"*Nang ming ka re re*?" - What is your name?

The woman's face brightened up. She forgot her sickness. Commenting on it he wrote:

> "The smile and the joy of that poor mother is something I will never forget".[16]

16. Ibid., 86.

On another occasion Bishop Marengo was visiting the patients in the female ward. A young Assamese girl on catching sight of Bishop got all excited and told the nurse sister to send for him. She wanted to talk to him by all means. When Bishop reached her, she told him everything about herself. She was a college student. Because of heart problems she had to interrupt her studies. She was at a loss as to what to do. Bishop Marengo then spoke to her about God and His plans for each person. He told her that God loved her and that He had his own designs also for her. He would never abandon her. God would remember her sufferings and would bless her.

"Then I will ask Him to send me more sufferings", she added.

When she was out of the hospital she came to visit Bishop in Bishop's house and informed him that she had started a correspondence course to learn more about the Catholic Church. She again became sick and went back to the hospital. When her sickness was rather serious she sent for Bishop Marengo saying that she wanted to die a Catholic. God granted her that singular grace through Bishop Marengo.

One of the chief ministers of Assam who did not have much sympathy for Europeans and more so for Christian missionaries was one day admitted to the Assam Medical College Hospital. Earlier his own wife was admitted in the old civil hospital. She was so taken up with the spirit of service of a certain Sr. Cecilia that when the Chief Minister himself was admitted, he wanted that the same Sister should attend to him too. The hospital authorities granted his wish.

One day when Sr. Cecilia came in to give a penicillin injection to him, he told her that he was allergic to it. Sr. Cecilia, of course, talked to him nicely and carried

out the doctor's order. When his body started reacting and began to swell, he called Sr. Cecilia and showed how right he was. Sr. Cecilia calmly replied:'The good Lord wants you to do some mortification everyday'. "What the chief minister understood from it" noted Bishop Marengo, "is anybody's guess".

However, when he was discharged from the hospital, he had only words of praise for the Sisters. He even gave a tea party and spoke for over 10 minutes praising the Sisters for their sacrificing and generous spirit. Bishop Marengo commented:

> "One could really see that for the Sisters caring for the sick, dealing with the nurses and the doctors was not just a profession, but a true vocation ... what is even more, in spite of the very busy schedule of work in the hospital they were very regular in their religious practices and observance of the rules".[17]

There are many other instances regarding Bishop Marengo and his association with the Medical College Hospital.

It was not easy for any of the Sisters to be a dietician of the big hospital. To feed over 1000 people and to see that the kitchen department went on smoothly was more than a full time job. In addition the Sisters were also doing the book keeping. Noticing that the Sisters were overburdened, the principal put a nurse to write the accounts. The nurse found book keeping too much for her. She complained to the principal. The principal tried to convince her saying that the Sister dietician was managing the work of a dietician and book keeping together without complaining, and therefore, she should not find it a burden too heavy. That didn't cut any ice. The nurse's complaint continued, and the principal was displeased with her. One day after listening to the usual

17. Ibid., 87.

grievances in the presence of the principal, the Sister volunteered to help the nurse to keep the accounts too. But that too did not satisfy the nurse. She wanted to be completely relieved of it. The principal then paused for a while, looked at the Sister and said:

"Oh, now I see, she is not wearing a cross as you do!"

Soon after the Chinese invasion in 1962 the superintendent of the Nurses' Training Centres in Assam visited Dibrugarh to carry out the routine inspection of the training centre. She had come from Tezpur where there were no Sisters working in the hospital and where things were disorganized and somewhat in a mess. In fact, it was reported to Bishop Marengo that some doctors and nurses were so disheartened that they left the [Tezpur] hospital.

When the superintendent reached Dibrugarh, she expected something similar in Dibrugarh too. But she was so pleased with the order, cleanliness and regularity in the hospital that she embraced the Sister Matron and declared:

"Oh, Sister, this is wonderful. This is unbelievable!"

Some time later, narrated Bishop Marengo, a high medical officer from Delhi visited the Assam Medical College and was pleased with the way it was organized. He congratulated the principal in glowing terms. The principal who was a humble and sincere person told the officer that much of the credit goes to the Sisters working in the hospital.

Sr. Angela Carzaniga SCCG who had been in Dibrugarh during Bishop Marengo's time remembered his great patience, charity and the ability to speak in different languages with the patients whenever he visited the AMCH.

**Padre Pio and the Little Flower School**

The people had been pressing for an English medium school for girls in Dibrugarh. At the invitation of Bishop Marengo the Salesian Sisters came in August 1952 to meet this need. For the first one year and a half they were housed in St. Mary's convent of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians and made use of two halls in the building as class rooms. Soon the town committee arranged for a small plot of land adjacent to St. Mary's where the present Little Flower School stands.

As the building was coming up the changing course of the mighty Brahmaputra with its dangerous power of erosion made the Sisters waver in their plan to go ahead with the building. One day Sr. T. Villa and L. Morelli came to Bishop Marengo and requested him to write a letter to Fr. Pio in Italy to know his mind on the matter. Bishop Marengo then wrote a letter giving Fr. Pio a realistic account of the situation and asked him whether the Sisters should go ahead with the building.

Sometime later Bishop Marengo received a note from Fr. Pio's English speaking secretary which read as follows:

> "Tell the good Sisters not to worry, but to go on working with zeal for the glory of God, because the government is going to build a second defence against the river".[18]

Soon after Dibrugarh had a visit from the Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who after seeing the havoc caused by the river arranged for experts on flood control to put a stop to the devastation that was being caused by the Brahma-

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18. Orestes Marengo, 'Memories of an Old Tramp at large in the Brahmaputra Valley', in *Diocese of Dibrugarh: Silver Jubilee 1951-1976 Souvenir*, 34.

putra. They planned to build spurs. The work began immediately. Train loads of boulders were emptied into the river. They broke the violent fury of the mighty onrush of water, forced silt to be accumulated along the river bank on the side of the town. Calm and assurance returned to the townspeople. It was the second defence spoken of by Fr. Pio.

The memory of Little Flower School Dibrugarh evoked in Bishop Marengo sweet remembrances of God's special protection.

> "I am convinced, he wrote in his memoirs, that this school was really wanted by divine providence".[19]

## One of Bishop Marengo's Greatest Joys as a Missionary

Second of nine children Lakshmi Devi was born on 16 March 1935 in a Hindu Nepali family near Rawalpindi in Pakistan. In 1953 Lakshmi Devi undertook a long journey to Assam to spend her holidays with a friend. She had her father's consent. Before the end of the same year the Lord would ask her father to give another consent which changed completely Lakshmi's life placing her definitively in the orbit which he had marked out for her.

The flood waters of the aggressive Brahmaputra disrupted railway lines in Assam and Lakshmi Devi was forced to spend a few days in Calcutta with a certain Mrs. Rayon, a good Catholic. Rayon's kindness made a deep impression on Lakshmi Devi. That was her first personal experience of Christ and His message. On reaching Assam she spent some days in Jorhat and Golaghat. In Golaghat she was struck by the simple lifestyle of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians. It was there that Lakshmi Devi first met Bishop

19. SHTCD-MM,I, 88.

Marengo. Later events prove that, that first meeting was no casual one. Slowly but steadily the seed of faith was being planted in Lakshmi's heart. Within a few years it was to blossom into a magnificent tree.

Lakshmi returned to Calcutta. When Mrs. Rayon left for England Lakshmi wrote to Bishop Marengo for permission to come and stay with the MSMHC Sisters in Dibrugarh. Bishop replied her immediately and also sent her the journey fare. When the two met in Dibrugarh, Lakshmi took the first chance to confide to Bishop her desire to become a Christian. Bishop Marengo was overjoyed and asked her to get the written permission of her father. Bishop himself drafted the letter for her:

> "Dear Dad,
>
> I know how much you love me and wish me to be happy in life. It would make me very happy, if you allow me to become a Christian. I shall love you more than ever before and pray for you every day".[20]

The most awaited reply came without much delay. It said:

> "My dear Lakshmi, I want you to be happy, and if becoming a Christian will make you happy, you have my full consent".[21]

8 December 1953 became a red letter day in Lakshmi's life as well as in that of Bishop Marengo. On that day Lakshmi Devi was baptized by Bishop Marengo, and took the name, Mary Rose.

Deep down in her heart, that was just the beginning of a new dream. It unfolded as she continued receiving

20. Ibid., 89.
21. Ibid.

Christian instruction and came to experience the life of the Sisters and the goodness of Bishop Marengo.

In the meantime a good Nepali boy from Calcutta on hearing that Lakshmi Devi had become a Catholic wrote to Bishop Marengo enquiring if she was willing to marry him. The Bishop showed the letter to Mary Rose. After reading it, she thought for a while and said:

> "Bishop, I will tell you by Christmas".
>
> "It struck me," wrote Bishop Marengo, "that a girl just received into the Church should think of Christmas as a proper day to make an important decision".[22]

She kept her promise. On Christmas day Mary Rose approached Bishop Marengo and confided to him something which brought him additional happiness.

> "Bishop," said the transformed Lakshmi Devi, "I am a very recent convert to Christianity and I know it will be difficult ... but if at all possible, I would like to become one of these [the MSMHC] Sisters".[23]

Rose Mary Thapa not only became a Sister. In 1970 she was also chosen to lead the Congregation as Mother General. She was Mother General for 18 fruitful years. During her term of office the Congregation took great strides in significant directions. The number of houses and members grew considerably. Above all, she endeared herself to one and all through her goodness and simplicity. Her capacity to love and be loved is stupendous.[24]

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22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Jane Mary Thadathil, *A Great Missionary Legacy*, Shillong/ Guwahati: Centre for Indigenous Peoples/Missionary Sisters Publications, 1997, 203-206.

Rose Mary Thapa brought still more joy to Bishop Marengo when the seed of faith took root once again in the Thapa family. That was on 11 January 1997. On that day Bishop Marengo, then in his 91st year, had the happiness of baptizing Ram Kumar Gurung, the nephew of Mother Mary Rose at the Little Flower Convent Chapel of the MSMHC at Hatigaon, Guwahati. Gurung took the name of 'Mark' to symbolize his 'total acceptance of Christ in his life'.[25] On the 13th of the same month Mark Gurung married Miss Manju Sharma. The presence of Bishop Marengo on that occasion too made the Thapa family extremely happy. As Bishop Marengo kissed the newly wed Mark, tears of joy ran down the Bishop's cheeks:

> "My son," he said, "today I feel really very happy. Keep your faith in Jesus alive, and pray for me".
>
> Mark in reply assured:
>
> "Yes, dear Bishop, I will remember you with much gratitude, and be faithful to Jesus till my death".[26]

Here we may add that Bishop Marengo's association with the MSMHC had been something of a continuation of Bishop Ferrando's fatherly love for them as founder. Bishop Marengo humbly delighted in repeating that Bishop Ferrando founded the MSMHC, but it was he who made use of them for his missionary work.[27]

At the time of his appointment as the first Bishop of Dibrugarh, the MSMHC had only two houses: the temporary sheds in Dibrugarh and in Golaghat. Bishop Marengo at his

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25. SHTCD-MF, 59.
26. Ibid.
27. Bishop Marengo put it in his humorous manner: "Someone laid the egg, and it was he [Bishop Marengo] who ate it up".

own initiative constructed a Middle English School for them in Dibrugarh, the first one of the MSMHC. From his mission tours in Nagaland and Manipur he used to bring children to be educated in the schools in Dibrugarh and Golaghat. The Golaghat school, though blessed by Bishop Ferrando, was developed by Bishop Marengo.

As a touring missionary priest during 1946-1951 and later as Bishop of the dioceses of Dibrugarh, Tezpur and as Apostolic Administrator of Tura, Bishop Marengo found the MSMHC suitable for village visiting and missionary evangelization. In the words of Mother E. Pakumala, out of the 39 houses owned by the Congregation of the MSMHC till 1980 in North East India, 15 owe their origin to Bishop Marengo.[28] In his humility he used to say:

> "If I have called the Sisters to open convents, it is because I needed their help to carry on the work which is entrusted to me".[29]

And the Sisters in their turn declared that Bishop Marengo's

> "missionary zeal, simplicity of life, large-heartedness, love for the poor, concern and care for the missionaries have made a lasting impression on all those who have collaborated with him".[30]

## He touched Our Hearts with Divine Love

Bishop Marengo's loving kindness has touched thousands of people wherever he has been. It is not easy to record all of them. From among them I would like to present the case of one who has been deeply moved by his goodness.

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28. MSMHC Golden Jubilee Special No. 10 (mimeographed). See also, Jane Mary Thadathil, op., cit., 190-191.
29. Ibid., 191.
30. Ibid.

Victoria. That's her name. Her father was a Punjabi Hindu attached to the tea garden in Tinkhong near Dibrugarh. His first wife was a Nepali from Darjeeling. It was only after the first marriage that he became a Catholic. After the death of his wife he came to work in Assam where he met an Assamese lady, a Baptist from Sibsagor, the future mother of Victoria and three others - two girls and a boy. This second marriage was blessed in Dibrugarh Cathedral when Fr. Dal Zovo was parish priest there.

Victoria's family was wealthy, and her father was generous. She remembers Bishop Marengo telling her that her father was one of the few who owned a car in those days in Dibrugarh. But her father passed away when Victoria was in class III at Little Flower School, Dibrugarh. With her father's prolonged illness and death, the family had become very poor. Her mother too died an year later leaving the young Victoria and her two little sisters and a brother. The years that followed can best be described in Victoria's own words.

"To make a living for me and for my sisters and brother:

> I have done all sorts of jobs from the age of 9, like selling tickets at the ladies' counter of a cinema hall, leading the audience to their seats once they enter the hall, running a 'pan, bidi, cigarette shop' in front of our house on the road, worked as a servant in the convent doing sweeping, swabbing, washing clothes, taking children of nursery class to the toilet and also during the monsoons sitting by the bank of the Brahmaputra river to get driftwood. I used to carry them home by evening and the following day chop and dry them and make them into bundles to be sold. I have also helped in different Marwari groceries to earn at least 8 annas a day".[31]

31. Letter of Victoria to J. Puthenpurakal, 19 September 1996. See SHTCD-MF, 16.

Victoria didn't stop at that. She was convinced that any work was honourable. By dint of hard work she finished her matric examination which she passed well. For sometime she taught in the Salesian Sisters' schools in Kohima and Guwahati. She came to Calcutta to do shorthand and typing. After completing it she was employed by the Walfords in Calcutta itself and soon after in their office in Guwahati. Being born of an Assamese mother Victoria loved Assam.

After her marriage to a certain Mr. D'Souza from Calcutta she worked in Dibrugarh as private secretary to the Registrar of Dibrugarh University before she settled down in Calcutta where she got a job in the Italian Embassy.

In Victoria's life - from her parents' death onwards till she came to stay in Calcutta and even afterwards - there was one person whom she 'adored and admired' greatly. And that was Bishop Orestes Marengo. His passing away on 30 July 1998 was one of the saddest days of her life.

When her father was very ill and the financial position of the family came toppling down to hit rock bottom especially after the death of her father and mother, one following the other, she felt 'orphaned'.

> "But Mgr. Marengo and others like him," writes Victoria, "did not allow us to feel so because they were very loving, compassionate, caring, understanding and were always available".[32]
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> "Bishop Marengo," Victoria affirms from experience, "is a person who understands without much explanation ... I consider myself fortunate to have known him".

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32. Ibid.

In Dibrugarh seeing little Victoria coming to collect her ration, Bishop Marengo would call her to himself, bless her and always give her something more to show his concern. Victoria lived about 3 kms from the Bishop's House and she remembers distinctly how Bishop Marengo would press some money into her hands asking her to take a rickshaw home.

> "I could never forget," registers Victoria summing up her recollections of Bishop Marengo in Dibrugarh, "his tenderness and concern".[33]

When Bishop Marengo was in Tezpur diocese as its first Bishop, Victoria had her two sisters studying in St. Joseph's school run by the Salesian Sisters. At that time she was a teacher in St. Mary's Guwahati, Bishop Marengo supported the two in Tezpur by paying half the fees for several years, since Victoria had to support her brother studying at that time in Don Bosco Liluah.

Victoria recalls that Bishop Marengo never once forgot her name. He used to be regular in corresponding with her, even when her reply was not regular. She treasures everyone of those letters even to this day. There were moments in her life when only the thought of Bishop Marengo sustained her and kept her up.

> "His eyes and smile, tells Victoria, have followed me all along. His prayer for me was my strength ... I always felt that my doing anything wrong would break his heart which was the last thing I desired in this world ... whereas others instilled fear into my heart, Bishop Marengo, love. Sometimes I have wondered, how could one have so much love to love!"[34]

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33. Ibid.
34. Interview with Victoria in Shillong, 26 November, 1996. See, SHTCD-MF,16.

Cecilia is another example:

Mrs. Cecilia Ryntathiang of Pynthorrit, Shillong, attests that when she was employed in Tinsukia as an *ayah* in a European family during the 1960s and used to come to Dibrugarh, she was so happy to meet Bishop Marengo and speak Khasi. She was struck by his great love for the poor. She attests that his prayer was powerful with God. When he left for Tezpur people were worried saying:

"Like him, we will never get one!"[35]

Mrs. J.E. Street, another witness, recalls how her parents, Mrs. and Mr. Alexander Thorse, were impressed by the gentle and affectionate ways of Bishop Marengo during their stay in Dibrugarh in the 1950s.[36]

Mrs. Rose Mary Sungoh, yet another example, was with her parents in Digboi when Bishop Marengo was in Dibrugarh. Since her mother died when she was very young and since her family was poor, Bishop Marengo used to help her. She remembers him very vividly among the children making them happy. Rose Mary was still small when one day Bishop Marengo asked her if she wished to make their first communion. When she said "yes", she recalls - the next question he asked her was:

"Are you ready to die for Jesus?"

"Yes,", she answered.

"Then," continued Bishop Marengo, "you can say you love Him. I therefore, allow you to make your First Holy Communion".

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35. Interview with Mrs. Cecilia Ryntathiang, SHTC, Shillong, 28 February, 1997. See, SHTCD-MF,16.
36. Telephonic conversation with Mrs. J.E. Street in Shillong on 28 July 1997. See also SHTCD-MF, 16.

> "Pray to God, and God will always provide what you need" - This she remembers, was Bishop Marengo's constant advice.

In later years when Mrs. Rose Mary Sungoh was in Jowai, she fell ill. Fr. C. Guidotto who met her in the hospital brought her to the Salesian Sisters at Jowai. Today Mrs. Rose Mary Sungoh is an active apostle in Nongrah.

Then there is the story of Ruby who met Fr. Marengo when she was a little girl of 5 years in St. Mary's Guwahati. She is today Sr. Catherine Hull RNDM. She belonged to a Hindu family. Her mother's relatives had some land in Naharkatiya. Sr. Catherine remembers the first two questions which Fr. Marengo asked her in Guwahati. By then Ruby was already baptized by Fr. Attilio Colussi and given the name 'Angela'.

"What's your name?", asked Fr. Marengo.

"Angela," she replied.

"Then, you are my 'angel'?"

"Yes"!

These two little questions and their answers helped to create a sincere friendship between Ruby and Fr. Marengo. When he was made the first Bishop of Dibrugarh, he searched and found out Ruby's family in Naharkatiya. His loving concern for them and the friendship he cherished with the family members led to the conversion of every member of Ruby's family. One by one they were all baptized by him except her father who was already a member of the Church of England.

Sr. Catherine recalls that during her holidays at home as a young girl, she used to be invited to light the lamp and perform the *puja*. But since she was already baptized, she refused to do it.

"That's the result of sending these [young ones] to Christian mission schools," shot back her aunty who was a staunch Hindu. It was her mother who consoled Ruby by saying:

"Don't worry, leave Ruby alone. Let her follow her father's religion".

Sr. Catherine remembers how on one occasion she even broke the idols and became angry at someone trying to force her to do puja.

Her happiness was immense when in later years she could gather her dear ones and pray to Jesus in the same place where the idols stood. For her Bishop Marengo was a 'father' loving and forgiving. In one of his visits to St. Mary's Guwahati, he found Angela getting a prize for catechism competition. To show his affection for her he gave her an additional prize, a small book entitled *Key to Heaven*. It was a simple gesture, but very symbolic. That's how the whole chain of relationship started.

Sr. Catherine has 4 brothers and no sister. They had a dog called 'Blacky' at home. He was the pet of her brothers. When Bishop Marengo asked one of her brothers what name he wanted to take at his baptism, the first name that came up was 'blacky'. Bishop had a laugh. He then allowed Bishop to suggest one. He gave him the name 'George'.

Something which impresses Sr. Catherine is Bishop Marengo's ability to keep in touch with people. Even from his retirement in Garobadha he used to write and enquire about each one by name in the family: George, Stephen, James, Pius and little 'Ruby' who became Sr. Catherine.

**Not Enough to be an 'M.A.'. You Must be an 'F.M.A.'**

Easter 1957. Miss Ivy D'Souza was in Dibrugarh.

> "You must meet him. Speak to him, for he is a holy person".

That's how Sr. Mary Mascharenhas and Sr. Teresa Villa, both Salesian Sisters, introduced Bishop Marengo to Miss Ivy. So Ivy went to meet him. She told all about her life to Bishop Marengo. Recalling that conversation Sr. Ivy remarked:

> "It was so pleasant to talk to him. I was at ease with him. I could talk freely".

At the end of 1957 Miss Ivy was told by the Sisters [she was an 'aspirant' at that time] to appear for her M.A. When the results appeared in February 1958, Ivy was already a postulant. She wrote to Bishop Marengo and informed him about her good results. Bishop Marengo congratulated her and then invited her to move into that orbit which the Lord had marked out for her. He did it in simple words:

> "It's not enough to be an M.A., you must become an F.M.A."

Ivy was already on the way to it. And the encouraging words of Bishop Marengo were an added support. They were not mere words. He had assured her his prayers and made sure that he replied every letter of hers to strengthen her in her vocation. One of his advice she will never forget. He said:

> "Like the creeper that clings to the wall, you must cling to Jesus".

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37. Miss Ivy D'Souza and her companion Miss Maria Rodrigues had come together from Bombay to teach in St. Mary's School, Guwahati. As a Salesian Sister Maria is one year senior to Sr. Ivy.

Ivy did her novitiate in 1958-1960.[37] In 1964 when Bishop Marengo was in Bombay, he made sure that he paid a visit to her home. On that occasion Sr. Ivy too had gone there all the way from Jowai to be with her family. Her parents and relations remember with joy Bishop Marengo's visit to their home.

Even when Sr. Ivy was away in Italy for her studies, Bishop Marengo kept in touch with her. Sr. Ivy points out that Bishop Marengo's replies were not just 'news'. His was something that provided deeper and stronger motivation in one's spiritual life. He always gave the impression of a 'personal' friend who was always 'concerned'. That's one reason that he remembers people by name.

In 1959 on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of the Episcopal Ordination of Archbishop L. Mathias and Bishop S. Ferrando, Bishop Marengo accompanied them to the F.M.A. novitiate in Nongthymmai. It was Sr. Ivy who read the address of welcome. As soon as Bishop Marengo heard her voice, he asked someone near by: "Is it not Sr. Ivy?"

Like Sr. Ivy there are many who can testify to Bishop Marengo's personal love for people.

**Rescue Operation**

"Good Morning, Fathers!". That's how it all began for Fr. Sngi. It was winter 1962. The students of theology from the Sacred Heart Theological Institute, Kotagiri, had gone for a picnic to Coonoor, a delightful hill station in the 'blue' Nilgiris. Strolling through the streets of Coonoor Fr. Sngi along with two Brothers - all three doned in immaculate white cassocks - entered a by-lane which passed in front of a Hindu Ashram. The time, just before mid-day meal. It was not possible for the children who were looking out of the

Ashram to miss the sight of those three men in cassock. They recognized that they were Catholic priests. Their "Good Morning" was not the usual, routine kind, but special, full of hope. In fact the whole crowd of them ran down to the gate of the Ashram to meet Fr. Sngi and the two Brothers. Fr. Sngi had already noticed their 'Mongoloid' features. He guessed that they were from somewhere in the North East.

"Where are you from?", he enquired.

"From Manipur," pat came their reply. And one of them added immediately:

"I am the small brother of Mr. Sailo".

"How did you land up here?", pursued Fr. Sngi out of curiosity.

The 'how' of it is a long story. But the children made it short.

"We were sent to study in an English medium school. But we landed up here in this Ashram. Here we learn English and Hinduism. But some of us are Catholics, Father".

"Who brought you here?", enquired Fr. Sngi further.

The children replied what they knew:

"Some Hindu organization from Manipur and Nagaland. We were recruited by some Naga educated men who are working in Delhi".

Since it was time for their picnic lunch, and since it was not prudent to delve into details just there, Fr. Sngi and the two Brothers wished the children goodbye with a promise that they would meet them again.

That day's lunch was special for Fr. Sngi, not only because it was a 'picnic' lunch, but because of the conversation

he shared with the two Brothers who had accompanied him for a stroll. "Why were Catholic children from the North East taken to the South to learn Hinduism and English?", this question kept on knocking for an answer.

True to his promise, Fr. Sngi in the company of some others went to Coonoor again after about a week. This time the students met Fr. Sngi and his companions displaying their medals they had around their necks - medals carrying the figures of Christ or his Mother Mary. A simple gesture. What they wanted to express and they wanted Fr. Sngi to believe was clear: that they were truly 'Catholics'. Who else would wear medals of that sort in the precincts of a Hindu Ashram! Fr. Sngi understood the signal. The Ashram authorities, however, seemed to have 'mis'understood it. Their faces changed. Fr. Sngi was told to cut short his visit and to leave the Ashram forthwith.

On reaching back Kotagiri Fr. Sngi's doubts became more pronounced. He wrote to Bishop Marengo in Dibrugarh explaining what he had heard from the Naga children in Coonoor. Since Coonoor was in the diocese of Ootacamund, he also appraised the Bishop about the anxiety of those Naga children in '*Sri Sarguru Senior Basic School*' belonging to the '*Sri Sarguru Sarva Samarasa Sangam*'. The Bishop's reply was brief:

> "We know nothing about this matter. Hence, we cannot do anything. Do whatever you think best".

The reaction of the Rector of the Sacred Heart Theological Institute, Kotagiri, was what Fr. Sngi had suspected:

> "Be careful! This is a dangerous matter. We missionaries may get into trouble. Do it in such as way as not to get us involved".

In the meantime the parents of the students in far away Mao (Manipur) were becoming more worried. They had several village level meetings. They wrote to Bishop Marengo in Dibrugarh. Bishop Marengo in his turn wrote to Fr. Sngi requesting him to do whatever was needed so that the Ashram authorities would allow the children to return to their homes in Manipur. Things became complicated when a letter of a certain Mr. Sailo, the brother of one of the boys, came to the attention of the Ashram in-charge. The content of the letter was that the boy should go to Fr. Sngi and stay with him. From then on Fr. Sngi became a suspect in the eyes of the *Sri Sarguru Sarva Samarasa Sangam* authorities.

Without knowing all what was happening, one day Fr. Sngi turned up at the Ashram to meet Mr. Sailo's brother. One can only imagine the fury of the Ashram authorities when they came to know that Fr. Sngi had come again to the Ashram. In the words of Fr. Sngi:

> "They [the Ashram authorities] closed the gate and sent me away, saying that I was causing trouble in the Ashram".

Fr. Sngi went back to Kotagiri. After a week he received an insulting letter from one of those Nagas who were responsible for sending those students to Coonoor. With his usual calmness and unusual perception Fr. Sngi replied exposing clearly the trickery behind the whole episode. He also threatened to take action against him through the proper channel, if the Catholic children were not freed without delay.

Fr. Sngi's letter had the desired effect. Arrangements to allow the children to return to their homes were made forthwith by those concerned. Fr. Sngi informed Bishop Marengo to send a priest to accompany the students back to

the North East. Things moved fast. The children were freed. And the curtain came down to conclude a rare episode.

It all began with a bright prospect: some Mao Naga young men working in New Delhi had offered the children 'English Education' in Delhi itself. How they then landed up in Coonoor under the pretext of 'national integration' and why they were introduced to Hinduism and asked to worship Kali or Durga and how one day one of the boys got angry and kicked the idol and broke it causing a furore in the Ashram are now part of history.

No one should doubt the good intentions on the part of the Ashram authorities. They must have gone out of their way to make the Naga children feel at home. But the children felt their 'home' was in Manipur. Their God was Jesus Christ.

In the whole process, for the parents of the Naga children at Coonoor Fr. Sngi was an effective reference point. In a memorandum drafted by A. Kaisho Mao at Kohima dated 14th June 1963, a copy of which was sent also to Fr. Sngi in Kotagiri, we read a few lines in Khasi meant only for Fr. Sngi:

> "Ngi sngewnguh shibun eh ia ka jingleh bha jong phi na ka bynta ki khynnah. Wat sngewsih ba ngi pynshitom ia phi, hynrei ngin leh kumno ngim don lad da kumwei pat lait tang ban shu ia kyrpad ia phi ba phin sngewbha ban pynbeit lem ia ki khynnah rit. Ynda ki kmie ki kpa jong ki khynnah baroh ki la mynjur ban pynlang peisa na ka bynta ban wallam noh ia ki khynnah sha la iing ngin sa thoh pat sha phi".[38]

38. "We are indeed very grateful to you for all what you have done for the children. Kindly excuse us for all the trouble we are causing you. We have no other way but to request you to arrange for the children to return. When the parents of all the children will agree to collect enough money for bringing their children home, we shall write to you again".

Bishop Marengo who came to know of the worry of the parents wrote to them on 21 May 1963 to send an authorization letter to Fr. Sngi to negotiate with the Ashram authorities. It was sent on 25 May 1963. On 25 June the Bishop sent one of his priests. He led the Naga children back home to Manipur.[39]

**St. Joseph's Seminary, Dibrugarh**

Bishop Marengo guided by his motto *'To Seek Souls'*, always found the mission field responsive and immense. As such he would never say that he had enough personnel or means. Personnel and means were always lacking in comparison with the work he had at hand.

As Fr. Dal Zovo notes in the chronicles of St. Joseph's Seminary Dibrugarh, the idea of starting a minor seminary was for long in the mind of Bishop Marengo. But the plan of having one for both Shillong and Dibrugarh together kept on coming up in discussions in higher circles. And finally after much consultation, it was decided that the blessing of the foundation stone for a minor seminary in Dibrugarh for both Shillong and Dibrugarh would be held on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of the episcopal consecration of Archbishop L. Mathias and Bishop S. Ferrando in November 1959. Somehow that did not materialize. In fact, the jubilee was celebrated, but not a word was mentioned about the seminary. And not knowing how long he had to wait for a common seminary, Bishop Marengo proposed the idea of a seminary for Dibrugarh to the Sacred Congregation of *Propaganda Fide* during his first *ad limina* visit to Rome in 1960. The proposal was accepted by Mgr. Mazza of the same Sacred Congregation.

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39. For Documents concerning this, see, SHTCD-MF, 65.

From Rome Bishop Marengo wrote to Fr. Dal Zovo to get ready a plan for the building and to send it to Rome without delay. Accordingly Fr. T. Lopez prepared a plan as an extension to the existing old Don Bosco School near the Bishop's House. Rome promised a help of Rs. 60,000 in three instalments. And the first instalment was received in 1961.

In November of the same year Mgr. John Knox, the Apostolic Pro-Nuncio, who visited Dibrugarh approved the idea of a minor seminary and exhorted Bishop Marengo to build it to accommodate at least 150 seminarians:

"You will see that it will soon be filled," assured the Pro-Nuncio.

A humble beginning was made during 1961 itself by keeping 6 boys from Don Bosco School who had expressed their desire to join the seminary in Don Bosco itself. Fr. Buccieri from Garo hills asked if he could send a Garo boy to the seminary. Fr. Dal Zovo after consulting with Fr. Zanon, the Rector of Don Bosco School, despatched a telegramme asking Fr. Buccieri to send the boy immediately. Meanwhile, boys arrived from different places. Two came on 16 January 1962. The 15 boys sent by Fr. Ravalico and Fr. Wollaston from Manipur reached on 19 January. In the meantime the boy promised by Fr. Buccieri too arrived. There was also a certain Dominic Tage from the mission school in Doom Dooma, perhaps the first Abor candidate. All these boys who made the first group of minor seminarians stayed in the parish house and hall and were given Latin classes by Fr. Zanghellini. The Garo boy, however, returned to Garo hills after about a year, and the Abor boy too had to discontinue, since he could not cope with the studies. More seminarians joined in the following months. Fr. M. Uzhunnalil who went to Kerala in search of vocations selected 8 post-matric boys. They were brought to Dibrugarh in July 1963 by Fr. P.C. Mani.

All these prove the great earnestness of the missionaries and especially of Bishop Marengo not to miss any vocation whether local or otherwise in building up the Church in North East India.

When everything seemed to go well, there came the Chinese aggression in November 1962 on the Indian border. The seminarians were asked to return to their homes. But the situation improved, and they were asked to return to Dibrugarh in January 1963.

Even in the make-shift arrangements of the early days of St. Joseph's Seminary, Bishop Marengo showed great interest in vocations. He made sure to visit the seminarians, and was always happy to give them the *good night talks* every Sunday evening and whenever he was able to do so.

The effort to increase the number of seminarians continued. At the same time, the search was begun to get a suitable land for putting up the seminary building.

Here we may remember that as far back as 1956-57 the present location of the minor seminary in Lichubari in Kodamani area was offered to the Catholic Church. It is said that Fr. Piasecki himself had gone to see it with a view to acquiring it. But that idea was not followed up at that time due to other more pressing needs. Finally through the efforts of Fr. Mathew Uzhunnalil SDB the same plot at Lichubari, namely, the present site, was acquired and the blessing and laying of the foundation stone by Bishop Marengo took place on 19 March 1964, the feast of St. Joseph. The name of the seminary suggested by Fr. Uzhunnalil was gladly accepted by Bishop Marengo. The parchment composed by Fr. Dal

Zovo and enclosed in a bottle and placed in the foundation reads:[40]

*Anno Domini MCMLXIV*

*Regnante Summo Pontifice Paulo VI*

*Summo Indiarum Moderatore Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan,*

*In die festo Sancti Joseph Sponsi Beatae Mariae Virginis,*

*Hunc Angularem lapidem Seminarii Minoris Diocesis Dibrugarhensis,*

*eidem Sancto dedicati benedixit et posuit*

*Rev.mus Orestes Marengo, Societatis Salesianae*

*ad Dei Gloriam et Ecclesiae triumphum.*

Significantly, the playlet that was put up for the entertainment on the day of the blessing and laying of the foundation stone was *the Happy Jailbirds*. Anyone visiting St. Joseph Seminary will be struck by the happiness that reigns there.

The news of the transfer of Bishop Marengo from Dibrugarh to Tezpur was made known in July 1964. That did not in anyway slow down the construction of the seminary. The first part of the three storey building was blessed by Fr. Paul Taverna SDB, the Vicar General of Tezpur, on 11 February 1965. Fr. Ignatius Rubio took over as the Rector of the seminary on 1 February of the same year. The new Bishop Mgr. Hubert D'Rosario, paid an informal visit to the seminary

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40. Here is a literal translation:
The Year of the Lord 1964.
During the Pontificate of Pope Paul VI,
Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan being the President of India,
this foundation stone of St. Joseph's Minor Seminary of the Diocese of Dibrugarh was laid by the Rt. Rev. Orestes Marengo SDB to the glory of God and the good of the Church on the feast of St. Joseph, the Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

on 28 August 1964. At the formal and more solemn welcome given to him in the Cathedral on 13 December 1964, Bishop Marengo preached a very touching sermon in Hindi and in English at which the seminarians too were present.

The blessing of the statue of St. Joseph which adorns the entrance to the seminary on 18 March 1965 by Bishop Hubert D'Rosario, the sub-diaconate ordination of Bro. T. J. Chacko on the same day as well as the send-off given to the first batch of 6 seminrians who left for the major seminary in Poonamallee for their philosophy course on 26 April 1965 bring to a happy completion Bishop Marengo's efforts to establish the minor seminary in Dibrugarh.

**Mission in Manipur**

Bishop Marengo never forgot his first audience with Pope Pius XII in which Manipur, the "land of gems" and the neighbouring Nagaland were mentioned. The optimism of the Pontiff gave much encouragement to the Bishop.

**Mission among the Tangkhuls**

Four years after the historic visit of Fr. Attilio Colussi and Fr. Marengo to the Tangkhul area in November 1948, Fr. H. Marocchino from Kohima made a visit to Hundung in February 1952 at the invitation of A.S. Dominic Shomi. Shomi had contacted Bishop S. Ferrando in Shillong, who in turn asked Fr. Marocchino to visit the area. With no road, the only option was to walk from Litan to Hundung. He reached Hundung on 10 February 1952.

On the following day Fr. Marcchino celebrated Holy Mass in the house where he was put up. In the first meeting that was held in front of the village chapel he spoke to them about God's love for mankind, His sending Jesus as Saviour, and about the Church Jesus founded with Peter as its visible

head. In the discussion that followed some 350 people belonging to 33 families and who were prepared by A.S. Dominic Shomi decided to join the Catholic Church. Thus the words of Fr. A. Colussi and Fr. O. Marengo at the end of their visit in 1948 began to be a reality:

> "We have prayed to God that you may have the gift of the Catholic Church in Tangkhul area. He will hear our prayers, and the seeds of His Church will truly grow".[41]

Fr. A. Ravalico made his maiden visit to Ukhrul in December 1952 in connection with the wedding of a past pupil of Don Bosco Guwahati.[42] On the day following the wedding he came to Hundung where about 30 families were ready to be received into the Church. However, he promised to return to Hundung to baptize them. Before leaving he baptized 36 children.[43] Fr. Ravalico kept his promise and came back to Hundung for Holy Week 1953. On that occasion he received into the Church 120 adults. In course of time the faith spread from Hundung to the neighbouring villages of Choithar, Nungshong and Ukhrul, the headquarters of the Tangkhul

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41. *Silver Jubilee Souvenir* of the arrival of the Catholic Missionaries in Manipur: 1952-1977, 18.
42. At this point it is not easy to verify the dates of Fr. Ravalico's visit to the Tangkhul area. Bishop Marengo in his memoirs notes that "Fr. Ravalico made his first trip to Manipur and to Tangkhul area towards the end of 1952" (Vol.I, 56). Whereas, Mr. Ronald Trevor Byrne gives October 1953 as the probable date of Fr. Ravalico's first visit to Imphal and Ukhrul. See, *Nirmalarani Church: A Souvenir on the Silver Jubilee of its dedication, 1961-1985*, 37. Also letters received by the author from A.S. John Mishivam, ex-catechist of Choithar village, gives April 1952 as Fr. Ravalico's visit to Choithar.
43. On arrival at Imphal for the first time on his way to Ukhrul, Fr. A. Ravalico was met by Mr. Ronald Trevor Byrne in whose house he stayed. For details, see *Nirmalarani Church: A Souvenir on the Silver Jubilee of its Dedication, 1961-1986*, 36-37.

area. These were also the first Catholic communities that provided catechists for other villages that gradually sprung up.

Fr. Ravalico returned to Imphal in December of the same year and made a quick tour of several villages in Pallel area. He returned to Imphal on 2 January 1954. When he returned to Dibrugarh he was accompanied by 30 children including Sheila, the daughter of Mrs. and Mr. Ronald Trevor Byrne, to be admitted in schools and boardings at Dibrugarh.

During Fr. Ravalico's absence, then away in Europe or America for the sake of finding funds for his work in Manipur, Bishop Marengo visited Manipur more than once. He always enjoyed touring the villages and being with his flock. He was a 'Father' to his people. His joy was to be with them. In spite of the strenuous walks up and down the hills he would visit the Tangkhul Naga and other communities twice a year: in December and in January when it was rather cold. Some of the villages were 7000 feet above sea level. It was never snowing, but the fields were white with frost and the water in the paddy fields, frozen. His second visit usually was in April-May before the monsoon set in. Still, the heavy monsoon downpour would get him in some village or other before he concluded his touring.

In the first Tangkhul communities there were always generous and sacrificing groups of Catholic youngmen and women, a sort of Catholic Action, who made sure that the faith that was sown was taken care of, and that it spread from village to village. Whenever the Bishop went from one village to another about ten to fifteen of these young men and women would accompany him.

The Tangkhul villages including the pagan villages were very hospitable. In the winter months soon after the harvest the people generally had enough rice for all those who

accompanied the Bishop. In fact, the villagers themselves would vie with one another to invite him. There was great eagerness to deepen the Christian faith. The young people who went with him instructed the people, taught them singing and prepared them for baptism and confirmation. Some of them knew English and people like Dominic Shomi and others translated the talks of the Bishop.

Recalling his visits during the first few years, Bishop Marengo writes:

> "Sometimes it was hard for me to restrain my tears when saying Mass in a community of only three to four years standing that could sing and pray devoutly and harmoniously and approach the sacraments with the faith of an old fervent Christian community".[44]

In the plains of Assam as a rule he would not have accepted into the Church young boys and girls, even if they had come with the due permission of their parents. He wanted the whole family to come over together, lest they would go astray when the time for the marriage came. Instead, among the Tangkhul Nagas and other hill tribes he knew that he could safely receive young children both because the pagan parents would not interfere in their children's religion, and because the groups of Catholic young men and women would soon absorb those new Christian children and would look after them.

Pagans on becoming Christians as a rule gave up drinking rice beer and all intoxicating beverages. That was also what the Baptist church demanded. However, one of the accusations which they levelled against the Catholics was that the Catholic Church allowed its adherents to drink or rather, did not forbid the people strictly enough. The Baptist

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44. Ibid., 64.

brethren could not easily understand that it is a sin to get drunk and that people's conscience should not be distorted by making them feel that a little drink is sinful! Perhaps, they found it easier to tell the people 'don't drink' rather than educate them to its correct use.

Once, the Catholics of Choithar, a large community of neophytes came to Bishop Marengo with a problem that worried them. In a Naga village when people broke new land or sowed or planted, they did it on a community basis. They helped each other in turn according to the order of the village headman. The American Baptists used to separate the Christians from the pagan part of the village and would settle them in a new area. From the beginning Bishop Marengo told his Catholics that it was neither necessary nor Christian to dissociate themselves from the rest of the village. Rather, he insisted that they live with the pagans and be as friendly as before and that they were to help each other and work together as a village community. He also told them to take part in all the community works and celebrations except what was clearly against the teaching of the Church. But the real problem was that when the Catholics called the pagans to work in their fields, the custom was to provide them with rice beer, even though they themselves did not drink. But the pagan friends did. Bishop Marengo listened to them attentively and then told them to meet him in the evening along with some of their pagan friends.

In the evening the neophytes came with a group of their pagan friends. Bishop Marengo addressed them saying:

> "It is the desire and the teaching of our Church that the Catholics should cooperate in the community works and celebrations of the village community. You demand that my people should serve you drink when you come to work for them. This is quite right. I will

> tell them to prepare rice beer for you, but you will agree that I cannot tell them to make you drunk".

Then an elder from the pagan group stood up and said with becoming gravity:

> "Sir, we sometimes drink to excess, but we ourselves know it is wrong and we are ashamed of it. So your people, our friends, need have no misgiving on this score, and we thank you, Sir, for being so obliging".

Since we are still in Choithar, it may be noted here that Mr. A.S. John Mishivam, the first catechist of Choithar village, was one of the first to be baptized from there. The date of the baptism as given by him is 13 April 1952. It was administered by Fr. A. Ravalico on the occasion in which he baptized some 35 people.[45]

Mr. A.S. James Mingmayang gives the names of 12 persons of the first group from St. Joseph Catholic Chuch, Choithar (M.S. Maximus Maringmi, H. Dominic Mashangthei, H. Carlus Khumkhui, H. Patric Keising, A.S. Isaac Shangazan, Miss M.S. Sarah Mangkhapla, Mrs. M. S. Naomi Yangyirla, Mrs. M.S. Prescila Pashila, Mrs. H. Christina Khaikhaila, Mr. A.S. Mariana Mahala, Mrs. L. Teresa Takreila and Mrs. L. Martina Changnila) who like young apostles accompanied Bishop Marengo and Fr. Ravalico in their first tours in Tangkhul area from 1953 onward.[46]

To give an idea of a visit in those early years of the Catholic mission among the Tangkhuls, here are a few lines:

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45. See the letter and description given by Mr. A.S. James Mingmayang, ex-vice president of Sacred Heart Parish Pastoral Council, Hundung, and later Deputy Zonal Education Officer, Ukhrul, in SHTCD-MF, 46.
46. Ibid.

The party used to set out from Khamasom Phungrei village, for example, one of the first villages to accept the Catholic faith in that area. The jungle paths were covered with wild berries and flowers on both sides. Their first halt was Langdang. They spent some time there singing and praying. From Langdang they proceeded to Shiroi two kms away. At Shiroi film strips containing the passion and death of Jesus were shown with explanation. When people saw Jesus carrying the heavy cross, some of them grew anxious for Jesus and shouted: 'Oh, the cross is big, and if it falls on Him, Jesus will die!'[47]

After the film strip show, they recited the rosary. It was followed by *good night talk* by Bishop Marengo.

The following morning Mass was celebrated at Shiroi. After they had their meal, they continued their missionary journey to Lunghar which they reached after 3 hours on foot. They crossed hills and valleys, singing and praying all the way. Miss Christina remembers giving wild berries to Bishop Marengo who after eating replied *'shaiphai, shaiphai'* meaning 'tasty, tasty'. At Nunghar Bishop Marengo and his party were welcomed by Mr. H.S. James, a Baptist. He offered tea with boiled eggs and Naga bread to the group. After refreshing themselves, they continued their tour and reached Choithar. There too they had film strips and instruction. They spent the night sleepless, since it was biting cold and the party did not have enough warm clothes.

On the following morning Mass was celebrated with baptisms of some elders. Stephen Khaso, the catechist, explained the Mass part by part. After meal meeting and house visiting, the group continued its tour. Bishop Marengo, Fr. Ravalico and some Khamasom Catholics proceeded to Nungbi village

47. Ibid.

while the others went back to Khamasom Phungrei. As they parted Bishop Marengo wished them '*chingrihairanu*', 'peace be with you'. They shook hands, both groups shed tears of joy for what the Lord had accomplished through them.[48]

Mrs. Solomi Phachang describes how Bishop Marengo along with A.S. Dominic Shomi and his friends used to go on foot to Choithar, Khangkhui, Nungshong, Pushing, Mapum in the East and from there over hills and dales to Khamasom Phungrei, Nungbi, Paoyi and Chingjaroi on the far North.

In the South of Hundung he used to visit Shingkap, Lungphu, Tangkhul Hundung, Chingsou, Tarong, Mawai, Khunthak, etc. to preach the Gospel.[49] On one occasion Bishop spent the whole night on the verandah of an unknown person's house in a village in Keihao parish in the Kasom sub-division, and without food. In the early morning he left for Yaripok and from there he proceeded to Imphal. Both Mr. A.S. John Mishivam of Choithar and Mrs. Solomi Phachang of Hundung testify that Bishop Marengo was 'a praying Bishop'.[50]

The recorded visits of Bishop Marengo to Hundung and nearby villages as seen in the Baptism and Confirmation registers between April 1954 to January 1964 are 24. During these visits he administered 883 Confirmations. There is no doubt that the Tangkhul Catholic community had a special place in his fatherly heart. They were his first love in the Hills of Manipur. From among the children brought by him from the Tangkhul hills to the boarding schools in Assam, Shillong or elsewhere, Sr. Theresa Shimrah MSMHC, a

48. Ibid.
49. Letter of Mrs. Solomi Phachang to J. Puthenpurakal dated 25 March 1996. See, SHTCD-MF, 46.
50. See, their letters in SHTCD-MF, 46.

Tangkhul, is the first Religious Sister.[51] Bishop Marengo helped them in their needs as he had done all his life with regard to other communities too in the rest of North East India. It was painful for him not to be able to help someone. From his reply from Rongkhon, Garo Hills, on 19 May 1995, we get a glimpse of Bishop Marengo's fatherly heart even though he was in retirement after years of strenuous work. He wrote to the priest concerned:

> "Dear Rev. Father,
>
> I do not forget the promise I had made to help you when possible. But now I do not see this will be possible as at present I have no benefactors. I had a very generous benefactress, but her great generosity to me must have made her broke, for it is now two months she is not sending me any help.
>
> My successors in Dibrugarh, Tezpur, Imphal and Tura have my benefactors. Some of my benefactors are also in Shillong as the late Archbishop of Shillong also was my successor in Dibrugarh. I am the only one who has now no benefactors; and therefore no means of helping you.
>
> Dear Father, I am almost blind. I cannot read what I write and I am only much afraid you cannot read my horrible scribbling.
>
> It is now 2 years I cannot read least of all my own handwriting. I beg to be excused if I cannot keep my promise. May God bless you and your work and keep us all in His holy love.
>
> Believe me ever in union of prayers,
>
> Yours sincerely and aff.ly,
>
> (s/d + O. Marengo SDB)" [52]

51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 65.

### A Kind Thought for the Protestants

The American Baptists had been working in the Tangkhul area for at least 60 years before the Catholics arrived there. Bishop Marengo speaking of their contribution to the spread of the faith says:

> "They have done very good work, converted large numbers and most of their converts are convinced and sincere Christians. We must admire them. Theirs was a real pioneering work".[53]

Already from the first trip he made to Manipur in November 1948 together with Fr. Attilio Colussi he was taken up with the beautiful tin roofed Baptist churches on hill tops overlooking the villages. They were very conspicuous.

> "One could not help being happy, he wrote, that the Saviour was known and loved and worshipped in all those villages".[54]

Bishop Marengo always had a kind thought for the Protestant brethren. Whenever possible he saw the positive side of events and persons connected with them.

It was only understandable that the American Baptists who reached the Tangkhul Hills some 60 years before the Catholics, should consider the Catholics as 'invaders' especially when one realizes that most of the Baptist converts had very little or no idea at that time of the origin and history of the Catholic Church. They resented the Catholic presence in villages where the Baptists were a sizeable majority. They even spoke of the 'danger of contagion by the Catholic Church'. They also printed and diffused defamatory publications against the Catholic Church, its

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53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., 67

teachings and practices. Some of the writers went to the extent of digging up old accusations, silly objections and veritable calumnies to place before simple people. The simple people began to feel that the Catholics were 'so bad that any stick was good enough to beat them'.[55]

For a long time Bishop Marengo did not mind this sort of anti-Catholic propaganda. He was convinced that with improved literacy and correct knowledge about the Catholic Church things would improve. However, when things reached the point of a personal attack on the Bishop, he was ready to face the music.

Once in connection with an American Baptist school teacher who had spread some calumny against the Bishop, he showed that he could face it. During the course of his tour he reached near the village where the young man was teaching. Bishop Marengo sent the people to meet him. But as soon as he heard that the Bishop wanted to meet him, he absconded. He was still absconding the following day. This time the Bishop passed through his village. He called the headmaster of the school and told him in no uncertain terms that unless his assistant teacher apologized and made amends, he would straight away file a case of defamation. It worked. The next day the young man himself came to Hundung where the Bishop was. He had a written statement to the effect that whatever he had spread was his own fabrication. Not to make his apology too hard, Bishop did not show himself. He sent Fr. Peter Bianchi who was then touring with him to handle the matter.

By and by the attitude of the Baptists changed. They began to realize that the Catholics were not 'as black as they had been painted'.

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55. SHTCD-MM,I, 68.

Once Bishop Marengo received a letter from a Baptist Pastor complaining that the Catholics were preaching to those who already knew Christ and that it was causing doubts among the Baptists. He also alleged that some of the Catholics were indulging in disparaging the Baptist pastors. The Bishop replied saying that the Catholic missionaries never went to any Baptist centre unless they were personally invited by those who wanted to hear directly from them. In fact the Bishop had instructed the catechists not to use derogatory words. He was visibly annoyed when any of the Baptist pastors were referred to unkindly, for he held them in esteem for whatever good they were doing. As regards the calumnies they were spreading about the Catholics, the Bishop pointed out that they would boomerang against them, once the people became educated and came to know the truth.

In his village tours Bishop Marengo was always accompanied by a group of youngsters. Whenever he was approached by some of the Baptists with their usual doubts about Confession, devotion to the Mother of God, attitude towards the Bible, etc. he would just tell them:

"Do not ask me".

And then pointing to his own Catholics, he would add:

"Here are those who know us. Please ask them".

In principle Bishop Marengo refrained from debates and arguments.

"The happiness of our Catholics," he used to say,

"was the best convincing arguments and the most effective sermon!"

**On to Chingjaroi**

Chingjaroi, some forty kms North of Ukhrul, was a very big Tangkhul village even at the time of Bishop Marengo. In winter it can be very cold there. During one of his visits he was coming up the slope with a group of young people accompanying him. All of a sudden he heard a chorus of shouting and screaming with the accompaniment of what sounded like a noisy pounding on a wooden floor. On enquiry he was told that since a few weeks the Baptists who had become revivalists had separated themselves from the main village and had built a new settlement and were very hot on 'revival'. The noise was coming from their church.

Some years later he met Rev. Gilbert of the Tura Baptist Church. He asked him about the noisy type of revivalism he came across in different places in the North East. His reply was:

> "Please do not ask me about it. I know it is going on in some of our churches, but I have absolutely no time for it. Too often there is very little religion in this kind of a thing and excesses are committed".[56]

On another occasion a group of young men and women from the pagan section of Chingjaroi village came to know about the Catholic faith. They got themselves instructed. They used to gather to pray and sing by themselves. The diehard pagans of Chingjaroi started persecuting them. The pagan father of one of the girls even tried to kill her for becoming a Catholic. Barbara was her baptismal name. One day her father placed a very heavy stone above the door in such a way that when Barbara came back late from the prayer meeting and tried to open the door, the stone would fall on her head!

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56. Ibid., 63.

The good Lord warded off the danger. The stone fell down, but not on her head. The steadfastness of Barbara and youth like her acted as a leaven on the big pagan section of Chingjaroi.

Bishop Marengo, realizing the need of educating the children, used to arrange for seats for young boys and girls from far away villages in the various boarding houses in his diocese. One such little girl was Seraphina whom he brought to Dibrugarh as a little girl from Chingjaroi. It was when there was no Priest or Sister staying in Manipur. That little girl was to become the wife of catechist Sylvester of Chingjaroi.

Bishop Marengo's care for his flock was expressed in many such little deeds which bore fruit in the course of years. Today Chingjaroi has a very big Tangkhul Catholic community.

**Kill Me that I may join Her**

Khamasong, one of the oldest Catholic villages of Tangkhul area, had been impervious to the endeavour of the Baptists to conquer it. Only very few of those staunch pagans had become Baptists, whereas in a very short time a big and fervent Catholic community had sprung up among those simple and honest pagans. Among the neophytes there was a young girl, an only daughter of a pagan family. The mother had gladly allowed her daughter to become a Christian but she herself had not made up her mind.

On his next visit to Khamasong he was given the sad news that the girl had died. After the Mass Bishop Marengo invited the people to go with him to bless the tomb, an isolated tomb on the road side on a plot of land belonging to the family of the deceased. The mother of the girl had followed crying and during the blessing was looking on with stunned silence.

As Bishop Marengo and the others were preparing to come away, she drew out a hatchet she had been hiding in her little bag. She handed it to the Bishop, and then falling on her daughter's tomb, she started shrieking:

> "I've given my daughter to you, now she is no more, you kill me that I may join her".

It was a heartrending scene. Bishop Marengo caught her by both her hands and lifted her up, and then looking straight into her face he told her:

> "You will never meet your daughter that way, you will meet her only if you walk her path. She is now happy with God, but quite close to you. She is waiting for you".

She seemed to calm down and kept looking at him speechless. We do not know how much she might have understood of what he told her. Bishop Marengo then entrusted her to one of the Catholic women requesting her to explain to the heart-broken mother what he had tried to tell her. Bishop Marengo never heard of her again. But he is confident that her daughter had obtained her the grace of baptism.

Even after many years memories like this would come back occasionally to his mind. He re-lives the days he spent among the neophytes of different Naga tribes of Manipur.

**Mission among the Kuki-Chins**

When mission work was progressing among the Tangkhuls, there was good response also from the tribes inhabiting the Indo-Burma (Myanmar) border, especially from the Zous and the Thadous. Equally responsive groups where the Lothas and the Angamis in Nagaland. Bishop found it very hard to cope up with the ever growing demands from these several responsive tribes (the Tangkhuls, the Zous,

the Thadous, the Lothas and the Angamis) in addition to the work going on in Assam. In the face of these multiple demands Bishop Marengo could not afford to take another priest with him in his tours.

The border line between Manipur and Myanmar was not clearly defined. The Chin Hills inhabited mostly by Zous and Thadous from Manipur extended into Myanmar. India and Myanmar had agreed on a policy according to which the hill people could enter each others country freely forty kms both ways. This rule of course was not valid for foreigners.

As the area was new to Bishop Marengo, he had to trust his catechists and guides in going from one village to another. He had also cautioned them that on no account they should take him into Burma. But since some of the Thadou Catholic communities were right on the border, there was always the risk of crossing into Myanmar.

**Do not worry, I will not get You into Trouble**

Once Bishop Marengo was on his way to a rather big community of Thadous in the village of Tengnopal quite close the border. He had been there once before. But this time the path was not familiar to him. He asked Marcus, the head catechist:

"Are we reaching Tengnopal?"

Marcus was the catechist of that particular area; he was rather rough, but a very inteligent youngman, sincere and frank to the point of being blunt and perhaps irritating to those who did not know him well.

"*Phadal* [in their dialect the consonant 'r' does not exist] the old path is *ovelglown* with jungles and only used by elephants. So I must take you by *anothel* path, *lather* long, but *easiel*.

Bishop followed his trusted guide. But after a few kms, he found himself in a reserve of magnificent teak trees and he immediately knew where he was:

"Marcus, where are we?"

"Balma," he replied with a broad grin. Then sensing Bishop's disapproval he added:

"You want me to take you to Tengnopal, don't you? This is now the only way. Do not worry, I will not get you into trouble".

Soon they found themselves in the broad Tamlu-Mandalay road. It was built during the emergency, but was not kept up. Along its sides one could see huge piles of expanded perforated metal sheets used to pave the worst areas of the road. All along they met only one Burmese villager. He was minding his buffaloes grazing in the forest by the road side. In his mouth was a cigar as thick as a walking cane and almost as long. He smiled at them. Then they turned into a forest path towards the Manipur side of the border. After a rest in a small Christian village under the jurisdiction of the Fathers of the Foreign Missions of Paris who were working on the Myanmar side of the Chin Hills, they poceeded towards Tengnopal. The delicious fresh fruits which the hospitable Christians offered the Bishop and his helpers refreshed them. The rest of the way to Tengnopal was a detour. They reached there somewhat late in the evening.

**A Poor Harmless Creature**

On the way to Tengnopal the party came across a huge snake, perhaps a small python. It was on a tree stump and basking in the evening sun. Bishop got hold of a stick and killed the reptile. Afterwards he felt sorry for that poor creature. It looked like a trivial incident. But every time he

remembered it, he blamed himself. It reminded him of the early years of Don Bosco when going with his boys he rebuked one of them for killing a blind worm:

"Why did you kill the poor harmless creature?", Don Bosco had asked, "life was the only gift it had!"

This little incident is a window to the gentle, kind and at time scrupulous heart of Bishop Marengo. He did not like to see anyone suffer.

**"Earthquake"? No, a Herd of Bisons!**

Bishop Marengo remembered with joy the poor and affectionate community of Tengnopal. He never forgot the cheerful catechist, John Vunkam, and his young but sickly wife. Right at the beginnings of the Church, most of the communities in Manipur were situated in remote places, far from big towns or mission centre. It was very difficult for them to get medical assistance even when they needed it urgently. They were constantly plagued by all sorts of ailments: malaria, worms, dysentery and sores of numerous kinds. Seldom did they have enough to eat. However, whenever the Father visited any of their villages, the people would go out of their way and make every sacrifice possible to make the Father's stay comfortable.

The usual programme which Bishop Marengo followed in each village was:

Arrival towards the evening, then the people would gather in the village chapel for prayer and singing, it was followed by instruction on Confession.

The Rosary was recited during Confessions, if the Confessions took a rather long time. The evening service was concluded with night prayers.

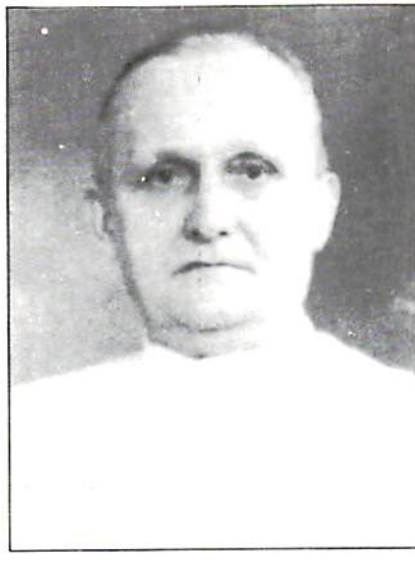
The parents of Bishop Marengo :
Lorenzo and Agostina Montaldo

Bishop Marengo with his parents, brothers and nephews

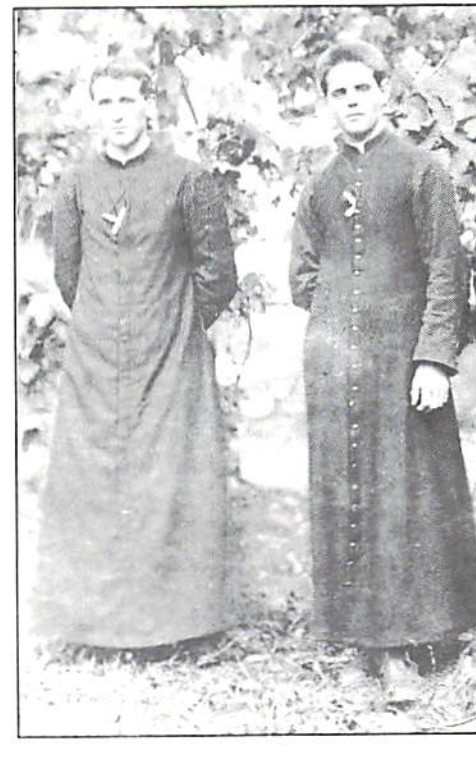
Miss Margherita, the sister of Bishop Marengo,
who joined the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity
of St. Antida de Touret and took the name Sr. Agnes

The three brothers of Bishop Marengo:
(from left) Natale, Fr. Joseph and Cesare

Bishop S. Ferrando SDB who, as a young priest,
led the group of novices including young Marengo to India in 1923.



Fr. Leo Piasecki SDB,
the "lion" of the Brahmaputra Valley, who inspired Fr. Marengo with missionary zeal.



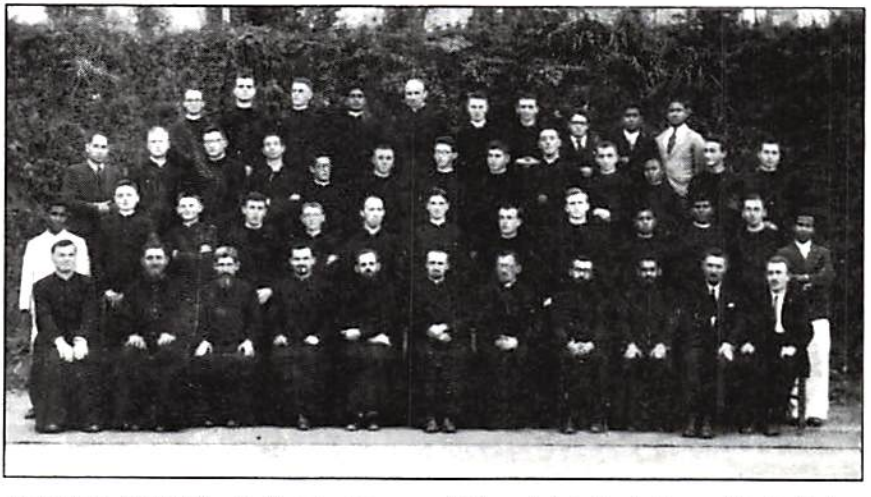
Bro. Marengo
(right)
with Bro. Joseph Foglia

Bishop Marengo as a Cleric

Bro. Marengo
determined to be
a zealous missionary

Fr. Marengo as a young priest
touring the tea gardens of Assam
plains and as chaplain of the
railway workers

The first group of Salesian novices at Bandel with Fr. Marengo, their Novice Master (1936-37) standing: from left to right) : Bros. Louis Gobetti, Noas Topno, Fiorenzo Zola, Angelo Bongiorno, Luigi Del Nevo, Silvio Tronconi, J. Klick, and Fortunato Giacomin. (Sitting: from left to right) : Fr. Orestes Marengo, Francesco Zandrini (a theology student and assistant to the novices).



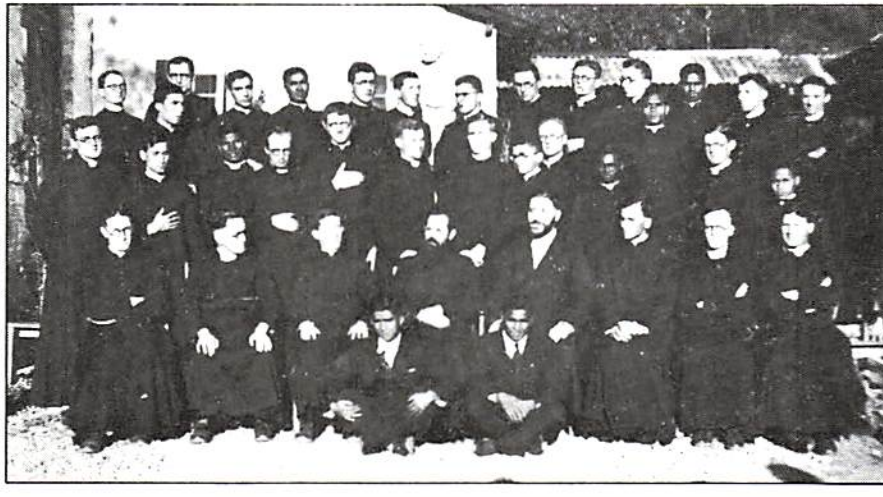
In Sonada (1938-39) : Fr. Orestes Marengo (5th from left in the first row sitting). On his left is Fr. Archimede Pianazzi. Bro. Michael Cahoj, the future collaborator of Bishop Marengo, is in the front row sitting extreme right.

With the group of novices (1938-39) in Sonada

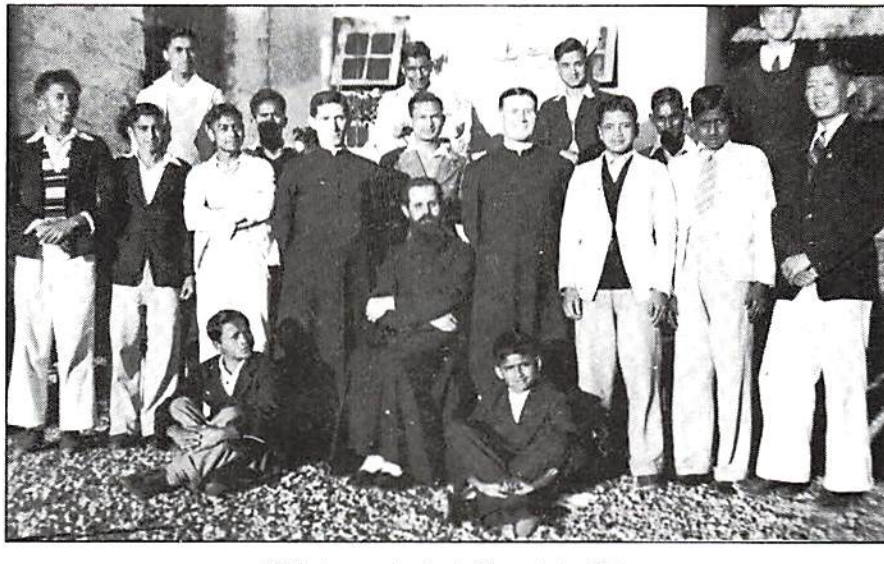
In 1941 in Sonada, Darjeeling Dt.

With his novices in Sonada (1938-39) : (from left to right) Bros. Isidore Fioredda, Ruggero Toneguzzo, Felice Matta, Daniel Colussi, Guido Colussi, George Sungmur, Solomon Marak, Milesi, Joseph Topno, Fr. Orestes Marengo, Henry Frassy, Jerome Drawel, Rota, John Topno and Peter Bianchi.

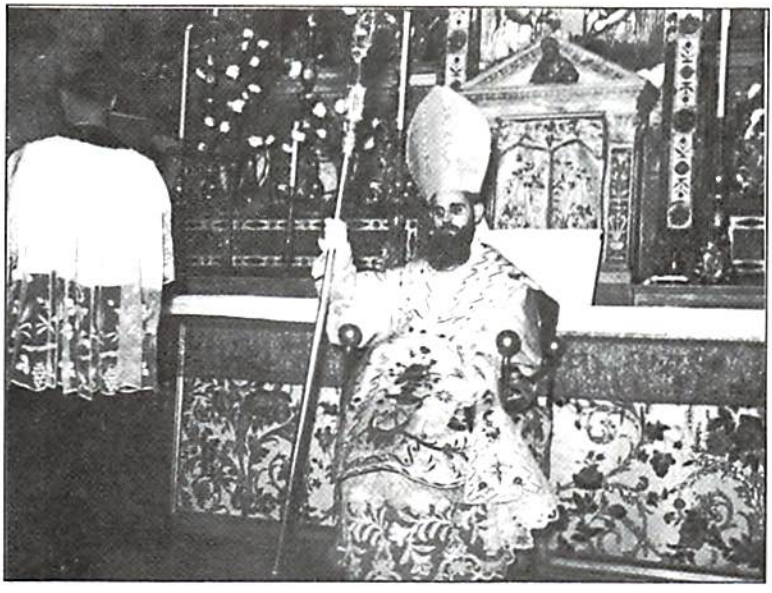
The first group of philosophy students, Sonada 1940 : (sitting from left to right), Felice Matta, Rosario Strocio, Dario Composta, Joseph Topno, Patrick Sheehy, Luigi Borghi.
(Standing : from left to right) : Ruggero Toneguzzo, Henry Frassy, Antonio Duca, Paolo Taverna, Mastuzzo, Willibroad Buisman, Fr. Orestes Marengo, Fr. Vincent Scuderi, Fr. Archimede Pianazzi, Charles Dyer, Natale Chiosi, Dino Colussi, Joseph Moya and John Topno.



With the Salesian community at Sonada, December 1941



With the aspirants in Sonada in 1941



Episcopal Consecration on December 27, 1951 in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, Valdocco, Turin

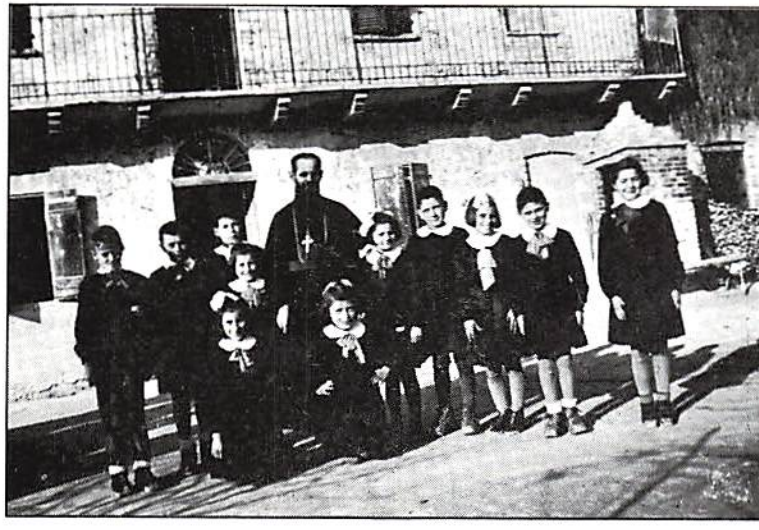
Together with the co-consecrating Bishops Maurilio Fossati, Archbishop of Turin, Bishop Carlo Stoppa, Bishop of Alba, and Bishop Angeleri, Auxiliary of Bishop of Turin

With his mother, relations, and others soon after the Episcopal Ordination (December 27, 1951) in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, Turin, Italy

With his mother and brothers

With his nieces Maria (on Bishop's right) and Agostina in front of the ancestral home at Le Cecche in 1952.

1953 : In the native village of Diano d'Alba



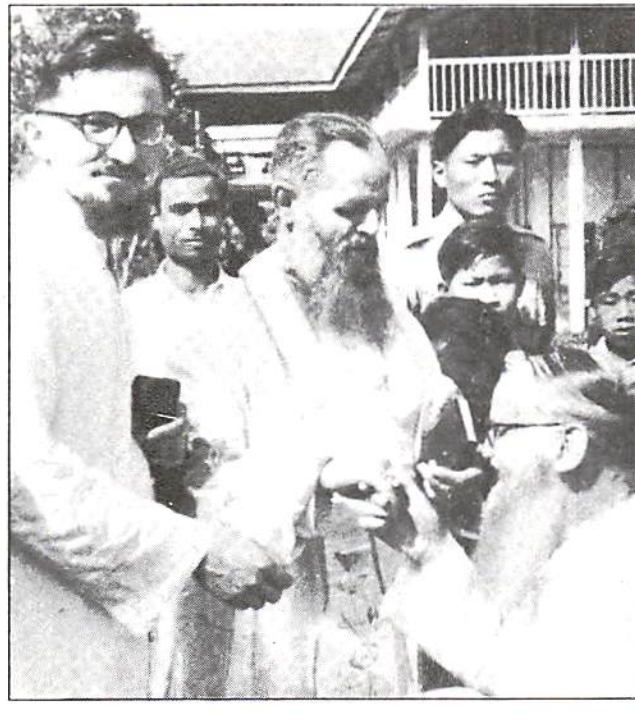
Visit to one of the schools in his native village of Diano
at the beginning of 1952

In front of his house in Le Cecche. Seen are (from left to right)
Cesare (extreme left), the Mayor of Diano d'Alba (in the vehicle),
and Bishop Orestes Marengo with the two nieces Agostina and Maria

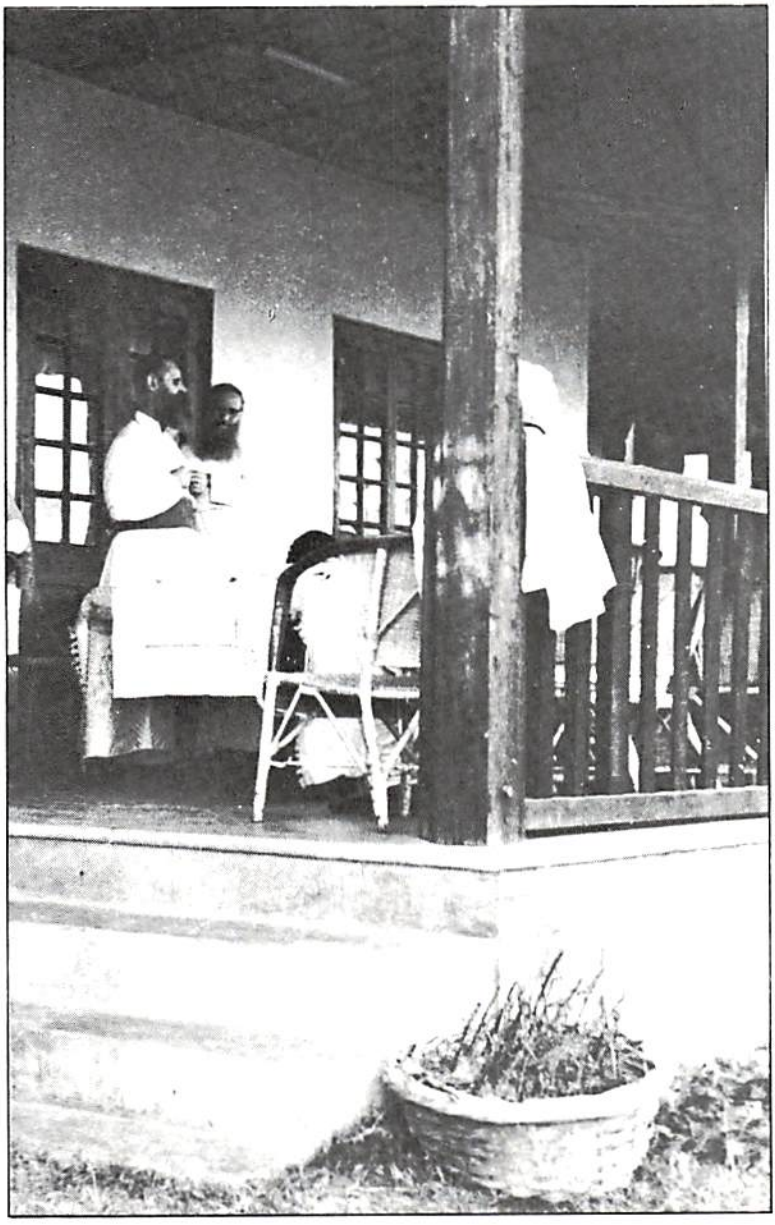
Bishop Marengo with one of his lay collaborators among the Lotha Nagas

With his mother, Fr. Joseph Marengo (Bishop's brother), Sr. Agnes (Bishop's sister) and relations and friends soon after the Episcopal Ordination.

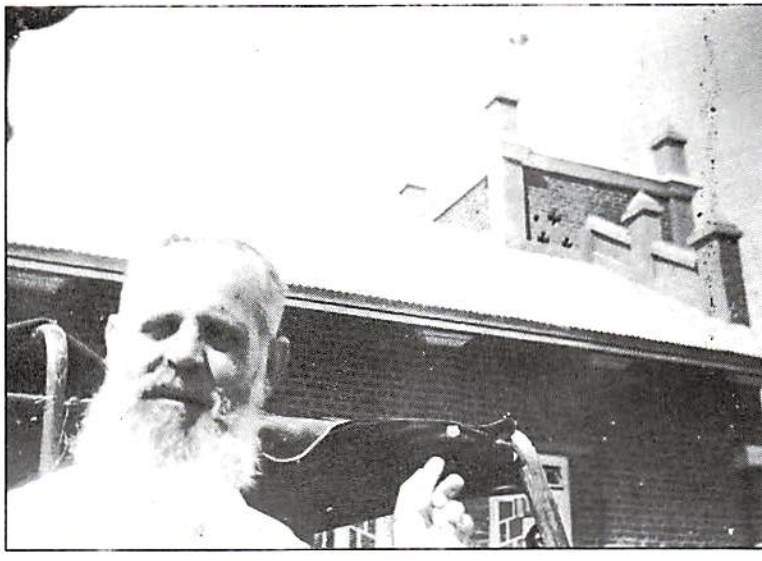
5th March 1956 : Bishop Marengo blesses Fr. A. Ravalico and Fr. P. Bianchi and their jeep with provisions as they set out from Dibrugarh for Imphal, Manipur. Seen is also a cycle tied on top of the jeep!



Bishop Marengo blesses Fr. A. Ravalico and Fr. P. Bianchi at Dibrugarh before they set out for the mission at Imphal, Manipur in March 1956.

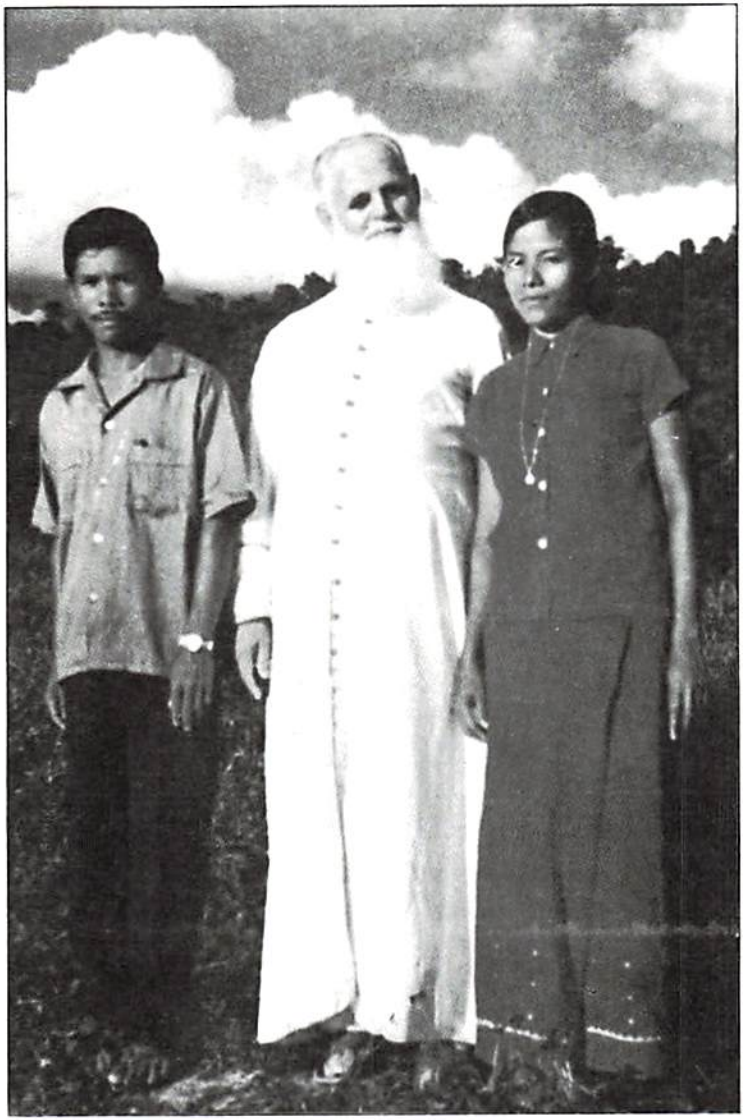


On the occasion of the blessing of Nirmalabas, Imphal, Manipur, on 9th May 1956. Fr. A.Ravalico is seen on the left of Bishop Marengo.



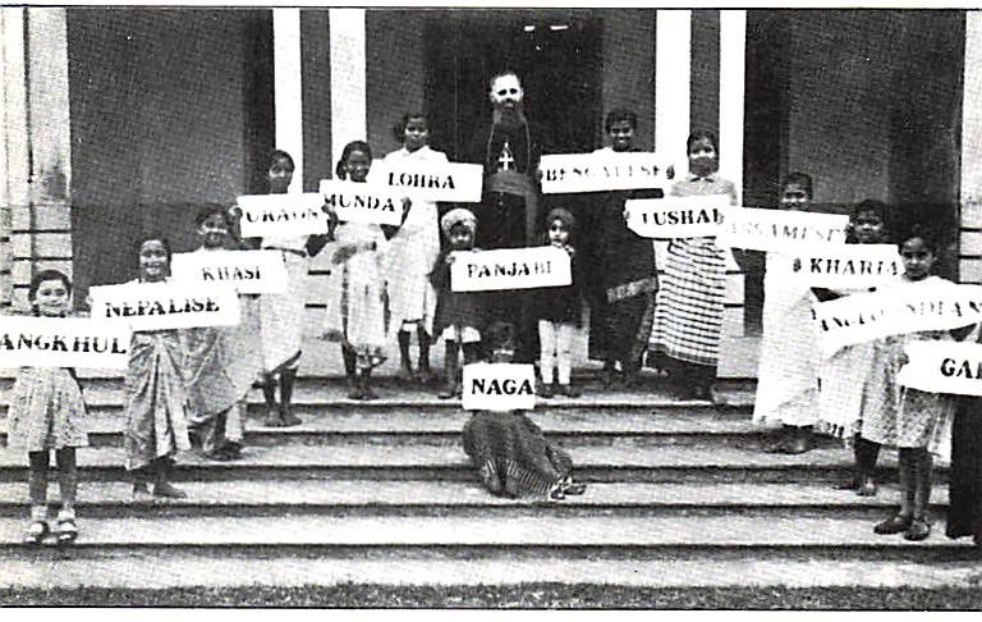
Near the Sacred Heart Parish Church, Hundung,
which was blessed on 31 December 1959

Bishop Marengo is being received by Fr. Wollaston Douglas Joseph
(the parish priest) and Fr. Mathew Planthottam (assistant parish priest)
at Hundung, Manipur, 1958



Bishop Marengo with Mr. Tarcisius Marak
the catechist of Chokpot, Garo Hills, and his wife.

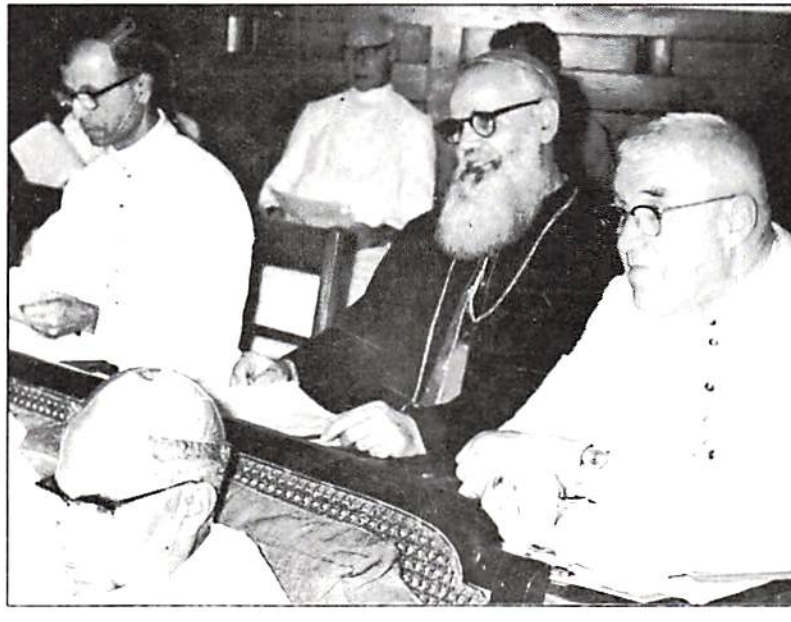
Bishop Marengo being welcomed with a shawl among the Tangkhuls. Seen is also Fr. Mathew Planthottam, missionary among the Tangkhuls for many years.



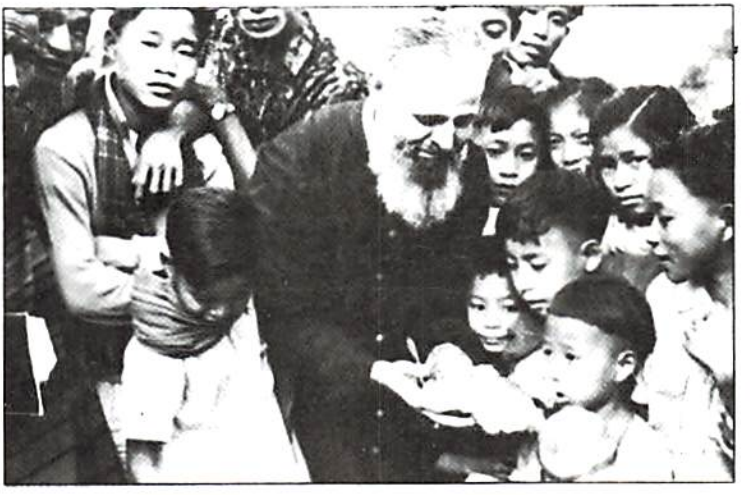

Bishop Marengo is at home among all the tribes.

With a group of Lotha Naga children.

With the children in a boarding school.



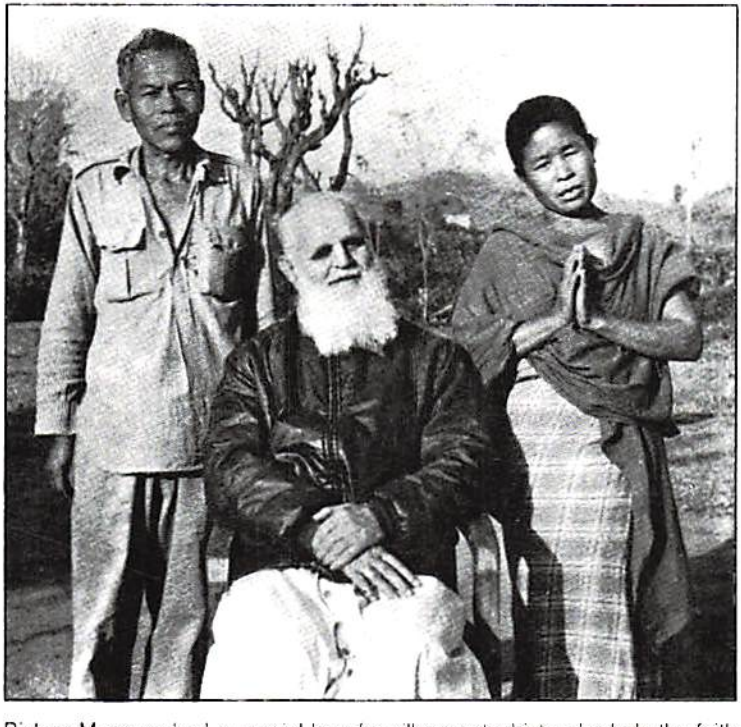
Bishop Marengo together with Bishop Stephen Ferrando SDB at the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (1962-1965). Mar Sebastian Vayalil, Bishop of Palai, Kerala, is seen in front of Bishop Marengo.



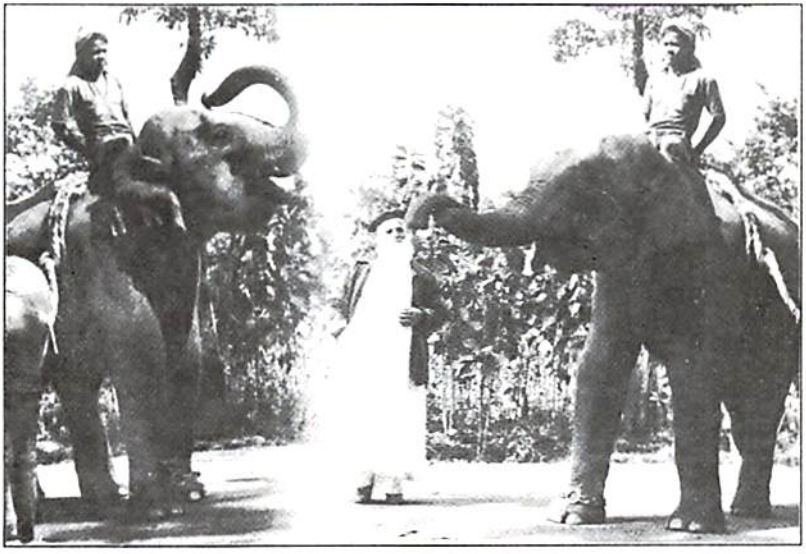
At home with children.

Bishop Marengo with young people ready to dedicate their lives for the spread of the Gospel.

Young people ever ready to work with Bishop Marengo.



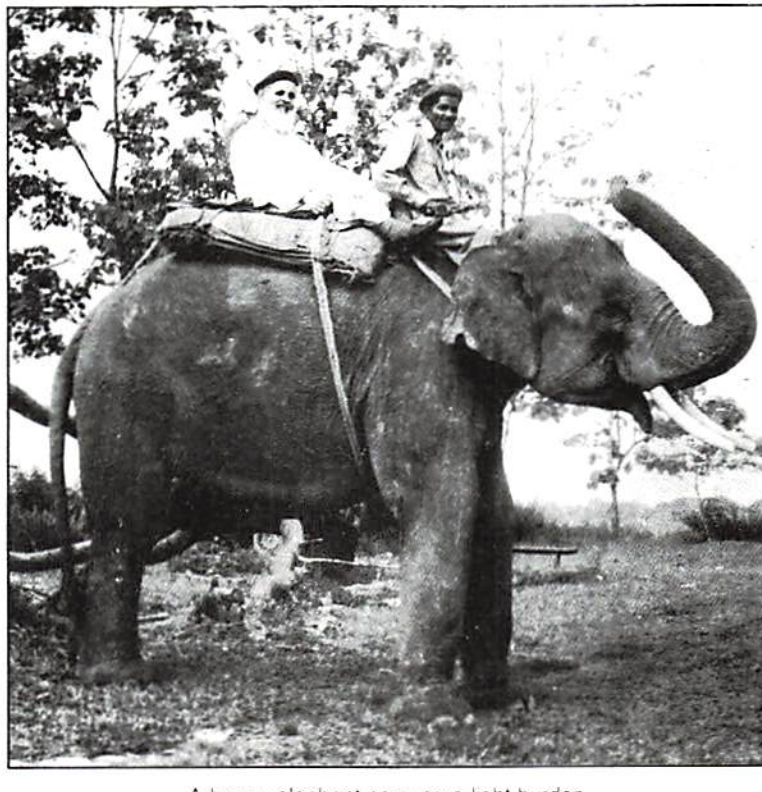
Bishop Marengo had a special love for village catechists who help the faith of the communities to grow strong.



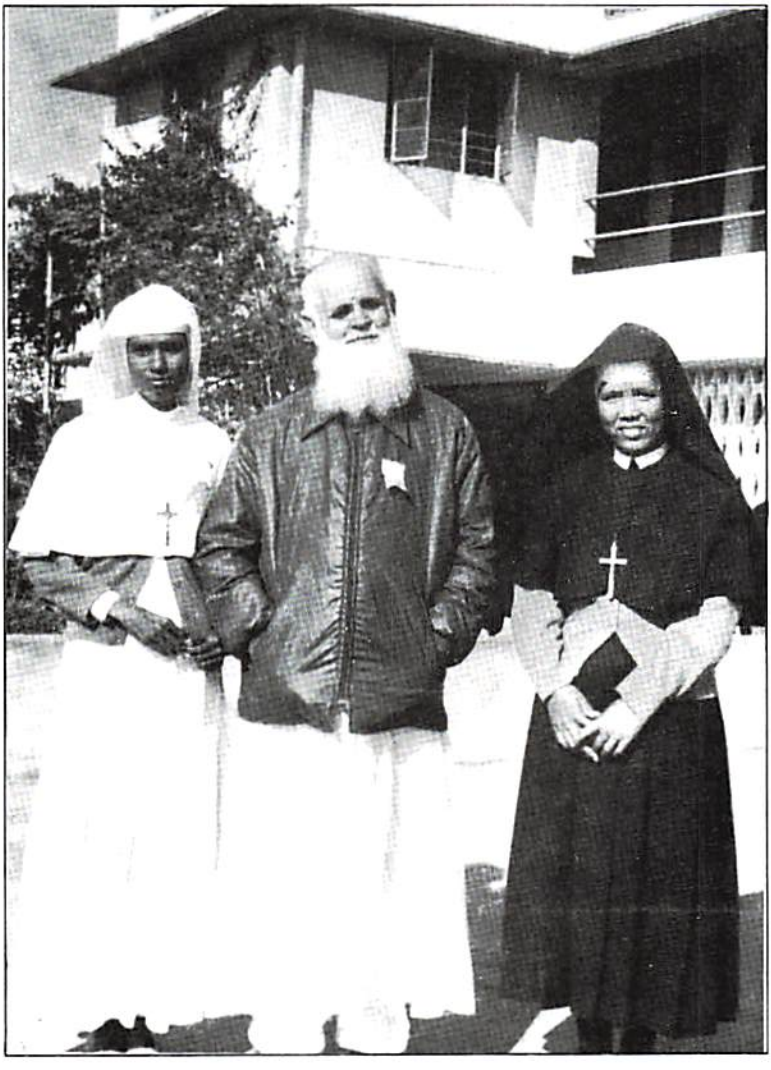
Both are willing to carry Bishop Marengo. The problem is to choose one.

Bishop Marengo among his Angami Naga flock.

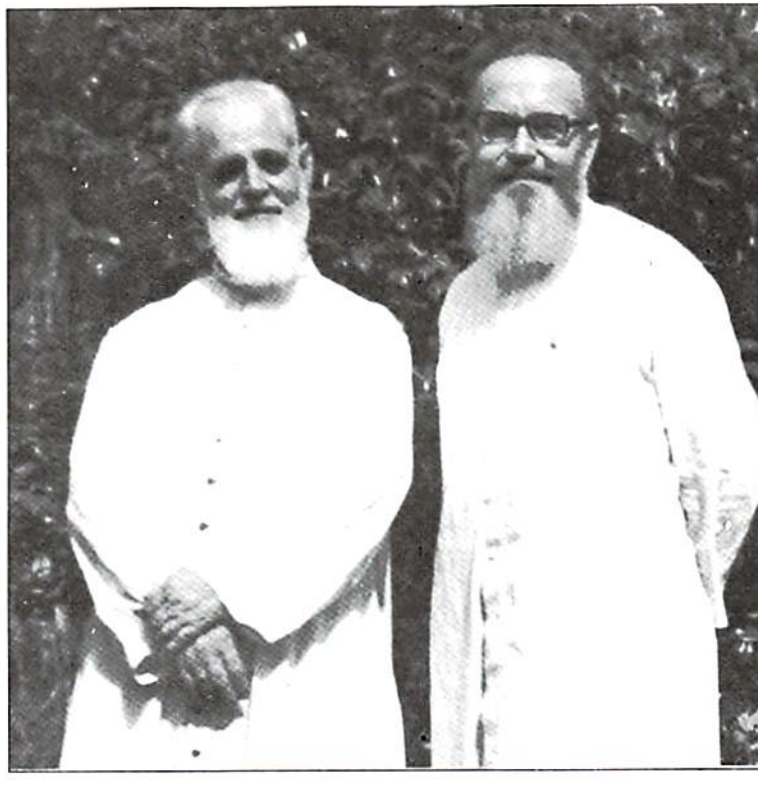
Dibrugarh : A smiling flock with a smiling Shepherd.



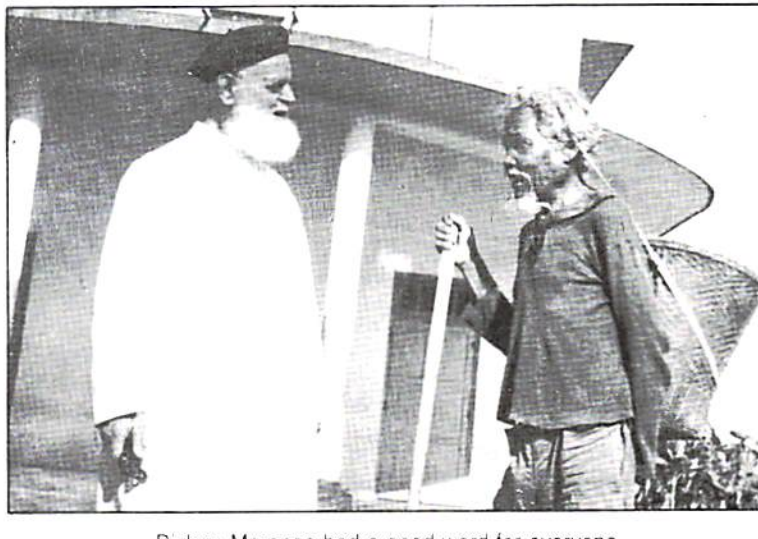
A happy elephant carrying a light burden.



Bishop Marengo with Sr. Sabina Marak and Sr. Arokia Mary, both from the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians founded by Bishop Stephen Ferrando SDB.

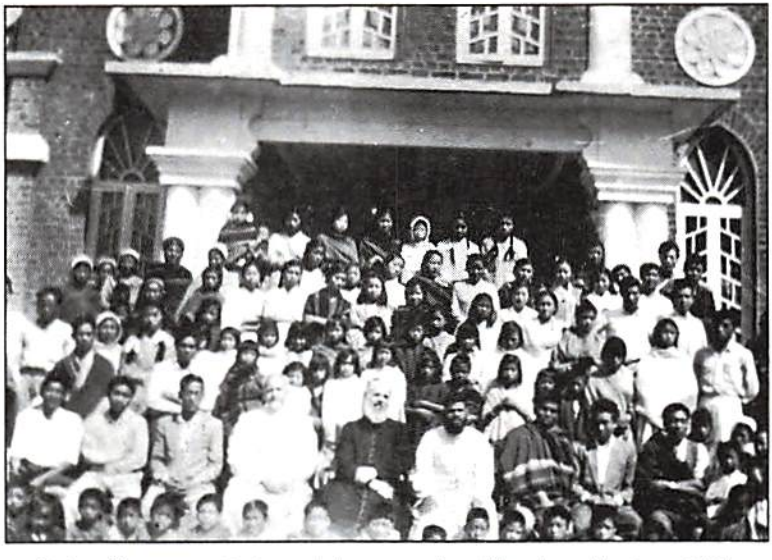


With Fr. B. Busolin SDB, a longtime missionary among the Garos.



Bishop Marengo had a good word for everyone.

On the occasion of the visit of Fr. Egidio Vigano',
the Rector Major of the Salesians of Don Bosco to North East India
(October 1979).

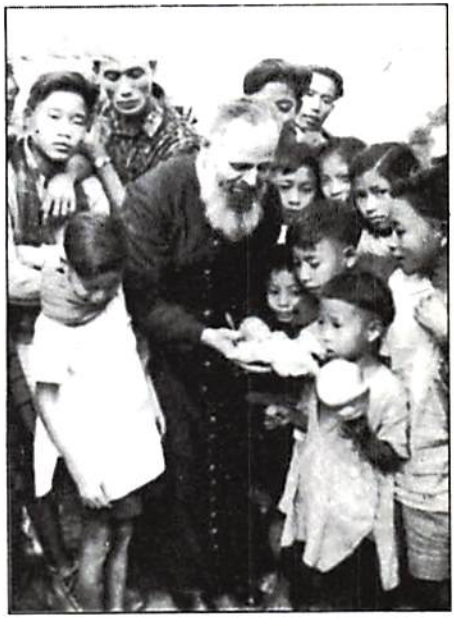


Bishop Marengo with the parish community at Hundung, Manipur, 1961.

Bishop Marengo with young aspirants at Dibrugarh.

First Baptisms in Keihao village, Manipur.

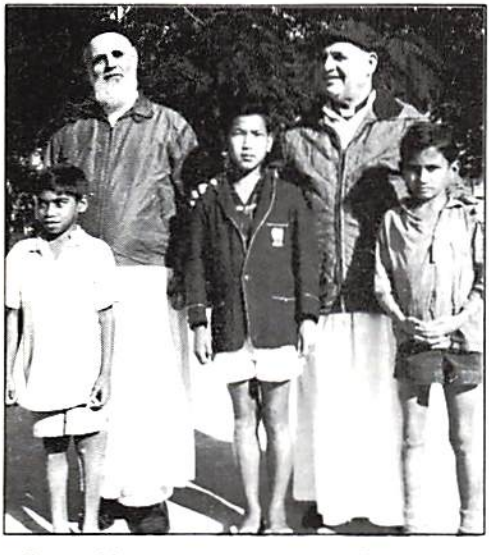
Bishop Marengo used to sit for hours at the Confessional administering the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Photo shows him hearing Confessions in one of the villages during a mission tour.



Always happy to be with the little ones.

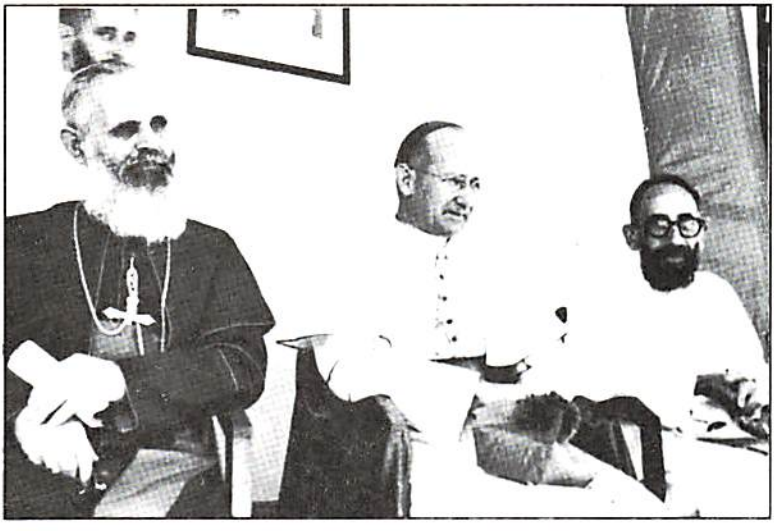
Bishop Marengo with a group of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians (MSMHC). He took great care to see that they grew for carrying out pioneering missionary work.

With the MSMHC novices at Shillong. On the right of Bishop Marengo is Fr. Noel Joseph Kenny SDB and on the left Mother Rose Mary Thapa.



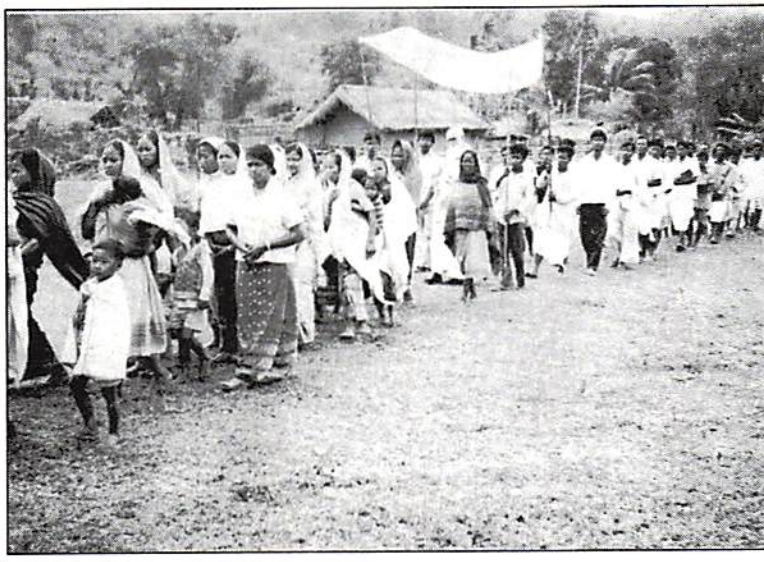
Bishop Marengo with his brother, Fr. Joseph Marengo when the latter visited him in Tezpur in November 1967

With Fr. Modesto Bellido, Councillor for the Salesian Missions and Fr. Anthony Alessi, the then Salesian Provincial during the former's vis to the North East in 1959.



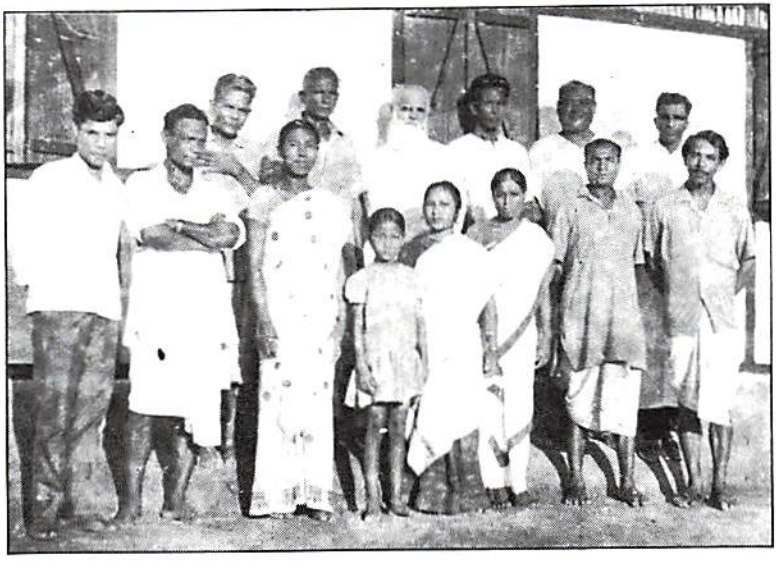
1968 : On the occasion of the visit of His Excellency James Knox, the Apostolic Pro-Nuncio to India. Seen in the photo is also Fr. Antony Alessi SDB, the then Salesian Provincial of Guwahati (right). Behind Bishop Marengo is Fr. Dal Zovo Ruggero SDB

1971 : Bishop Marengo with Fr. Noel Joseph Kenny at the final profession of a group of MSMHC, At St. Margaret's Convent. Peachland. Shillong.

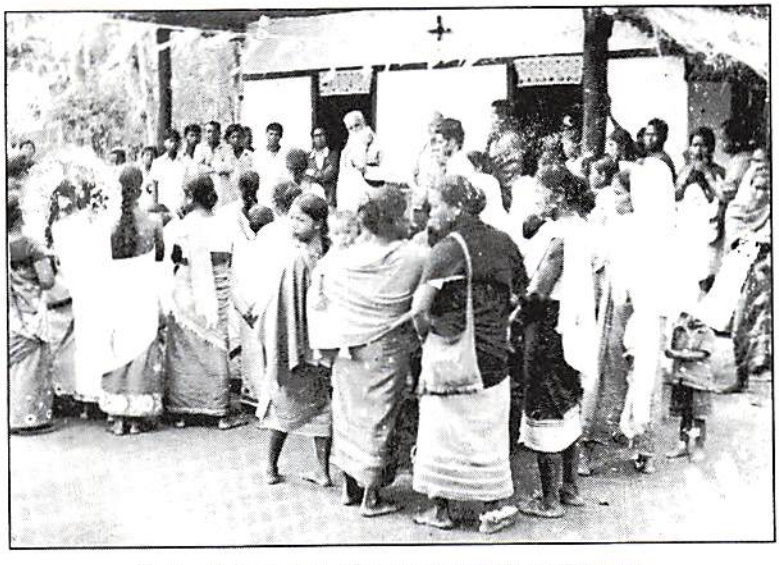


1974 : Eucharistic procession during Sobha at Sessapani.

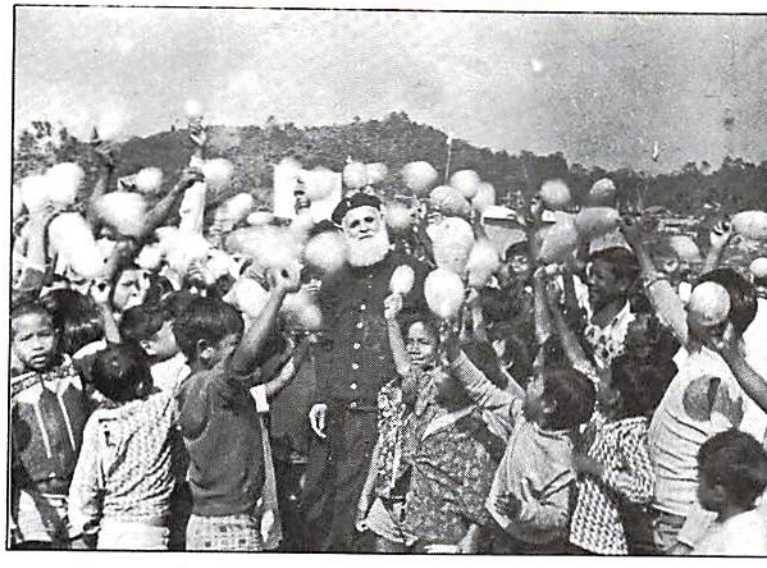
1976 : Visit to Gojapara village.



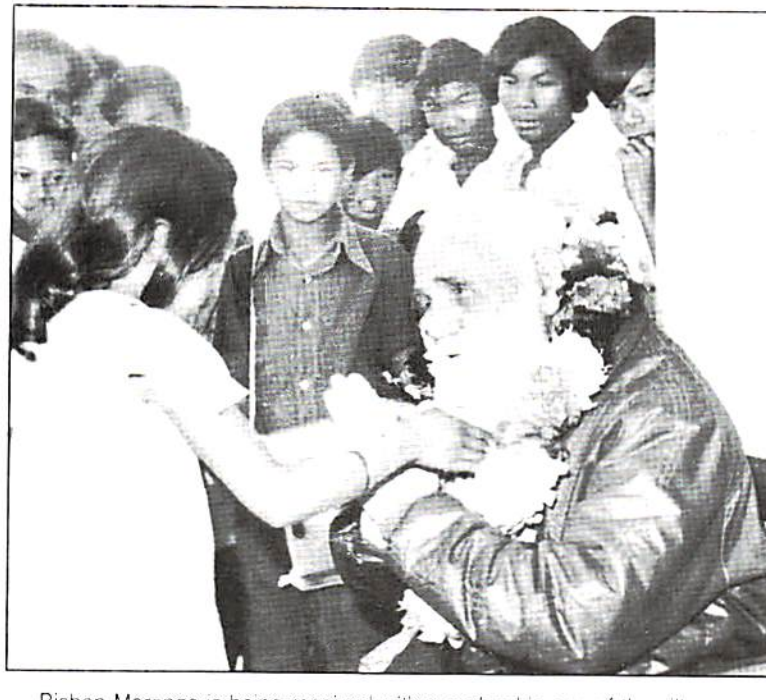
1976 : Visit to Dorongiri village.



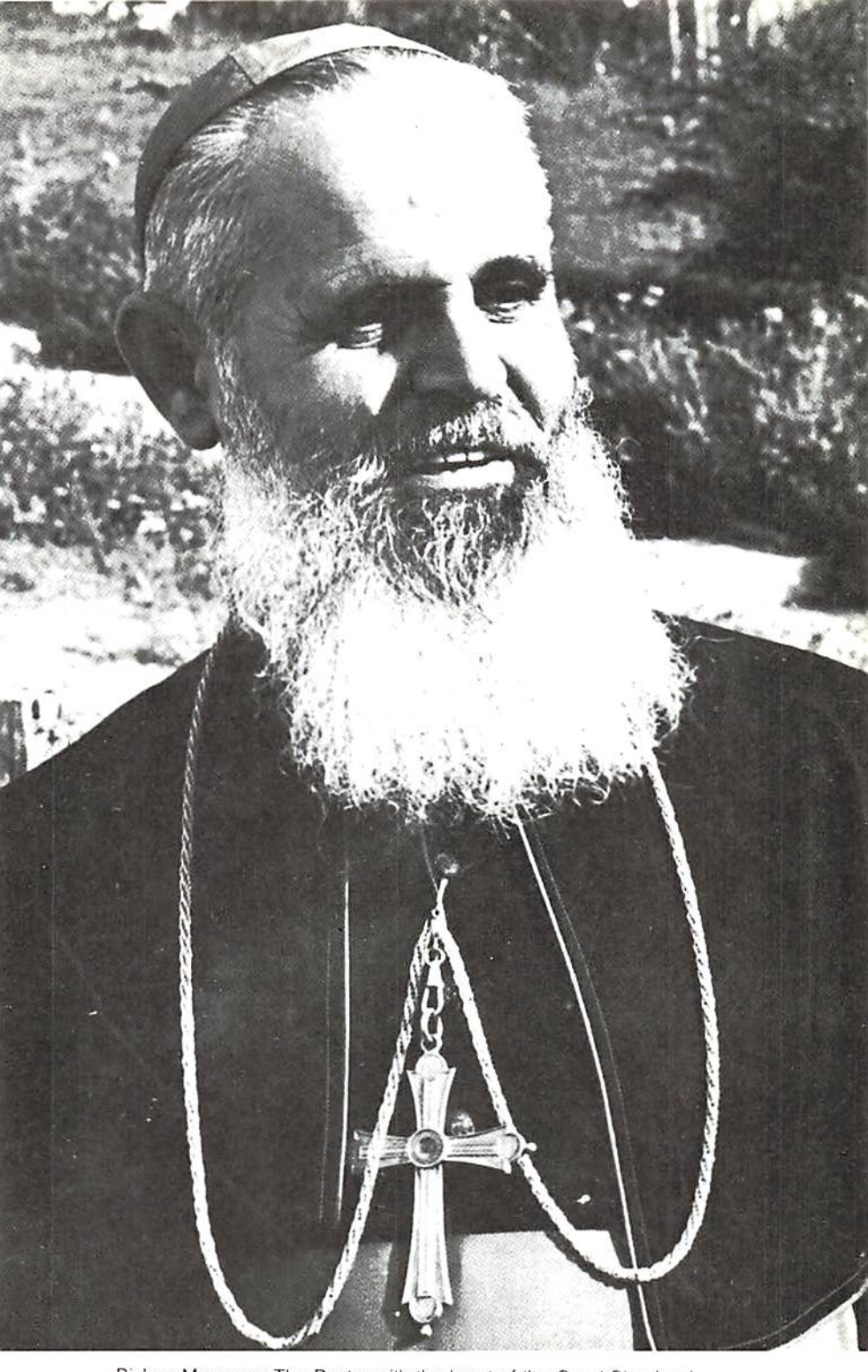
1977 : At Sessapani, the first Rabha Catholic village.



Cheerful welcome by children with balloons.



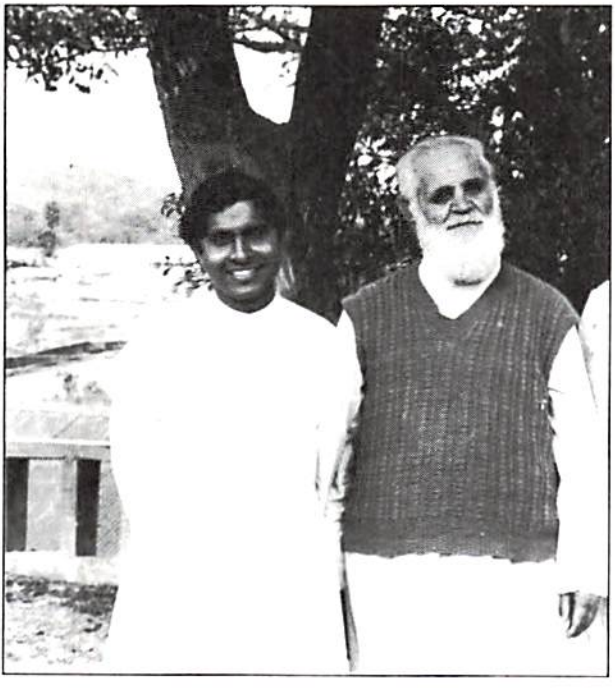
Bishop Marengo is being received with a garland in one of the villages.



Bishop Marengo : The Pastor with the heart of the Good Shepherd.

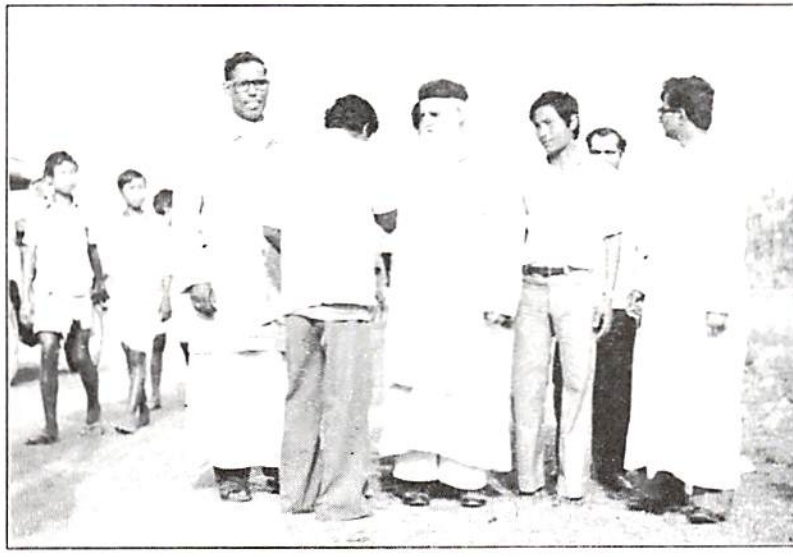
A village chapel in Nagaland.

Bro. F. Pancolini SDB who was Bishop Marengo's helper both in Dibrugarh and Tezpur.

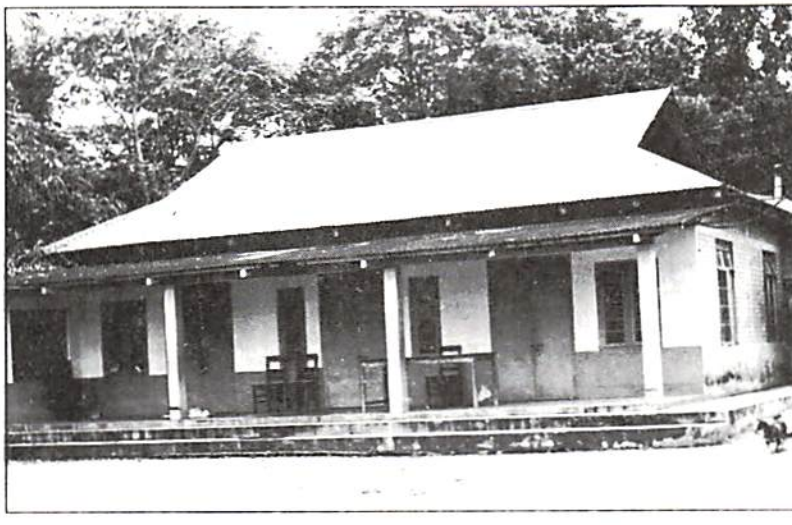


Bishop Marengo
with
Fr. Paul Panachikal
SDB
at Mendal.

Bishop Marengo with Bishop George Mamalassery and others
during the 1979 Rabha Sobha at Gojapara.



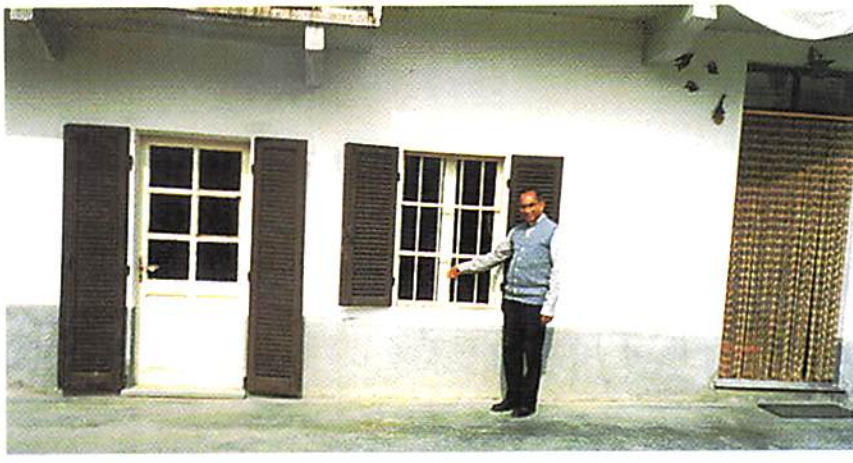
In Damra (1978)



The residence of Bishop Marengo at Mendal 1979-1984

*The horse-cart used by Mr. Lorenzo Marengo, the father of Bishop Marengo, to transport grapes and other products to the market at Diano (photo: September 1997)*

*Road leading to the hamlet "Le Cecche" where Bishop Marengo was born*



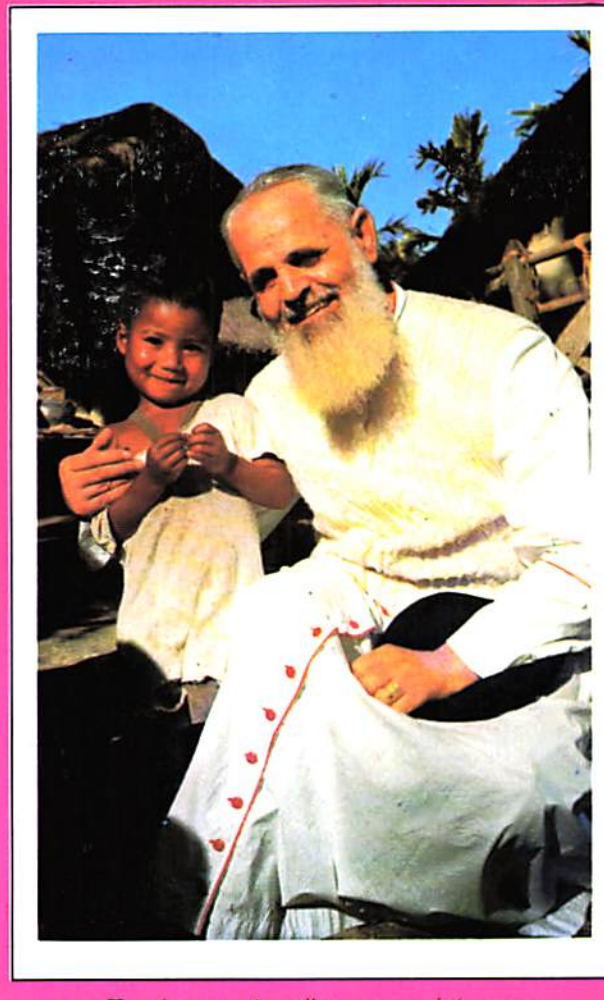
*The kitchen window (now renewed) through which the six year old little Orestes escaped when he was found "stealing" acciughe (anchovies=small fish of the herring family)*

*The slab on the tomb of the mother of Bishop Marengo at Diano*

*The slab on the tomb of the father of Bishop Marengo at Diano*

*Maria or "Mariuccia" (left) and Agostina, the two daughters of Natale, the eldest brother of Bishop Marengo in front of the tomb of Fr. Joseph Marengo (photo: September 1997)*

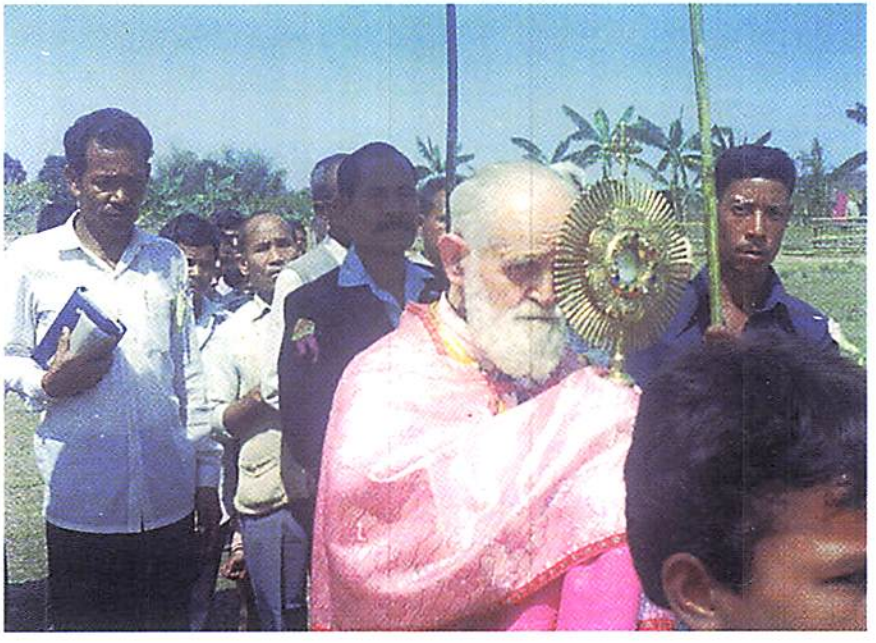
*Maria or Mariuccia (second from left), Bishop Marengo's niece and Giuseppe or Nuccio (third from right), Bishop Marengo's nephew. The one standing is Sina, the wife of Nuccio. (Photo taken at Le Cecche September 1997)*



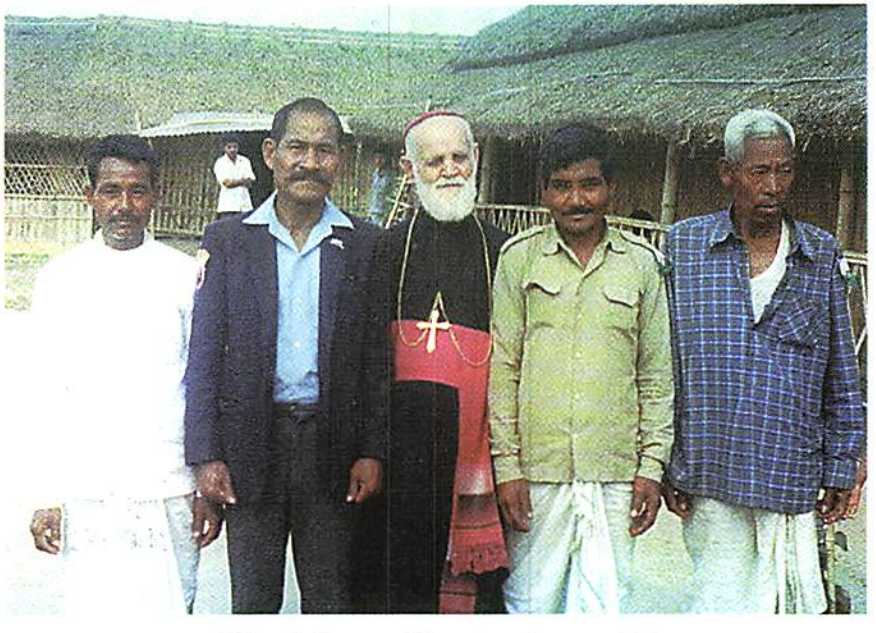
*Two innocent smiles merge into one*

*Mrs. Victoria DeSouza. She says: the thought of*
*Bishop Marengo worked miracles in my life.*
*That was the power of his love. I am fortunate to have had Bishop Marengo*
*enter my life right from my early years*
*starting from Dibrugarh*

*Sig.na Gemma Cattori (1910 - ...),*
*a long-standing generous benefactress of Bishop Marengo.*
*Already from the year 1948 onward her family is linked with the*
*Missions in the North East*

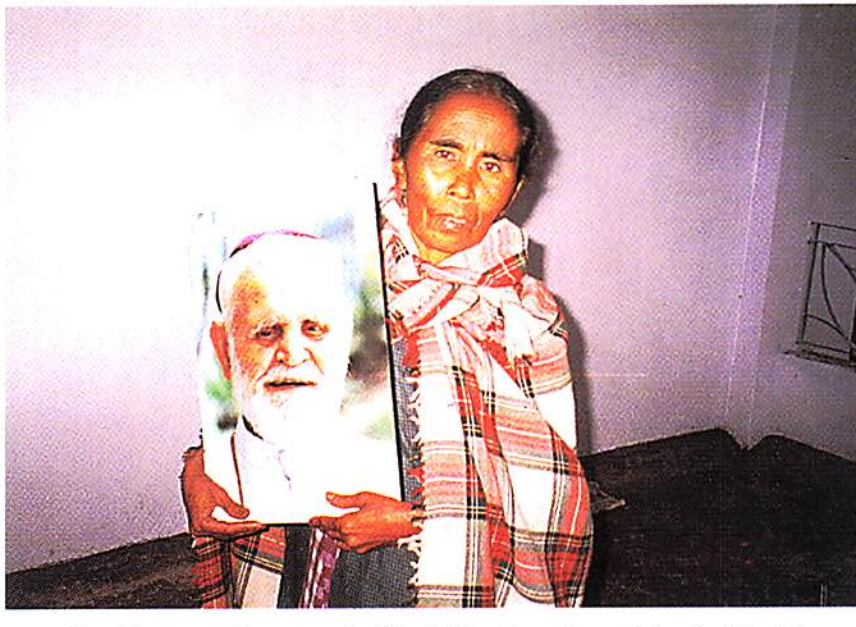


*Muktidata Ashram 1990:*
*Bishop Marengo promoted Eucharistic procession and helped people to come closer to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament*

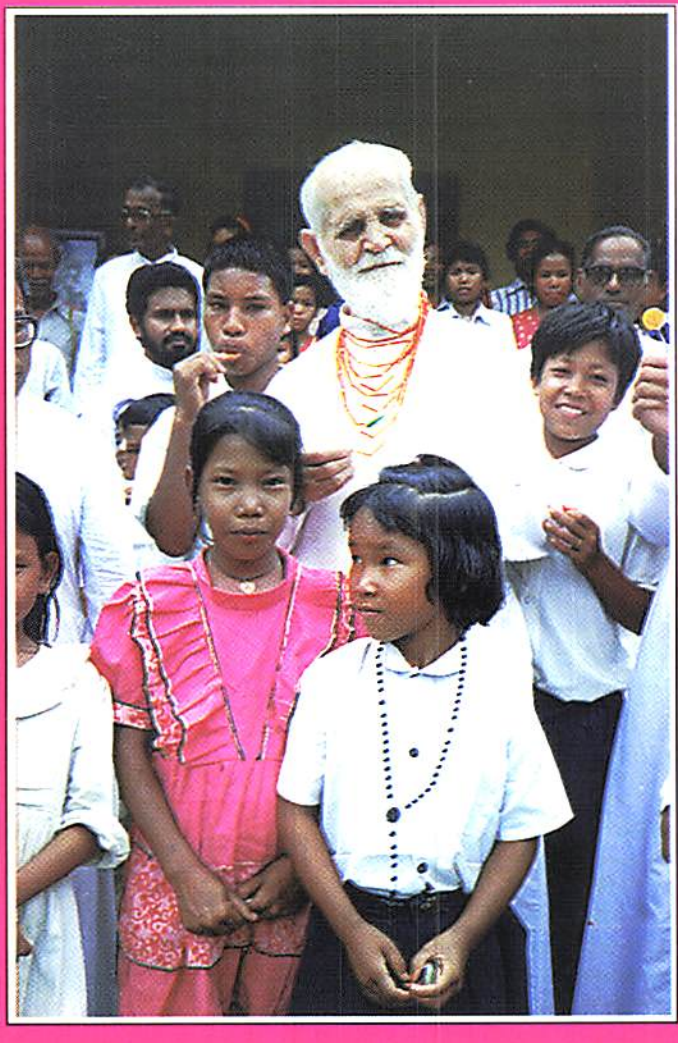


*With Rabha and Boro Leaders – 1979*

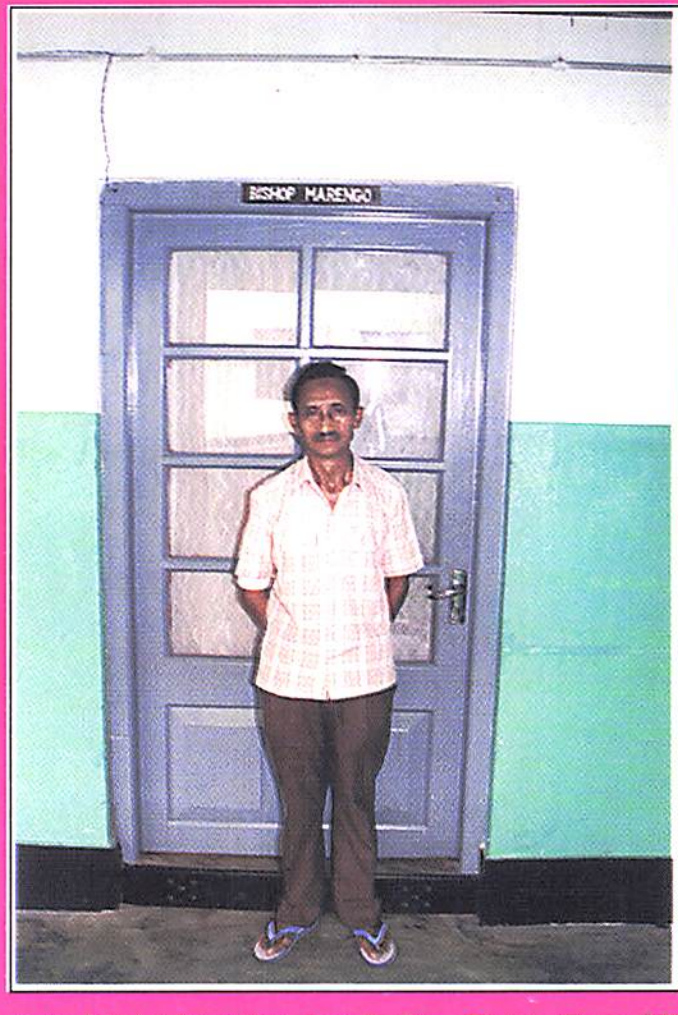
*At the close of the annual Sobha at Topolakama, Garo Hills*



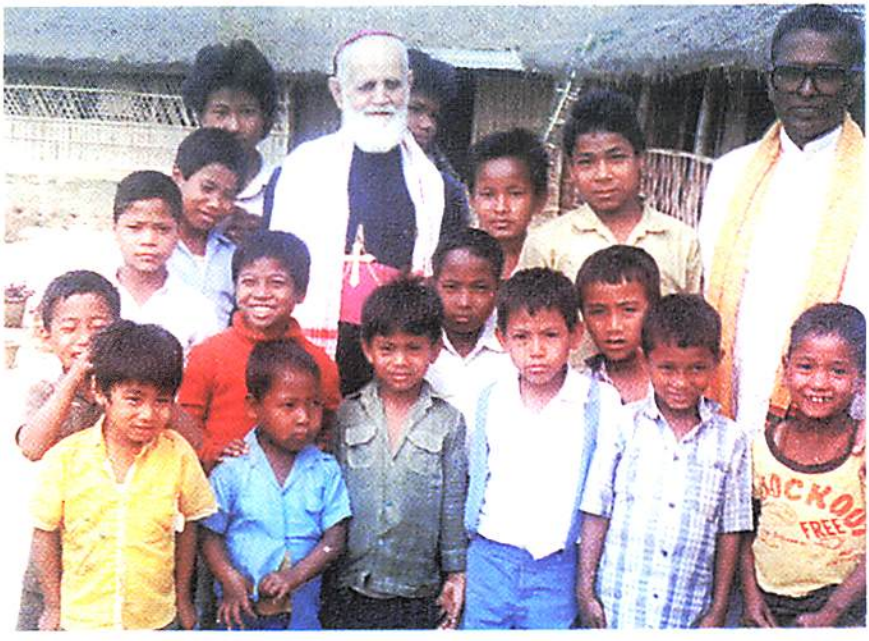
*Mrs. Susanna Turungpoi of Karbi Anglong (now living in Mawlai, Nongpathaw, Shillong). She knew Bishop Marengo for many years. She considers him as a great missionary, kind and ever helpful*



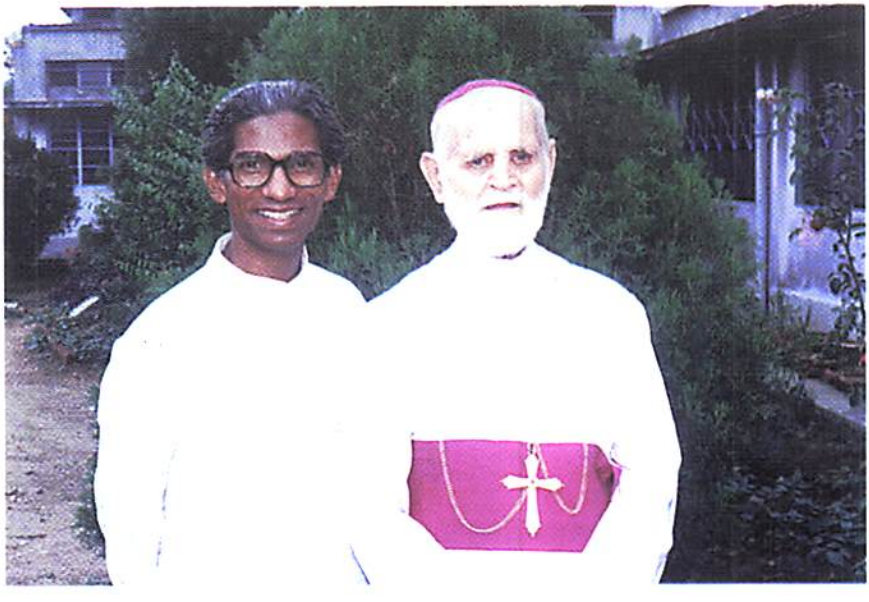
*With Bishop Marengo*
*is seen also Bishop George Mamalassery of Tura*
*(right side corner)*




*A very faithful "guardian angel", Bro. Eligius Khain SDB, the personal secretary of Bishop Marengo (Rongkhon 1992-1998). He is seen in front of the room of Bishop Marengo at Bosco Mount Rongkhon*



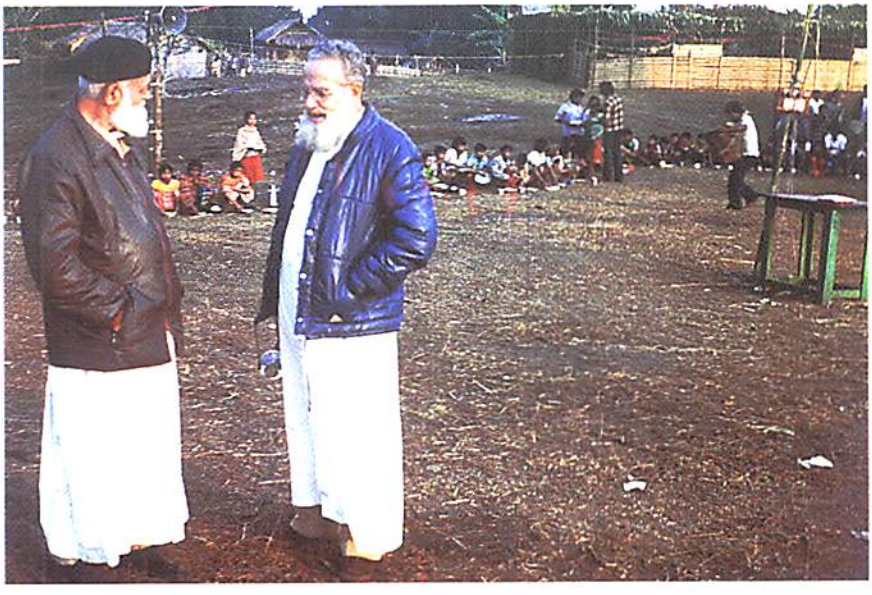
*In the company of Rabha, Boro and Hajong children*



*Fr. C.L. Thomas, SDB, the former Rector of Bosco Mount, Rongkhon, with Bishop Marengo*

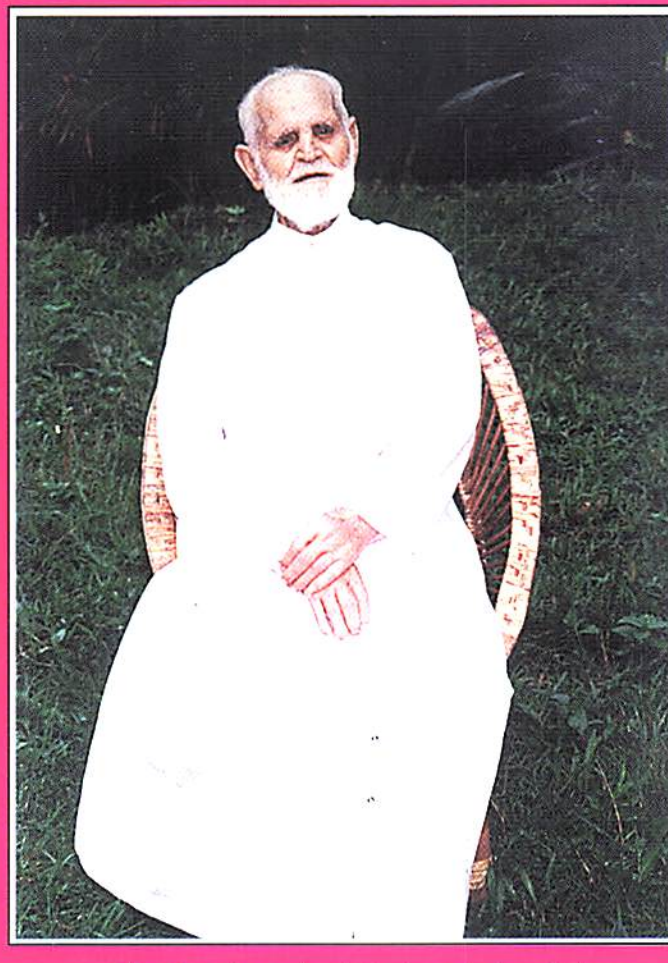
*1972: at Muktidata Ashram*

*Bishop Marengo and Fr. H. Frassy SDB*



*Bishop Marengo and Fr. B. Busolin SDB*

*Bishop Marengo with Sr. Teresa Shimrah MSMHC, the first religious sister from Manipur, and her sister Christina*



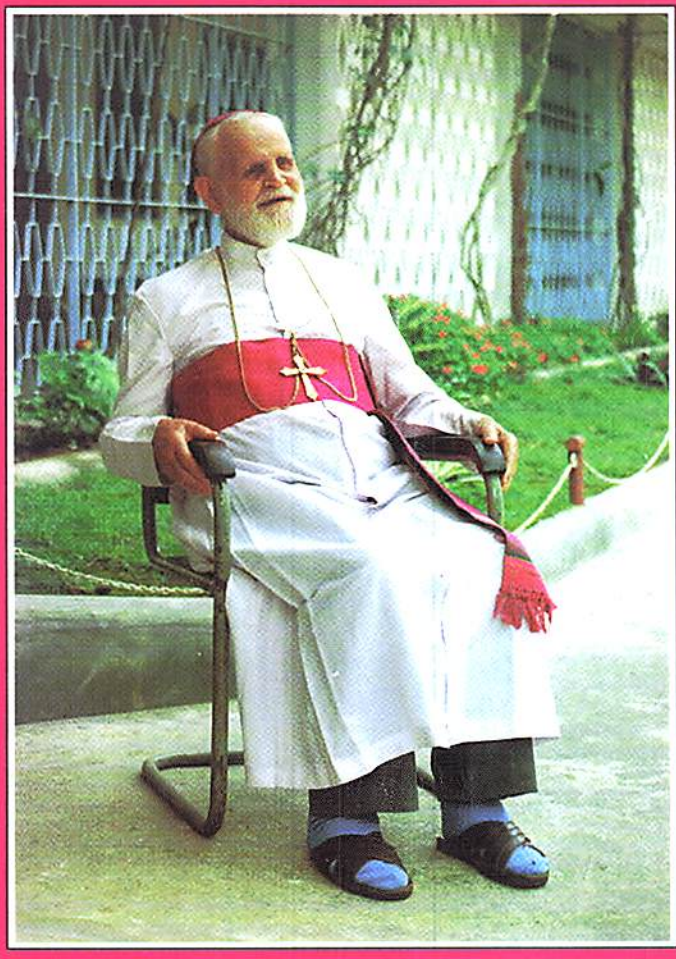
*Aged and weak, but always cheerful*

*A visit from Tangkhul flock during his stay at Bosco Mount Rongkhon*

*Sr. Gemima Pohrmen FMA greets Bishop Marengo on his 90th birthday celebrations at Bosco Mount, Rongkhon, Garo Hills*

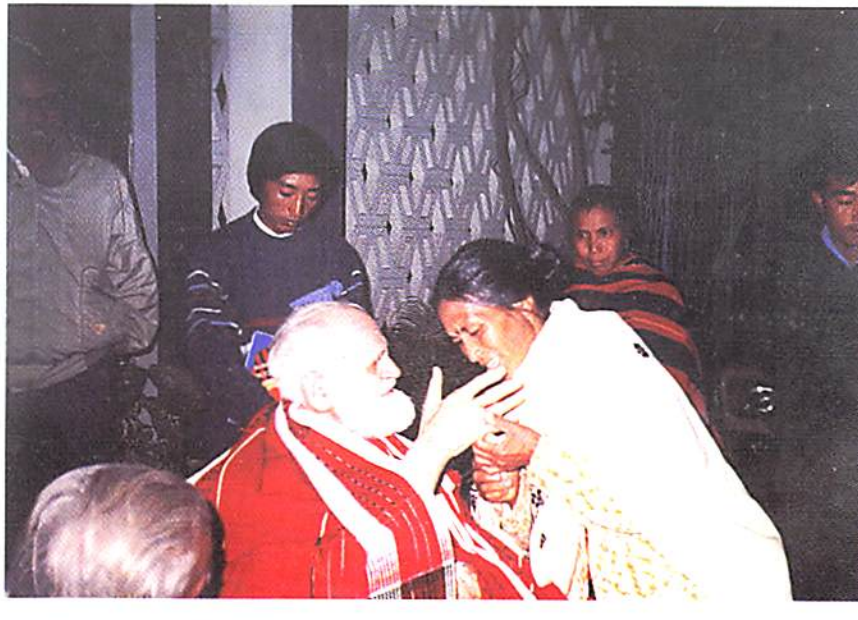
*Mrs. P. Solomi from Hundung who visited Bishop Marengo (Photo: Guwahati Jan. 1992)*

*The group of young people who toured the villages of Choitar (Manipur) with Bishop during 1961 (Photo: when they visited him in Rongkhon, Garo Hills)*

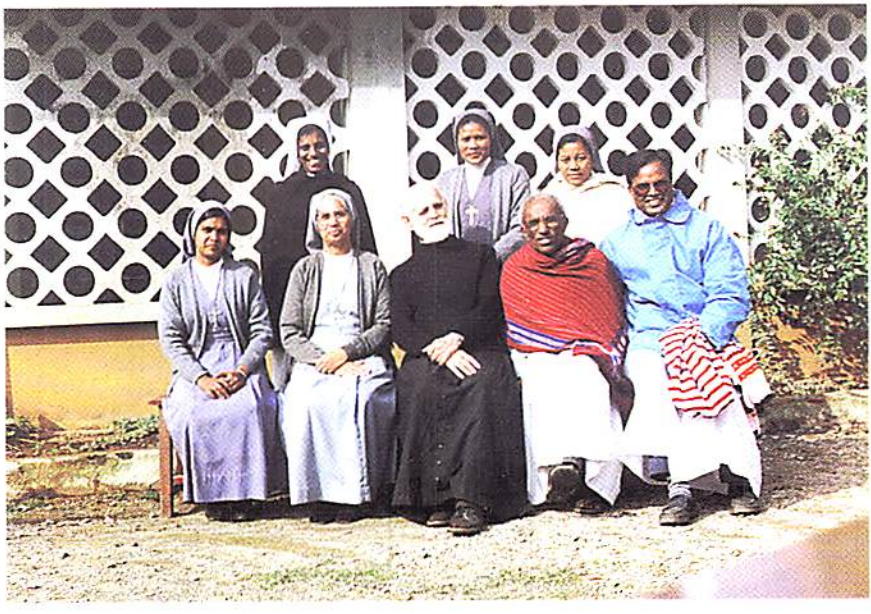


*At Salesian Provincial House, Guwahati*

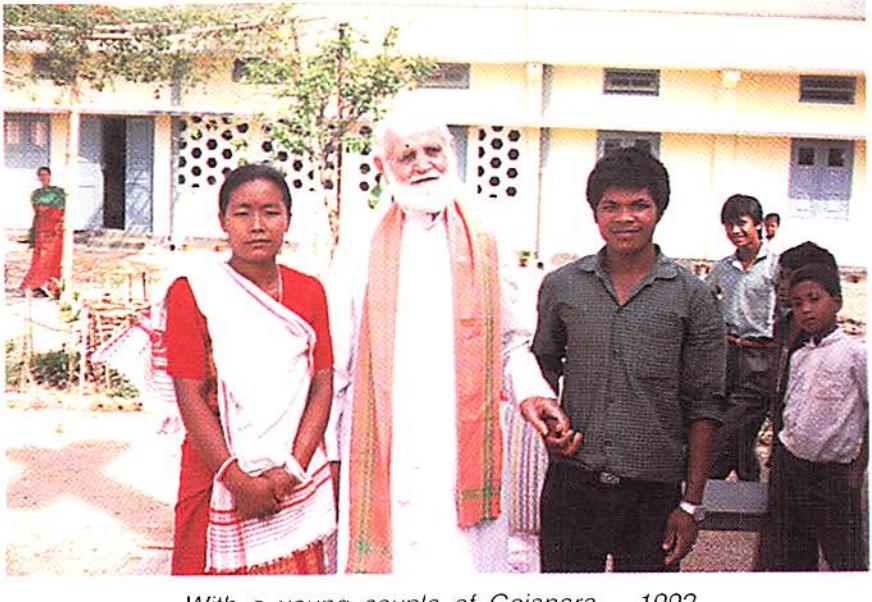
*Tikrikilla mission – 1990. Bishop Marengo and Fr. George Elavumkunnel in conversation with lay leaders*



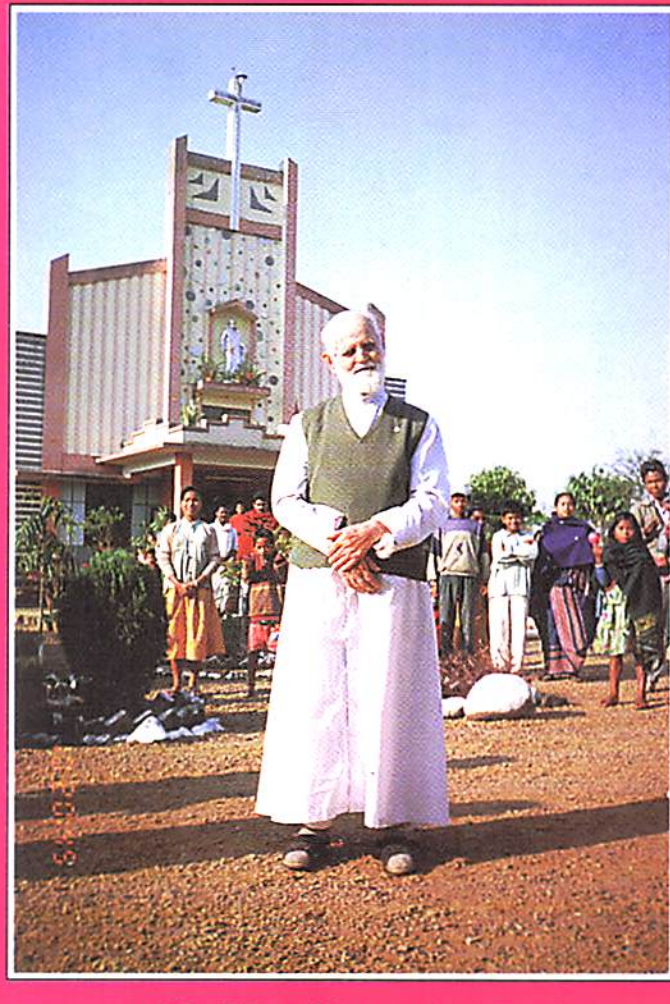
*The wife of the late A.S. Dominic Shomi of Hundung with Bishop Marengo at Don Bosco Guwahati, 1992*



*SDB and FMA communities of Garobadha – 1992*

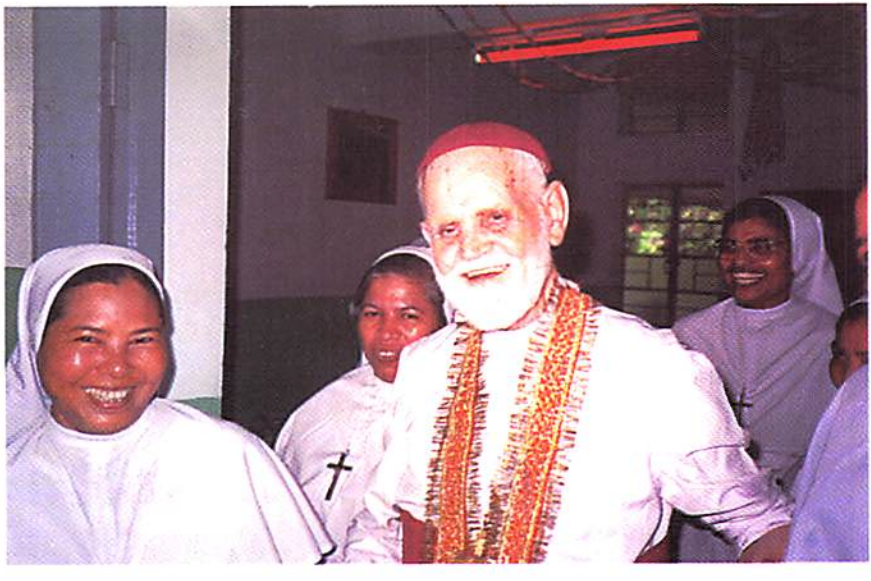


*With a young couple of Gojapara – 1992*



*1995: Bishop Marengo in front of the Muktidata Ashram Church, Garo Hills*

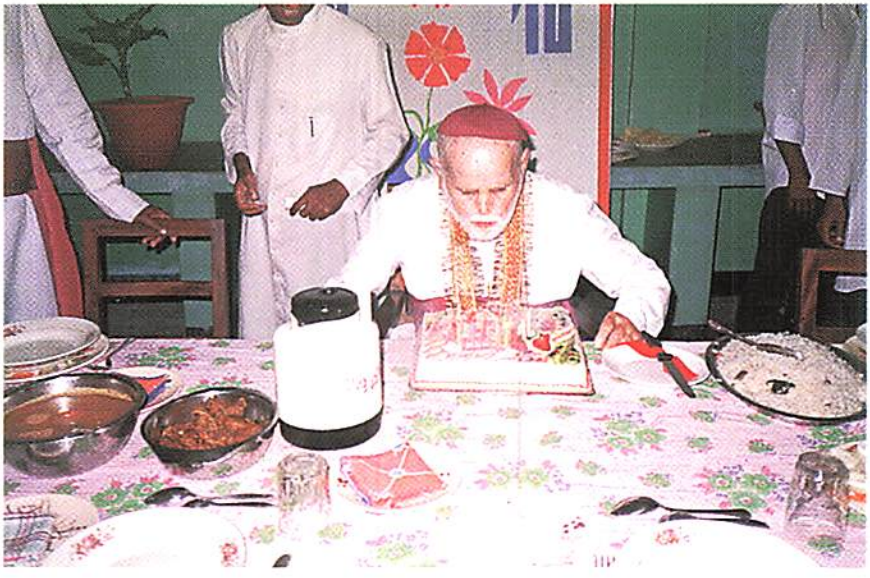
*At 90 still as vigorous a missionary as ever. Seen with Bishop Marengo is Fr. Joseph Kulathasseril of Bishop's House Tura*



*A hearty smile for the "90th Birthday wishes"*

*"Congratulations" with a 90th Birthday cake*

*On the occasion of the 90th Birthday and 70th Anniversary of Religious Profession of Bishop Marengo celebrated at Bosco Mount, Rongkhon, Garo Hills on 29th August 1995*



*Blowing out at one go all 90 candles of his 90th Birthday*

*Giving the concluding words on the occasion of the celebrations of the 90th Birthday and 70th Anniversary of Religious Profession at Bosco Mount, Rongkhon, Garo Hills on 29th August 1995*

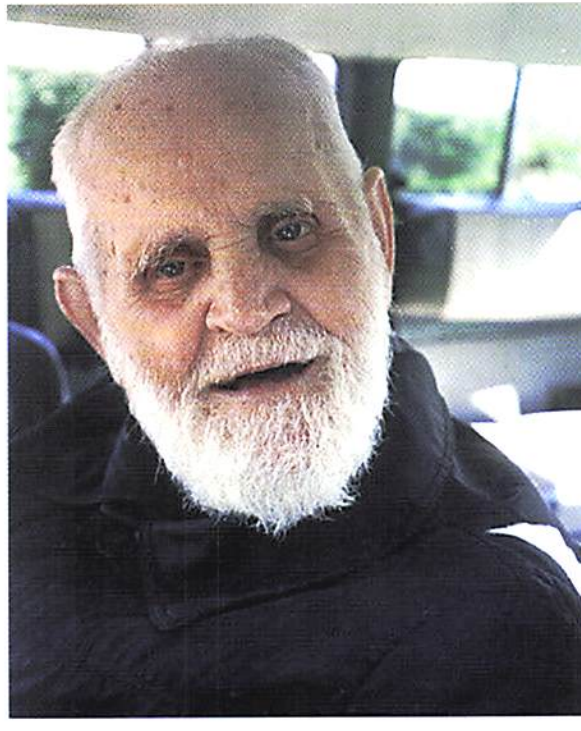
*Bishop Marengo with the Sisters of different Congregations during the youth ministry camp at Tura, July 1996. At 91 he is happy to teach them a song:*

*"One two three four five six seven,*
*All children go to heaven,*
*When they die their sins are forgiven,*
*One two three four five six seven..."*

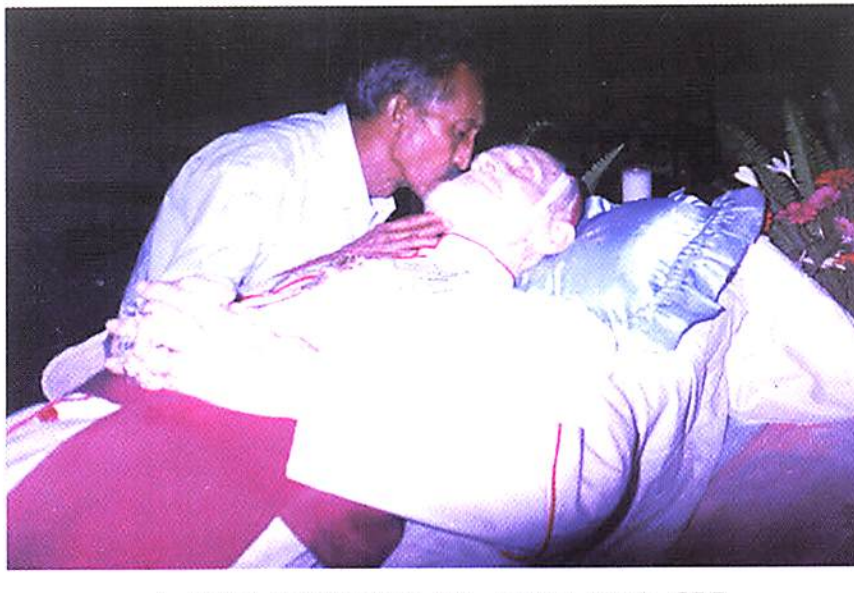
*During a visit to Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong in May 1996*

*At the age of 91 Bishop Marengo had the joy of blessing the marriage of the nephew of Mother Rose Mary Thapa MSMHC (extreme left) – Mr. Ram Kumar Gurung with Manju Sharma (extreme right) at Hatigaon (Guwahati) on 13 January 1997*

*Bishop Marengo being helped by Sr. Nancy Maliekal OSF during one of his routine check-up at the Holy Cross Hospital, Tura. 1997*



*1994: the 89th Birthday smile*



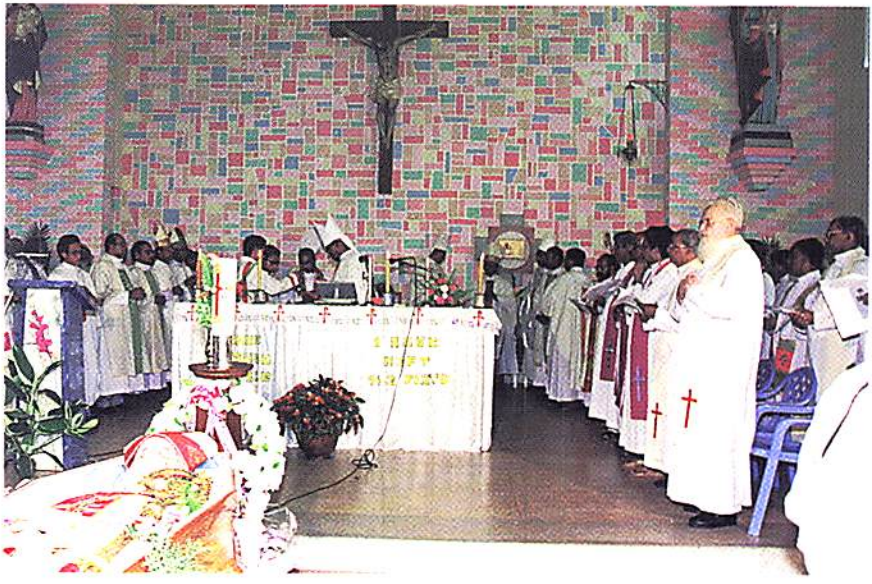
*A loving "Adieu" from Bro. Eligius Khain SDB*

*Sr. Josephine Gaod FMA bids a final farewell to Bishop Marengo*

*Funeral of Bishop Marengo: An affectionate farewell before the mortal remains are laid to rest*

*The faithful paying their last respects to the mortal remains of Bishop Marengo*

*Sr. Rose Kurian MSMHC, one of the nurses who looked after Bishop Marengo, in prayer before his mortal remains*



*Funeral Mass presided over by Bishop George Mamalassery of Tura and concelebrated by the other Bishops of North East India*

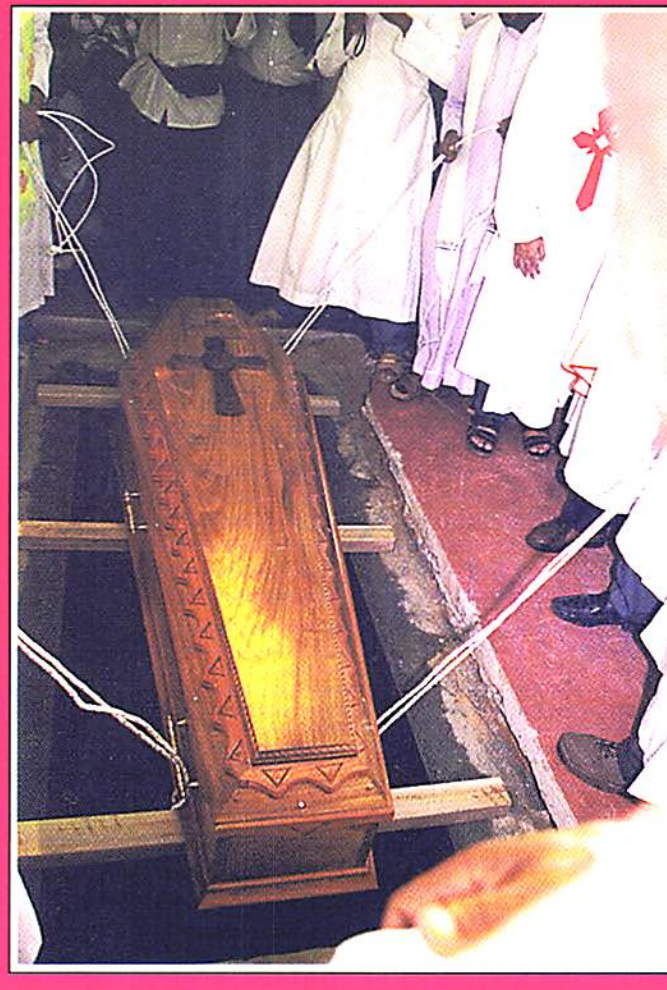
*Rev. Gilbert Marak speaking on behalf of the Baptist Church in Garo Hills at the funeral of Bishop Marengo*

*Fr. Dominic Jala SDB, Salesian Provincial, Guwahati, speaking at the funeral of Bishop Marengo*

*Bishop George Mamalassery, Bishop of Tura, incenses the mortal remains of Bishop Marengo*

*Archbishop Joseph Mittathany of Imphal in prayer before the mortal remains of Bishop Marengo. On his right is Bishop Jose Mukala of Kohima*

*The Bishops of North East India at the funeral of Bishop Marengo*



*The mortal remains of Bishop Marengo being lowered into the tomb*

Next day early in the morning the people would gather again in the chapel for Mass with homily. After the Mass the Bishop would visit the houses and say a short prayer in each home. The people loved to meet him and get his blessing. Some communities had this privilege at the most only twice a year.

The Tengnopal chapel was small and nice. It was made of bamboo. The whole structure stood a little raised from the ground. It shook whenever anyone moved in it. Its side walls rose only a short height from the floor, the rest was open, thus providing cool ventilation.

For the arrival of the Bishop the people had festooned the walls with green garlands of tree leaves. Once at night when Bishop was sleeping in the cubicle prepared for him at the back of the altar, he was awakened suddenly with a violent shaking of the chapel. He sat up to find out what exactly was happening. Earthquake? No. It was a herd of bisons from the forest which had come to feed on the green garlands hanging from the bamboo wall! He picked up courage. Came out and scared the bisons away. He looked around. In no time he realized that the bisons had also eaten half of his umbrella which he had left hanging on the wall!

**Till the 35th of November**

It was November 1954. Bishop Marengo was scheduled to visit some of the villages in the Chin Hills before he left for Bombay to take part in the CBCI (Catholic Bishops' Conference of India) meeting and the Marian congress. So he had written to catechist John Vunkam to make a programme from the 12th to the end of November. Bishop was to arrive at Imphal on 11th, offer Mass in John's village on the 12th and then to proceed with the programme. In his letter to John, Bishop had given the name of some of the

villages and their respective dates. He had also asked him if he could finish visiting all those villages so as to leave for Bombay in time.

John replied with a list of villages the Bishop had to visit. He then added:

"Bishop, if you want to visit all the Christian villages of that area you will have to be here at least till the 35th of November!"

And right enough, the last village on the list prepared by John was marked 35th November!

"Evidently," the Bishop commented, "I could not stay on till the 35th of November, because I was due to leave for Bombay on the 1st of December!"

**The Longest Tour**

The longest tour Bishop Marengo had in Manipur lasted 35 days. It was in the company of Fr. Peter Bianchi. They visited most of the Chin Hills communities on the Burma border and a few Anal communities too. Their daily fare was rice and pork. On Fridays it was boiled pumpkin and rice. The first meal was rather early, soon after Mass. Then the party would set out on a long and extenuating march to reach the next village. They would stop on the way near a stream to refresh themselves with a cup of coffee or cocoa. Bishop Marengo observed that the people in the Chin Hills were rather poor. Their pigs could not be expected to be fat. In some of them [pigs] there would not be even a grain of fat! Bishop Marengo remembered that once the catechist came to ask him whether he had any butter or oil with him to fry the pork!

"The majority of Chin Hills people," the Bishop wrote, "must eke out a miserable living by *jhum* cultivation on

their barren hills".[57] Only in recent years they managed to come down to the plains of Manipur in search of more fertile land. But then it was too late. Most of the land was already occupied.

Bishop Marengo also remarked that the Chin Hills Christians prayed very slowly, almost singing the prayers in a harmonious way very pleasant to hear.

**The Raja of Kwawntal**

By far the largest and farthest village of the Zou area of the Chin Hills was Kwawntal. Perched majestically on a high mountain overlooking the Burmese side of the Chin Hills, Kwawntal could boast of a hundred percent Catholic population except the headman. He was not just the headman, but the Raja of Kwawntal. An authoritative chief, he had under his command many of the nearby villages. His title came from the British for whom he had great admiration. He remained loyal to them even during the Chin Hills uprising. The Raja would make sure that the certificate he had from the British was shown to everyone who happened to pass through his village.

The front of his house was bedecked with the skulls of elephants, tigers, buffaloes, deers and other animals he had hunted in his younger days. In one way he was happy that all his people became Christians. He built a wooden church for them. Not only Christians of his own village, but also others from nearby villages too were asked to come and worship in the church he had built.

Bishop Marengo realized that it was not practical for people of the other villages to come to Kwawntal, for they could not all leave their houses and fields to go to Kwawntal. So during one of his visits Bishop Marengo decided to defy

57. Ibid.,61A.

the order of the Raja. He stopped for Mass in a village only three kms from Kwawntal. He said to himself that he would personally explain the reason to the Raja.

When he finally reached the house of the Raja, the Raja refused to talk with the Bishop. Instead, he very angrily rebuked the porters who had come with the Bishop from the other village. He burst out saying:

"Now that I am getting old you think you can flout my authority with impunity!"

Immediately the Bishop apologized for the liberty he had taken to offer Mass in the village. He also explained to the Raja that not all people were free to come to Kwawntal to worship God in the Church he had built. Besides, the people had the right and the duty to worship God. The Bishop praised the Raja for all his services and asked:

"Is not you yourself, my dear Raja, who encouraged the people to become Christians?"[58]

The Raja was appeased. That evening he invited the Bishop and all the people for a big tribal dance in the court-yard of his house.

After the dance the Raja wished to see the Bishop privately. He had some important matter to discuss with him.

> "Bishop," he said, "I am now an old man. I am the only one of the old religion in this village. So when I die there will be none to celebrate and to bury me according to the rites of the old religion. See, Bishop, all the people are following you. Even my two daughters - very nice and smart looking. They are married to members of your Church. Hence, my prayer to you is that when I die you allow your people to

58. Ibid.,61B.

> come and perform all the old rites and bury me with all the honour due to me as the Raja for more than forty years.[59]
>
> "My dear friend," the Bishop replied, "I love you dearly and I feel very much indebted to you. Be sure that God will not forget that you have guided your people to Him. You certainly understand that I cannot allow my people to perform or even take part in pagan rites".[60]

Bishop paused for a while. Then added:

"But why don't you give yourself to God after giving him all your people?"

He then explained how if he is a Catholic, when God would call him to Himself all the people would gather around him, sing songs and pray to God for him. He would be given a solemn burial with the whole village around him as their Raja. That would look more solemn than just a few people coming to perform some pagan ceremonies.

The old man was listening attentively to all what the Bishop was saying. The Bishop then called the Raja's son-in-law, a young man who had already done a two year course in Naharkatiya, to translate what the Bishop still had to say to the old man. Both the Bishop and the son-in-law were determined to win the Raja to Christ. Bishop Marengo remembered clearly the struggle he had, to make way for the grace of God into that honest soul of the Raja. Both were moved to tears. Finally, the Raja yielded as the Bishop made him kiss a crucifix which he then placed around the old man's neck. He and his wife were instructed and later baptized.

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59. Ibid.
60. Most of the details given here are from my conversation with Fr. Peter Haokip.

When Bishop Marengo visited Kwawntal the following year the old Raja had gone to his eternal reward after yielding allegiance to the King of Kings on the verge of his life. The widow who came to see the Bishop lamented that very few people pay visit to her, now that the Raja had gone. That evening Bishop Marengo arranged for a tea party followed by dancing and singing in front of her house.

**The First Visit to Wayang**

Wayang is on the border with Burma. The name means "flat area on the river bank" But there is neither any flat area or a river. In fact Wayang is on the hill some 4000 ft above sea level. Here one might ask how Wayang got that name at all. It is a carry over from the real 'Wayang' village which was on a river bank. When the village was shifted to the present site on the hills, the name too came along with it.

When Bishop Marengo visited Wayang for the first time, there were no Catholics. He remembers to have stopped there to ask for some water to slake his thirst. At that time he could never have imagined that almost all the people of Wayang would one day become Catholic and that from that cluster of huts lost in the forest of the Burma border there would emerge a priestly vocation in the person of Fr. Peter Haokip who at present is teaching Scripture in Oriens Theological College, Shillong.

Fr. Ravalico visited the area sometime in 1956. He agreed to start a school in Khengjang close to Wayang. At that time Khengjang had a few Catholic families through the missionary work of the Foreign Missionaries of Paris (MEP) from across the border in Burma. In charge of the schools was Mr. Paul Lamkhothang who was earlier a Baptist and uncle of Fr. Peter Haokip. The school remained in Khengjang from 1956 to 1958 when it was moved to Wayang. Fr. Peter

Haokip who was a student in the lower primary section remembers the visit of Fr. George Venturoli and Fr. Joseph Felix there in 1957.[61]

From Wayang Peter Haokip and four of his companions were sent to Don Bosco, Imphal by Fr. Ravalico in 1959. In 1962 Peter Haokip and three others were selected to be sent to the First Minor Seminary of Dibrugarh diocese at its inception in the parish house in Dibrugarh. It is said that Fr. Ravalico, on hearing that Fr. Wollaston was sending seven boys from Hundung did not want to be outdone. So he found four more boys from among the Kukis for Dibrugarh. Needless to say those additional four seminarians went back to their villages after about two months of exposure to Catholic life in Dibrugarh.

Fr. Peter Haokip remembers the tender love of Bishop Marengo whenever he visited Don Bosco, Imphal or St. Joseph's Seminary, Dibrugarh. He calls him "a Pastor of the people" often surrounded by his flock. He had a few memorable photos with Bishop Marengo. They were left with his brother in Chandel. Unfortunately, they were destroyed during the Naga-Kuki troubles of 1993.

One can get an enchanting view of the Burmese plains from a spot between Wayang and Chehjang. The people of Wayang, Chehjang and other villages nearby have easy access to the villages on the Burmese side. They are more familiar with them than with the villages on the Indian side. The Wayang village of Bishop Marengo's time is now shifted to a place some three kms down the hill to be on the GREF road passing from Tengnopal to New Samtal. It is situated at the 109th km from zero point.

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61. See, *Bollettino Salesiano*, 1 January 1957, 24-25.

During the Second World War so many shells were dropped in Wayang area that in later years the people made good money collecting from the forest empty shell cases and selling them. Bishop Marengo used to be presented with a few of them during his visits there. They were used as beautiful flower vases.

**Mythong: an Enriching Experience**

Mythong is a Mayol village in Manipur. During a missionary tour sometime in 1956 Bishop Marengo and Fr. Ravalico received about 200 adults into the Church. When the baptisms were over the catechist approached Bishop Marengo and said that there was a man who wanted to be baptized but could not come to the church.

"We shall go to his house and baptize him there," said Bishop Marengo.

"He is a leper. The village authorities have isolated him. No one should go near," continued the catechist.

"Is there no one to take care of him?" asked the Bishop.

"Yes, someone from his house would go and give him food. But he is forbidden to come to the village," explained the catechist further.

At this Bishop Marengo said:

"Alright, we shall go and visit him, and if he is prepared, we shall also baptize him".

"He knows how to read," said the catechist, "he has learnt all the prayers. Before he became sick, he did not want to hear anything about religion. Since two years he is sick, he wants to be a Christian and he prays much. One can hear him praying even from a distance".

Mythong is in the midst of a forest. Only a footpath trodden by animals and covered with slush and cow-dung led to that miserable hut in which lived that leper about a kilometre away from the village. The only persons who visited him was either his wife or the daughter who went there twice a day to leave a plate of rice near him for him to live on.

When Bishop Marengo accompanied by two youngsters arrived in sight of the poor man's hut he noticed his daughter standing at a distance and talking with her father. Perhaps, she had preceded the Bishop to tell her father that the Bishop was coming.

Drenched in the rain Bishop entered the hut and found the man sitting on a mat all covered with an old and filthy blanket. Close to him was the fireplace consisting of just three stones over which was an aluminium pot. A gourd hung close by served to bring water from the near by spring. Near the stool lay a small Manipuri prayer book.

After entering, Bishop Marengo came close to the man took hold his arm knelt down near him on the same mat (since that was the most comfortable position he could take in that low hut). He asked him a few questions. The man narrated his life and showed how painful it was to be in that hut day and night away from his family and friends.

Bishop Marengo had come across other lepers during his missionary tours. But it was the first time that he saw a tribal leper so isolated from his dear ones. That was what the village authorities had ordered to do!

At a certain moment the man removed a part of his blanket and made Bishop Marengo see the leprosy. It was just beginning to become ulcerous.

"Do you desire to be baptized?" asked the Bishop.

> "Yes," replied the man, "that is the only thing I now desire. I know I will not be cured. But I want to be a Christian".

The Bishop then made him recite the Act of Contrition and baptized him. As the waters of baptism flowed over his forehead, he pronounced the Trinitarian formula of Baptism. He then prayed together with that man, stayed some more time with him and returned to the village under the same rain that brought him to that hut. The house he was staying too had so much mud and water that the clothes he was wearing were damp and had very little chance of drying in that rain that poured for four days non-stop.

Two days after the baptism as Bishop Marengo and Fr. Ravalico were taking leave of the village, there came running someone with a chicken.

"My father wants you to take this along with you. He is very grateful for your visit and for the baptism". That was the daughter of the leper who wanted to thank Bishop for his kindness.

Reflecting on that day's experience, Bishop Marengo wrote that in that poor hut he learnt more than what he taught. In his humility he also acknowledged that his own faith was small compared with that of the leper. In that hut turned into a calvary, Bishop Marengo was convinced, there lived a splendid soul in that body now decaying.[62]

### Getting Ready for a Great Leap Forward

Bishop Marengo set apart the first few years (1952-1955) for contacting the Tangkhuls and a few of the Chin Hills tribes. Without a base in Imphal it became difficult to keep up contact with tribes like Mayol, Monsang, Paite,

62. Ibid., 56.

Anal, Lamkang and Mao, Maram, and Rongmei as well as some of the Mizo tribes. Dibrugarh which is over 500 kms from Imphal was too far to do anything sustained and systematic for those and other tribes open to the faith. It was necessary therefore to have a presence somewhere in Imphal.

To this must be added the fact that both Nagaland and Manipur were becoming increasingly difficult to access due to agitation for independence from India by Nagas of both Nagaland and Manipur. In fact, Manipur was declared a Restricted Area by 1957, and things were hotting up also in Nagaland. The restriction was all the more felt by a non-Indian national like Bishop Marengo. When restriction became more stringent, he could not go by vehicle to Manipur passing through Nagaland, for his normal route was from Dibrugarh via Dimapur to Imphal. Instead, he now had to go to Silchar by train - a 24 hour journey - and take a 15 minute-long flight over the hills to Imphal to go to the Tangkhul or Kuki-Chin areas. Only Fr. A. Ravalico and Fr. P. Bianchi could easily go in and come out more easily, since they had Indian citizenship.

Even though the Catholic Fathers were permitted by the Maharaja of Manipur at the end of 1948 to come and work in the Hill areas of the State, with the independence of India it was no more the Maharajas who had any effective power, but the Chief Commissioner appointed by the government of India. In the early 1950s the Chief Commissioner of Manipur was Mr. Moon. He was from Ulster, Ireland. He had no sympathy for the Catholics. Mr. Moon, who had been working in the Police Department earlier, had refused in the past to carry out an order of the British Regime to arrest Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Naturally, Nehru remembered this act of kindness with gratitude. He was waiting for the first opportunity to reward him. So, as soon

as he became the first Prime Minister of Independent India, Nehru promoted Mr. Moon to some important office. It is from there that he became the 'big boss' of Manipur.

Bishop Marengo had a short epistolary squabble with Mr. Moon when he wrote to the Bishop that he could not allow the Catholic Fathers to go to Ukhrul and visit the Tangkhul area. When Fr. Mario Bianchi, the secretary of the Bishop, obtained for Bishop Marengo a special permit from the Governor of Assam to visit Manipur, it was Mr. Moon who refused it saying that "a permit to visit Manipur did not mean that one could go anywhere in Manipur". "To visit the hills of Manipur," he added, "one needed the permission of the Chief Commissioner". He also made it known:

> "I hold out no hope that this [permit] will ever be granted".

> Bishop Marengo had the following to say on the matter:

"I suppose he [Mr. Moon] was a good and just administrator, but the easy-going section of Manipuris thought that he was too strict and he was removed!"[63]

The Sub Divisional Officer of Ukhrul was Mr. Thiankam, brought up at the school of Mr. Moon. At first he walked in the footsteps of Mr. Moon. Later on when he realized that the Governor himself was a great friend of the Bishop and an admirer of the Catholic Church, Mr. Thiankam too changed his opinion about the Catholics. When his wife was admitted to the hospital at Dibrugarh and was looked after well by the Sisters of Charity, he became a great friend of the Fathers and Sisters.

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63. Ibid., 56.

Bishop Marengo was awaiting a propitious occasion for sounding the mind of the Manipur Government on the possibility of the Catholic missionaries being permitted to reside in Manipur even if Imphal (the capital) was ruled out. The Maharaja who had kindly received the two Fathers in November 1948 but had made it clear that he could not allow the Fathers to stay and work in Imphal, was now merely a figurehead with no executive power whatsoever.

The propitious moment came when the Chief Commissioner who was then the highest authority in Manipur was Mr. Mathew, a Syrian Christian from Kerala. He was a good gentleman. He and his wife wre highly educated, refined, kind and sincere Christians. One day Bishop took the chance of his presence in Imphal to pay his respects to him. But he did not mention yet his plan which was close to his heart, namely, permission for the Fathers to settle down in Manipur.

Bishop Marengo went to meet him again on another occasion. He explained to him the great inconvenience arising from the fact that he had to visit his flock in Manipur from Dibrugarh without a permanent and convenient place in Imphal. Mr. Mathew then reminded the Bishop that there would be no difficulty whatever for Indian Fathers to stay on in Manipur, even in Imphal. When he remarked that he had no Indian Fathers, but had two Italian Fathers with Indian citizenship, he said emphatically:

> "Before the law, to all effects, there is not the slightest difference between Indian born citizens and foreign born Indian citizens. I don't see any difficulty for these two Fathers to settle down here".

But knowing the prejudices of the Meiteis against the missionaries, Mr. Mathew advised the Bishop not to call the establishment a "Mission Centre".

Recalling this historic meeting with Mr. Mathew, Bishop Marengo writes:

> "We must really be grateful to Divine Providence for sending us the right man at the right time and to Mr. Mathew for his kind advice and encouragement".

Bishop Marengo then began to look around for a suitable place for the Fathers to stay in Imphal. To find a proper site it was necessary that one should live in Imphal for sometime and build up acquaintances and friends. With that in view, Bishop Marengo found a small house belonging to a Mao gentleman, Mr. Kathipri, a Government officer. That was considered sufficient to begin with. And once the Fathers had settled down in Imphal, they could easily find a better accommodation.

### 1956 : The Great Leap Forward

The year 1956 marks the turning point in the history of the Catholic Missions in Manipur. Fr. P. Bianchi calls it *The Great Leap forward.*

On Saturday 11 February 1956 and "almost miraculously" Fr. Ravalico arranged for the purchase of a place at the heart of Imphal which became the present day Nirmalabas. The date is significant and the story of Nirmalabas is interesting.

A retired police officer at Imphal was planning to leave for Calcutta. What is today Nirmalabas was a small plot with a house in the centre of the town. Fr. Ravalico who was in search of a piece of land where the missionaries could stay more permanently jumped at the offer, when he came to know that the plot was on sale. He bought it for Rs. 58,000, and christened the 'Palit Bhawan' of Mr. Palit, *Nirmalabas* or the House of the Immaculate. Thus the Immaculate Mother of God herself became the powerful

help of Christians not only for the few Fathers, Brothers and Sisters who work in Manipur, but also for all those who hear the Word of God through them.

**A Jeep Filled wih Blessings**

Monday 5 March 1956. Fr. Ravalico and Fr. Bianchi were all set for Manipur. The jeep, a gift from a benefactor in the USA, was filled to capacity with provisions, medicines, vestments and even a cycle tied on top of it! It had no trailer. But the box-like projection at the back of the jeep was a proof that there was no empty space inside. While the jeep was parked outside the Cathedral Church in Dibrugarh awaiting the "showers of blessing" from Bishop Marengo who was to solemnly invoke God's choicest blessings upon the two valiant missionaries and all their dreams for Manipur, the faithful who had come out of the Church formed two lines on both sides of the road as if to symbolize the protecting hand of God. With all his heart Bishop blessed Fr. Ravalico and Fr. Bianchi. He sprinkled more than the usual amount of holy water on the jeep and its contents. He then embraced the two Fathers and wished them God's loving providence. All the persons present were visibly moved. The jeep started. It was the solemn and official beginning of a long and fruitful apostolate in Manipur.

On their way to Imphal they passed through Jorhat where a Catholic gentleman gave them lunch. When they reached Golaghat it was already evening. They were warmly received by Fr. F. Bollini and the other confreres. Next day, that is, Tuesday 6 March 1956 at 6.00 a.m., they started off for Imphal. They reached Kohima at 2.00 p.m. There they searched for a driver better acquainted with the winding mountain roads. An Angami youth offered his services. When they finally reached the border of Manipur, it was 4.00 p.m.

In the words of Fr. Bianchi:

"Fr. Ravalico, like a novel St. Francis Xavier, full of holy zeal for the new work ahead of him, asked his co-traveller":

"We are reaching Manipur: don't you feel anything?"

The answer was equally down to earth: "I feel hungry!"

They passed through Mao Gate without calling any attention. Within a few years and in God's own time a plentiful harvest would be reaped for the Lord from among the Maos.

The two reached Imphal at 8.00 p.m. They paid a visit to Captain L.H. Hartnett, a Catholic, and his family. The supper he had prepared for Fr. Ravalico and Fr. Bianchi was not just an ordinary one. It was a golden supper, with Golden Birthday Wishes for Fr. Ravalico on his 50th birthday. It was 6 March 1956.

Within a few days the two Fathers rented a house on the Thaomeipham road. They were put up there while the Nirmalabas house was getting ready. Then came the great and historical day.

**Nirmalabas, the Abode of the 'Immaculate'**

Wednesday 6 May, 1956, the Feast of St. Dominic Savio.

In the presence of a distinguished gathering including about 300 Catholics, Nirmalabas was inaugurated and blessed to become a shining 'jewel' in the 'Land of Jewels'. From that day onward Nirmalabas was the point of arrival for many a zealous catechist or catechumen or well-wisher of the Catholic Mission from the various tribes of Manipur. They would come not just to see the 'Fathers', but to invite them to start the Catholic Mission in their own villages and among their own people.

Following such requests Fr. Ravalico and Fr. Bianchi visited Maram Khullen village in the month of May, 1956. with due preparation a small community was formed there. Catechist John Longyao was sent there to instruct the people. Invitation came from Punanamai-Mao. On Tuesday 27 November of the same year, 1956, Fr. Bianchi visited Punanamai-Mao. He found about forty enthusiastic young men ready to become Catholics. Paul Yuishi was appointed catechist both for the Marams and the Maos. In the meantime Bishop Marengo visited Manipur again. He and Fr. Ravalico visited Senvon and Rawakot in the South-Western corner of the region. They began their tour on Sunday 4 November, 1956. They passed through the Paite-Hmar areas. On their way back they travelled by boat on the river Barak and reached Lakhimpur on 21 November.

Sensing the great harvest that the Lord was preparing for them Fr. Ravalico himself brought some forty boys and girls to Dibrugarh to be educated and trained in the different Catholic schools there. In course of time they would become the pillars of their respective Catholic communities. The girls were from the Mayol tribe. They joined the convent school at Golaghat. The boys were from the Chin Hills and from Thadou tribes. They were admitted to the boarding school at Naharkatiya.

The growing work needed more personnel. Fr. Joseph Felix reached Imphal on Thursday 20 December 1956. Soon he became fully involved in the mission work. His linguistic and music talents stood him in good stead.

At the insistence of Fr. Ravalico the Mother Provincial of the Salesian Sisters paid a visit on Thursday 7th February 1957. That was the first step towards building up what is today the Little Flower School, Imphal, run by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Precious help continued to flow in. Fr. George Venturoli came on Sunday 17 March 1957. And more youngsters from different tribes were given a place in the makeshift arrangements in Nirmalabas. There were boys from among the Tangkhuls, the Maos, the Marams, the two sister tribes of the Mayols and the Monsang, and the Kukis. Soon Nirmalabas proved to be too small to accommodate all of them. So Fr. Ravalico found a suitable place in a locality called Chingmeirong, at the entrance to Imphal town as one reached Imphal from the Assam road. That was in 1958. Little by little, the Fathers' residence, a boarding for boys and the Don Bosco youth centre were built here.

When the Father's residence was ready in Chingmeirong, the Fathers moved to the new place leaving Nirmalabas for the Salesian Sisters and for their school.

A very big help came with the arrival of the first diocesan Fathers.

**Long Mission Tours**

On 26 December 1954 Bishop Marengo set out on a four week– tour of the Tangkhul area in Manipur. He came back to Dibrugarh on 22 January 1955. After visiting the N. Lakhimpur area and other parts of the diocese he was back again in Manipur from 4 to 23 March 1955. On his return he visited the Doom Dooma and Naharkatiya mission. Spiritual retreat for catechists and their instruction were upper most in his heart. In April 1955 Bishop was back again in Manipur along with Fr. Peter Bianchi for a month's tour of the Tangkhul district. At the same time Fr. J. Larrea visited the Lotha communities in Nagaland. Bishop and Fr. Bianchi walked more than 140 miles trekking through jungles and climbing and descending impossible paths. They visited 13 villages giving those

Christians an opportunity of attending the Holy Mass and receiving the Sacraments. In each village they were welcomed with touching and joyful receptions. Christians would come and meet the missionaries at the entrance to their village, garland them and sing for them joyful songs. They would then kiss the ring of the bishop and accompany the missionaries into the village singing.

On 31 August 1955 Fr. Peter Bianchi set forth on his second tour of Manipur. Training of catechists was the main item on the agenda. For this he spent about a month at Hundung. On Sundays he used to visit the nearby villages of Nunghong, Chitoa and Ukhrul, Shiroy, Paoy and Chiparay. In November of the same year (1955) F. Bianchi set out on a 40 days tour of the Chin district. After a few days he was reached by Bishop Marengo. They returned to Dibrugarh on 12 December. They brought two Thadou-Chin boys to the boarding school of Dibrugarh. On December 27 both Bishop Marengo and Fr. Bianchi left Dibrugarh for Manipur on a four-week-long tour in the Tangkhul area.

Sr. Theresa Shimra MSMHC, a Tangkhul Naga, recalls how she and the other boarding children used to look forward to his return from the tour of Tangkhul area. He would accept all what the parents used to send to their children through him: packets of chilly powder, dry meat, bottles of chutney! No trouble was too great provided he could make both the parents and the children happy.

Returning from Manipur the Bishop made another long tour of Golaghat, N. Lakhimpur and Naharkatiya areas. January 1956 saw the baptism of the first two Mayols of Manipur in Naharkatiya.

In October 1955 Bishop left for a ten-day-tour in the Lotha Hills. Fr. Larrea from Golaghat accompanied him. In

May 1956 Bishop left for a two-week-tour in the Golaghat district and Manipur.

At the beginning of August 1956 Bishop left for Imphal to preside over a training course for local catechists. He spent the whole month of August in Manipur. Again he spent the whole of November 1956 in Manipur.

The whole of September 1957 Bishop was busy touring the Doom Dooma area twice, and visiting his Angami flock. End of December 1957 the Bishop set out on a long tour in the Chin area of Manipur. He would return to Dibrugarh only on 4 February 1958. During this period he was present at two huge annual conventions organized by the Tangkhuls and the Chin Thadou Christians. People came from far away villages after walking 3 days. Each group brought along with it a petition for a petromax, a set of the Stations of the Cross, Church pews, Church bells, an additional school master, a new chapel, etc. They wanted their little ones accepted, free of course, in the boarding schools. Bishop took with him 23 of these little ones.

The tour programme continued. The month of May 1958 saw Bishop visiting the districts of Doom Dooma and Golaghat. In Golaghat 30 Lotha children were looked after by Fr. Larrea. In December 1958 Bishop toured the Lotha area along with Fr. J. Larrea.

Golaghat, N. Lakhimpur and Naharkatiya districts were the object of Bishop's tour in February 1959.

On Sunday 15 February 1959 Bishop Marengo laid the foundation stone of the new Don Bosco school building in Dibrugarh, a three-storey building and a three-wing structure with a capacity to accommodate 200 inmates and 500 day scholars.

During March he visited Golaghat, Naharkatiya, Doom Dooma and N. Lakhimpur. During Easter vigil 1959 he received a number of school children into the Church. Among them were two Mao-Naga boys from Punanamei. Visits to Doom Dooma and Naharkatiya were carried out during April 1959. By the middle of the month he set out for Manipur where he visited Hundung, Churachandpur and Punanamei. Bishop spent the first week of September 1959 visiting the flock in the N. Lakhimpur district.

Chevalier M. Rathnaswamy paid a visit to Assam in September 1959 to have a look at the North Eastern part of India. He addressed the Catholics of Dibrugarh and spoke of the "urgent and imperative necessity for Catholics to form themselves into associations in order to exercise vigilance over the rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitutions and, should occasions rise, to become articulate about them". Bishop Marengo promised that every effort would be made to form Catholic Associations wherever it was possible in the diocese.

On 16 October 1959 Bishop toured Golaghat district. He spent the second half of November 1959 and the whole of December in Manipur. In March 1960 he visited the districts of Doom Dooma and Naharkatiya.

In the evening of December 22, 1960 the narrow lane leading to the Catholic Mission was unusually lined up with two rows of people: Hindu, Muslim and Christians. The ground in front of the Cathedral was packed. As the brown *Fiat* appeared at the turn of the road, the bells started ringing in joyful chime and a somewhat shattered brass band filled the air with scrappy melodies. A rousing *Hamara Bishop ki jai* by the hundreds present hailed the Bishop as he returned to his flock after an assence of six

and a half months in Europe for the *ad limina* visit and for meeting his benefactors.

He made a quick visit to many of the centres in January 1961 itself: Doom Dooma, Digboi, Naharkatiya, Golaghat. The month of February being the best month for mission tours, it was also the month for conventions. The Bishop had a very busy schedule: Fr. Frassy of Golaghat Mission took him to Garisowa village where there was one of the oldest communities of the Golaghat mission, and Fr. T. Lopez accompanied him to N. Lakhimpur.

The whole month of May 1961 was spent in Manipur. He also spent a long time with his flock in Mao-Maram area. He left Dibrugarh on 27 April and returned only in 5 June 1961.

After visiting Golaghat in October 1961 where he presided over the patronal feast of that mission, Bishop set out on a long tour of the Lotha Hills. We read in the chronicles of Dibrugarh:

> "In the month of November Bishop Marengo spent two happy weeks among his Lotha flock. The Lotha Catholics at that time numbered nearly 15000. It was a sizeable group thanks to the contacts made by Fr. J. Larrea and Fr. O'Hara".

From 20 to 27 November 1961 the diocese had the visit of the Inter-Nuncio Mgr. John Knox. Bishop Marengo received him at Silghat in the evening of 20 November. Next day along with Fr. A. Alessi, Bishop Marengo accompanied the Inter-Nuncio to Golaghat. Returning from Golaghat they travelled to N. Lakhimpur by air. Coming back to Dibrugarh they proceeded to Doom Dooma. It took half an hour to cross Tinsukia town for the maze of ramshackle horse coaches, rickshaws, trucks and sacred cows and slush. On the following day they visited Digboi. Then to Naharkatiya

and finally to Dibrugarh. On 27th they flew from Dibrugarh to Calcutta, and then to Imphal for a short visit to that part of the diocese.

Februry 1962: after waiting for nearly three months Bishop got the permission to enter Manipur again. But the list of places and Christian communities to be visited by the Bishop was severely curtailed and reduced to a few in the Imphal plateau.

**Unforgettable May 1961**

Bishop remembered for a long time May 1961: all the five confreres of Bishop's House, Dibrugarh, were down for a quite long period suffering from some strange ailment. Fr. P. Taverna of Naharkatiya and Bro. Michael Cahoj were operated at the Medical College Hospital. The car was badly damaged in an accident, and a 'hold up' and a subsequent theft by two cheats from Central India!

In the evening of May 23, 1961 two seemingly educated young men made their appearance at the Bishop's House, Dibrugarh. They asked for the superior of the institution and on meeting Fr. Dal Zovo they said they were special envoys from the Central Government, and that they were on a mission to discover false currency notes and possibly to arrest the culprit. They showed a document which later proved to be a forged one. The documents introduced Mr. Mathur and his secretary as agents of the Government and asked the co-operation of convents and institutions to carry out their mission. The two agents set a few questions about the financial condition of the Bishop's House, the bank where the money was deposited, and if they had any hundred-rupee notes in the house. Fr. Dal Zovo called Bro. Pancolini as a witness. They had no misgiving at the beginning of the interview: the well-behaved

'agents', their credentials, the fear of offending Government prevented them from entertaining any doubt until the two guests insisted a bit too much on seeing as many notes as were available in the house to find out false ones.

At this particular point of the interview Bro. Pancolini called a number of college boys, and placed them near the two doors of the parlour. If the two gentlemen, on seeing a large sum of money before them, were to attempt a hold-up with fire-arms, the students would have intervened on the spot. Nothing of the kind happened. The two 'friends' declared that some false notes were among the notes. They also declared that they had the authority to confiscate them. But they did not do so because 'they trusted the Fathers'. They said that they would simply seal the whole amount in an envelope, and would come the following day with an Inspector to check the notes. Till then they had not touched the notes. They wrapped them in a sheet of paper and enclosed the packet into an envelope. With a sort of hand-trick which escaped Fr. Dal Zovo and Bro. Pancolini, they managed to replace the packet containing the money with another packet which was hidden in the sleeves of one of them. They sealed it, and were assured that it would not be opened till the following day when the inspector would come in person.

As soon as the two 'investigators' left, Fr. Dal Zovo and Bro. Pancolini smelt a rat. They became curious. They tore open the sealed packet. To their great surprise, they found not the hundred-rupee notes, but a lump of newspaper cuts. A case was registered against the 'investigators'. They were caught and put in custody.

The case that was registered against them was passed in favour of Bishop's House on 9 August 1963. The two accused were condemned to two years of imprisonment for theft

and one year for impersonalization. Within thirty days the culprits appealed to the Session Judge, Jorhat, who transferred it to the file of the Additional Sessions Judge, Dibrugarh. On 31 August, 1964, the latter confirmed the sentence. In October 1964 Bishop's House received back the sum of Rs. 5700!

**A Surprise Welcome**

One day in June 1961 when Bishop Marengo was returning from Imphal, on reaching Mao gate, he had a surprise welcome by the little children of the Primary School of Punanamei. All the sixty little ones appearing from nowhere, surrounded the jeep and literally covered the Bishop with flowers and sang for him while the people looked on in wonder!

**Mission among the Zeliangrong**

Bishop Marengo made his first visit to Awangkhul in Manipur West District in October 1957. Fr. J. Felix accompanied him. Hardly one year had passed since the first contact, and Fr. Felix was eager to baptize them. But Bishop Marengo would allow it only after some more instruction.

The beginnings of the Church in Awangkhul and its spread to Tamenglong and other areas in the West District of Manipur is a story similar to that of Lakhuty in the Lotha area of Nagaland.

The suspension of some Baptists by their Church on a charge of drinking country liquor was the immediate cause of disagreement. It led about 25 families at first and later a total of 32 families to seek a realistic solution to their problems. It was the time when the Catholic Church was just being established in Imphal and among the Tangkhuls in Manipur East District as well as among the Kuki-Chin groups along the border with Myanmar. The Awangkhul group came to

know of it and they sent a certain Mr. K.S. Poujeipou to Imphal on a fact finding mission. He returned to Awangkhul after ascertaining the whereabouts of the Catholic mission at Imphal. He was so impressed by the Catholic Fathers and by what he heard from them, that he hurried back to Awangkhul and returned to Imphal with a group to meet them.

The group consisted of Mr. K.S. Poujeipou and 4 others. They came to Imphal on 12 February 1957. They were lucky to meet both Fr. A. Ravalico and Fr. P. Bianchi. The long chat that followed was more than an instruction. They cleared whatever doubt they had uppermost in their mind and went back to Awangkhul not only with a clearer mind but also with some prayer books and religious objects. Their earnestness did not stop there. A more determined delegation was formed to bring a Catholic priest himself to Awangkhul as early as possible.

Hence, another group of 4 which too included Mr. Poujeipou arrived at Imphal in April of the same year (1957). They met Fr. Ravalico and Fr. Bianchi. The latter sent Fr. J. Felix to Awangkhul to visit the village and to do the needful. Fr. Felix took along with him Mr. John Anal as his interpreter. Fr. Felix's one day stay at Imphal further confirmed the desire of the people to embrace the Catholic faith after due instruction. A total of 270 members were to be prepared immediately. Mr. M. K. Jangamlung was sent to Imphal to learn more about the faith so as to instruct his own people in Awangkhul. It was while this preparation was going on that Bishop Marengo paid his first visit to Awangkhul in October 1957 as we have mentioned above.

The first group of 270 people were received into the Church on 6 and 7 February 1958 by Fr. J. Felix and Fr. G. Venturoli. They belonged to some 35 families.

As in the case of some other beginnings too, persecutions were not wanting.

Unjust accusations and threats followed.

But the courageous stand of the Catholics and their good sense prevailed in the long run.

Soon the faith spread to Tamenglong and to other places. Boys who came to study in Don Bosco Imphal became the bearers of the faith to their own villagers. The visits of the Fathers brought encouragement to the infant Church in the different villages. At first the community was under the care of Fr. Felix and Fr. Venturoli and the catechists. Fr. P. Bianchi ministered to the Zeliangrong community from 1960 to 1963 and Fr. Daniel Rai, from 1964 to 1966.

On one of his return journeys from Awangkhul Bishop Marengo and Fr. Felix met a Kuki repairing a jungle path. Though he was a Baptist, he thought that the two men in white long dress would certainly have a solution to a problem that had been worrying him for long. He approached them as they came near, and without much ado plunged right away into an argument.

"Listen please," he said, "we Baptists and you Romans, we both believe that Sunday is the Day of the Lord, the day we should keep holy. Now these Seventh Day Adventists have come to tell us that Saturday and not Sunday is the day we should keep holy and observe as a day of rest. What do you say yourselves?[64]

Bishop left it to Fr. Felix to answer him. And Fr. Felix who had come across not a few of such cases had the answer at his finger tips. He explained to the man why Sunday is the Lord's day and then mentioned a quotation from the

64. SHTCCD-MM, I, 79.

New Testament (Col 2:16). As soon as he heard the New Testament quotation he picked up a dry stick from the ground and wrote that reference on his thigh with the ease and eagerness of a student in a class room. Bishop Marengo bent down to see what he had written. It was exactly Col 2:16.

Musing over it Bishop remarked as they continued their journey down the road: "How true that cleanliness is next to godliness!"

He felt sorry for the many non-Catholics. The instructions they received from their pastors in those days consisted only of some accusations against the Catholic Church and some prohibitions like: "Do not drink, do not smoke, do not eat pork, etc."[65] Bishop Marengo was of the opinion that only friendly and positive attitudes towards non-Catholics from the part of Catholics can build up good ecumenical relationships.

On another occasion coming down from the same Awangkhul after a day's march Bishop Marengo had stopped for the night in one of the villages on the way. There he met a unit of soldiers who were marching to Imphal from their outpost. They had a pack of mules. Most of the soldiers were Gurkhas. He took that chance to enter into a bit of conversation in Nepali, to revise the Nepali he had learnt some 15 years earlier in Sonada. To some he spoke in Hindi, to others in Nepali.

After a few miles he stopped in another village to offer Mass and to have a bite and to take some rest. In the meantime the soldiers marched ahead and moved towards their next halt.

When he caught them up again, they were happy to meet him. They invited him for a cup of tea and some

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65. Ibid.

biscuits. Then came the surprise. Here we shall allow Bishop Marengo himself to tell us:

"A stout and stocky lady from the Chin Hills was travelling with the soldiers. I believe she was the wife of one of them and was cooking for them. As chance would have it, in a matter of a few minutes I spoke Hindi, Nepali and Meitei. Then when the woman asked something about me from a soldier, I replied to her in the language she had spoken. The woman suddenly turned, and to nobody in particular, exclaimed in Nepali:

'*Yo Kosto saheb ho*!' which means, 'What kind of a European is this!'[66]

**Mission among the Lothas and Angamis in Nagaland**

The two beginnings - of Bishop Marengo as the first Bishop of Dibrugarh and of the Catholic community in Nagaland - almost coincide. In July 1951 Fr. Marengo was on his way back to Tezpur after preaching a retreat to the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians at Golaghat. A day before his departure for Tezpur he had met a group of Lotha Nagas from Lakhuti. They had come to meet Fr. F. Bollini to learn something more about the Catholic Church before they could take a final decision. In the providence of God they became the nucleus of the first Catholic community of Nagaland. When Fr. Marengo met them in Golaghat, he could never have imagined that within a few months they would be part of his flock.

Fr. Marengo's nomination as the first Bishop of Dibrugarh was propitious for the growth of the Church among the Lothas and the Angamis.

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66. Ibid, II, 45E.

On 7 April 1951 Mr. Shampano Humtsoe, Yantsao Yanthan and Chenisao Humtsoe walked all the way to Wokha covering full 45 kms to meet some government officers to ask them if there was anything wrong to be Catholics. M. Kithan and M. Kinghen whom they met, explained to them in simple words one of the most basic rights of every human being: the freedom to practise the religion of one's enlightened choice. Shampano and Yantsao also met Rev. H. Houston at the Vankusung mission and put the same question from another angle. They enquired of him whether they would be sinning if they became Catholics. Houston's answer could not have been more simple. He replied:

"This is something you must decide by yourselves. I will tell you nothing. I cannot forbid you to join the Catholic Church since that is the original Church".[67]

Why Shampano, Yantsao and Chenisao came all the way on foot to Wokha, why the three families had a meeting in their village three days earlier vouching with their thumb impression that they would be Catholics by all means, what made them pay a visit to the Catholics of Gorajan (an Adivasi Catholic community on the border between Nagaland and Assam), why they came to meet Fr. F. Bollini in Golaghat, and what followed thereafter before they became the first nucleus of the Catholic Church in Nagaland are part of the early history of the Church among the Lothas.[68]

The three leaders mentioned above made another visit to Golaghat. Fr. Bollini instructed them further and received them into the Church on 12 April 1951. Most probably Fr. Marengo

67. D. Syiemlieh, *A Brief History of the Catholic Church in Nagaland*, Shillong: Vendrame Institute Publications, 1990, 50.
68. Ibid., 48-59.

too was present in Golaghat at that time.[69] The first Catholics had to face much opposition. Through thick and thin the community forged ahead. They built their own little chapel in May of the same year and conducted their own religious services. It took nearly two years before Fr. Bollini could get permission from the government to make a visit to Lakhuti. That was in March 1953. He stayed three days with them to encourage and instruct them.

In the meantime Fr. Marengo had become Bishop Marengo and was installed as the first Bishop of Dibrugarh. He and Fr. Ravalico made their first visit to Lakhuti in November 1953. Each followed different route and met at Sunglup from where they covered the rest of 7 kms together to Lakhuti.

Before leaving for Lakhuti and while awaiting the innerline permit from the government, Bishop Marengo did a good bit of homework in Dibrugarh. He arranged for a young man from Lotha area to teach him Lotha and to help him prepare the first Lotha Catechism and Prayer Book.

On a Saturday evening he was in the Church in Dibrugarh for Benediction service. Next to him in the Church was his Lotha teacher Peter. At one moment Bishop Marengo saw him take out a notebook and a pencil and write down something as the *tantum ergo* was being sung. When they came out of the Church, the Bishop was curious to know what Peter was writing. He had a pleasant surprise. Peter was transposing the music of *tantum ergo* into *tonic sol fa*. That gave Bishop Marengo the idea of getting ready a few more hymns for his imminent Lotha trip. He called Bro. Pancolini and instructed him to sing a few hymns to Peter. Peter transcribed them into *tonic sol fa*.

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69. Ibid., 51. See also SHTCD-MM,I, 52.

Peter went back to his village at the beginning of October 1953. In November Bishop Marengo received the good news that he could proceed to Lakhuti. Fr. A. Ravalico having an Indian citizenship could take the route he wanted. So he proceeded to Lakhuti via Merapani. Since Bishop had a standing invitation from Mr. Carvalho, the Deputy Commissoner of Kohima, a Catholic, he passed through Kohima to meet Fr. Marocchino and the community of Sisters at the Naga Hospital. From there he proceeded to Wokha. Bishop met Mr. Carvalho and the Superintendent of Police at Wokha. His journey to Wokha was eventful. He started off on a *Dodge* in which Fr. Marocchino had reserved a seat for him. Unfortunately, the *Dodge* refused to start. He waited a few hours hoping against hope and praying that somehow he might reach Wokha that evening itself since the Deputy Commissioner and the Superintendent of Police were waiting for him there. Even then the Dodge would not budge. It was then that something unexpected happened. There came a military truck which was going straight to Wokha with a brief stop at Pokoboto. The anxiety vanished when Bishop recognized an old friend of his, a Khasi mechanic from Shillong, among the soldiers. He arranged a seat for Bishop in the military truck and everything seemed set right to reach Wokha before dark.

But as the saying goes, man proposes, God disposes. It did not take much time to realize that the old military truck with all its good will would never reach Wokha on the same day. The road was bad. And the truck was worse still. Coaxing and cajoling it managed to reach Pokoboto. It was too late to proceed. They had to spend the night there. The soldiers gave Bishop a *bara khana* and made his stay very comfortable at the military post.

Next morning Bishop Marengo offered Mass at Pokoboto for a handful of Catholics from the military post

and left for Wokha after breakfast. As the truck reached Longsa, a Lotha village few kilometres before Wokha, a Lotha *dobashi* (interpreter) who was travelling in the same truck turned to Bishop Marengo and said that he should preach there to get many conversions. Future years would prove the *dobashi* right.

Finally the military truck reached Wokha just before noon. As he reached the inspection bungalow there was the Deputy Commissioner and the Superintendent of Police full of concern for the Bishop. They vacated their own room for him to make him feel more comfortable.

In Wokha Bishop met Mr. Nchemo Lotha an influential government officer. He was very kind to him, though not a Catholic. His son, Mr. Kinghen, later on became a Catholic and married a Khasi. Both were good friends to the Catholic community wherever they were in government service.

The next day, early morning, Bishop Marengo left for Lakhuti on foot covering 40 kms - a good part of which was a steep climb. The *dobashi* of the previous day saw him walking along with his Lotha friends:

"Are you going to do all that way on foot?",
he enquired.

When he heard that Bishop had to reach because the people were waiting for him in Lakhuti, he 'clacked his tongue in disapproval' and added:

"You should not do so much marching!"

The march continued. Bishop Marengo arrived at Sunglup late in the afternoon to have a pleasant surprise. There to meet him was Fr. Ravalico with a group of boys from Lakhuti. Here it may be remembered that Fr. Ravalico had left Dibrugarh one day later than Bishop, but had reached Lakhuti one day earlier.

Sunglup had already a small community of catechumens. Bishop and Fr. Ravalico held a brief prayer service in their chapel before proceeding to Lakhuti. In fact it was in Sunglup that Bishop Marengo gave his first talk in Lotha.[70]

The welcome he and Fr. Ravalico received on reaching Lakhuti was beyond their expectation.The people who had been waiting for years overcoming opposition and persecution and persevering till the end were abundantly rewarded by the Lord. Their joy knew no bounds when they saw the graceful and inspiring figure of their Bishop. The rousing welcome to their Shepherd and the joy they expressed were a sincere outburst of what was in their hearts.

They went in procession to their village Church built by them with planks and thatch. It was somewhat spacious. They were indeed proud of it. They sang and prayed as if they were young boys and girls 'in our boarding houses'. Bishop Marengo was impressed by their ability to sing in voices.

The following morning was still more unforgettable: some 275 baptisms made Fr. Ravalico exclaim: *A Pentecostal Miracle*! The service lasted several hours. A quick 'breakfast', and both the Bishop and Fr. Ravalico were seen visiting some of the houses in the village. For the first time people saw two men in long white dress. They were special people. But more special were the 275 new members added to the Church in Lakhuti.[71]

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70. SHTCD-MM,I, 59. Some remember that Bishop Marengo and Fr. Ravalico met at Sanis along with the people from Lakhuti and Sunglup.

71. In Lakhuti as in other Lotha villages every clan has its own quarter or 'khel'. Each khel has a surname such as the Haili Khel, Yanthan Khel, Humtsoe Khel, etc. in which families of the same *totem* live. Again, as in the case of other Naga tribes, marriage among the Lothas is strictly endogamous as regards the tribe, but exogamous as regards

Bishop Marengo recalled from his visit to Lakhuti that in the afternoon of the same day there was a large procession taken out by the non-Christians. It was not in protest against anything which the Catholics had organized. It was an annual celebration of one of their feasts which happened to fall on the same day.

He also remembered an old pagan 'high priest' living close to the Catholic chapel who had come to see him. He greeted the Bishop quite cordially and said:

"Sir, I am happy that you have come to Lakhuti, and I hope that you have been pleased with our village and well looked after. I am not a Christian. I respect Christianity and am glad that my people follow you. I am the priest of all this area. I only offer sacrifices to the God of Heaven as you do".[72]

He also informed Bishop that he had ordered a *ghenna*[73] for the following day so that all the people would be present in the village. Since Bishop was scheduled to leave on the day of the ghenna, the high priest had also arranged for porters to carry the Bishop's luggage and to accompany him to the next halt. Here it may be remembered that this old high priest became a Catholic three years later and many others followed his example, thus strengthening the Catholic community of Lakhuti.

The responsive and promising Lotha community called for more attention. It was necessary to appoint a priest to

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the clan. In other words, a Lotha should marry a Lotha, but a Yanthan should marry from another clan and not from his own clan. With the impact of modern life these rules are not strictly followed now-a-days.

72. SHTCD-MM,I, 60.

73. It is a day in which no work can be done in the village. All remain in the village and no one will be allowed to go out. It is a sacred day.

minister to them. Though Bishop Marengo followed up personally the growth of the Church among the Nagas both in Manipur and in Nagaland for the first two years as Bishop,[74] it was not possible to continue that way. Or rather, it was impossible for him to do justice to the many demands made on him. Therefore, Bishop Marengo proposed to Fr. J. Larrea who at that time was in Salesian College, Sonada (near Darjeeling) to cater to the needs of the growing Lotha community. Fr. Larrea generously volunteered to come and help Bishop Marengo. In March 1954 he had already tried his hand at learning Lotha and visited Lakhuti, Sunglup, Yimpang and Longayim along with the Bishop. He returned to Dibrugarh on 2 April 1954.

From then onward Fr. Larrea threw himself heart and soul into the Lotha ministry:

> Preparation of a Catechism in Lotha in 1955,
> more visits to Lotha areas,
> shifting his residence from Dibrugarh to Golaghat in September 1955 to be closer to his dear Lothas, organizing instruction for groups of promising youth who gave signs of leadership and ability to be catechists among their own people, etc., mark the period from 1954 to 1964.[75]

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74. David Syiemlieh records that as early as 1 February 1954, three Lotha boys and two girls were sent to Dibrugarh for their studies. Another group was admitted in Don Bosco School Dibrugarh in January 1957. No stone was left unturned to educate as many youth as possible to be future leaders both in the Church and in society at large. At first it was thought that the education of the girls could wait. But soon it was realized that their role was so impactful that it could not lag behind that of the boys. See, *op. cit.*, 57.

75. In 1955 he got the help of Peter Yanthan to translate a catechism into Lotha, and to start a cyclostyled bulletin called *Ntsa* meaning "Truth". He visited the Lotha area in December of the same year. Seeing the

In order to accommodate the growing number of Catholics in Lakhuti, Fr. Larrea made all arrangements to transport building materials to Lakhuti from Golaghat to build a bigger church. It was a herculean task if one takes into account the disturbances in the hills and the difficulties of transport. Referring to the inauguration and blessing of the church at Lakhuti, David Syiemlieh notes:

"Bishop Marengo and Fr. Larrea just managed to reach Lakhuti in time for the blessing. It was an awful day, the rain

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beautiful little statue of Baby Jesus he had brought to the village for the Christmas crib, an old lady entreated him to give it to her since she had no children and that she would look after it as her own child! In January 1956 he organized a two-week catechism course at Golaghat for the Lotha youth. At the prize distribution Bishop Marengo had the joy of being present. In April 1956 Fr. Larrea visited Longayim for Easter services. In July of the same year Mr. Louis Yanthan reached Golaghat to help Fr. Larrea to translate the Sunday homilies. In 1958 a school was started in Golaghat for Lotha children. Though he was denied innerline permit (permission from Deputy Commissioner for Indian Citizens living outside the restricted area to enter it. For non-Indian nationals this permit has to be got from the Central Government in New Delhi) several times, Fr. Larrea kept on asking for it. On 10 March 1958 he had the joy of visiting Lakhuti, Akuk and Mekukla villages. In December of the same year Bishop Marengo and he together visited the Lotha area. One of candidates for Baptism, an old lady, on being asked by Bishop if she had learnt the prayers, gave the following touching reply: "My dear son, don't you see that I am an old grandma? How do you expect me to learn prayers!" It is said that the Bishop asked the wife of his catechist to instruct her about the Catholic Church. He baptized her on the following day. During this visit Bishop Marengo and Fr. Larrea reached also Pangti for the first time and started a community there. Fr. Larrea reached Lakhuti for Christmas 1958. On that occasion the site for a bigger church was chosen. It was blessed and inaugurated on 24 April 1960. The ever growing Catholic community showed the following figures: 310 in 1954, 415 in 1955, 1165 in 1959. See, A. Pianazzi, *Don Bosco Nell'Assam*, 218.

came pouring down as the ceremony was in progress; the public address system did not cooperate and the proposed spiritual preparation for the blessing did not materialize. The villagers on the other hand were very happy as their dry fields got a good shower of rain and they interpreted it as a good sign that divine blessings accompanied their priest.[76]

Fr. Larrea's major contribution to the Lotha mission consists in the concerted effort to educate as many Lotha Catholic youth as possible and to provide them with Catholic literature of a catechetical nature in Lotha. His knowledge of Lotha and his love for the Lotha Nagas are very aptly summed up in what the Lothas themselves call him, namely, *The Lotha Father*. Perhaps, the best tribute to Fr. Larrea is what Bishop Marengo himself wrote:

"He [Fr. Larrea] was thoroughly dedicated to his Lotha flock whose language he has learned to perfection. When we were not yet allowed to open a mission centre in the Lotha territory, he opened a Boarding School for Lotha boys in Golaghat and took upon himself the maintenance of many Lotha girls in the Golaghat Convent. He compiled and printed an excellent catechism and a prayer and hymn book with *tonic sol fa* notations. Time and again enlisting the help of some influential friends in the Lok Sabha, he applied for Indian Citizenship in his great desire to stay on among his Lothas".[77] But the Government turned down his application.

From among the many recollections he had about the Lotha area Bishop Marengo recalled that one day on his way to Lakhuti he passed through a big village which looked deserted with its huts in various stages of decay. On enquiry

76. D. Syiemlieh, *op. cit.*, 59.
77. SHTCD-MM,I, 60.

he was told that behind it was a rather sad story. There lived a young man whose wife was expecting her first child. One day while she was in the forest collecting firewood, she was attacked and killed by a tiger. The man was so angry on hearing it that he went out in search of the tiger. His only defence was a hatchet. He was desperate. He had no desire to live. His only goal was to kill that tiger which took his wife's life. He went through everything that came on his way. Finally, he was faced with the tiger herself at a short distance from him.

> He stopped and waited unflinching for her to approach.
> She crouched prior to springing at him.
> As it sprang he swung his hatchet with the strength
> of a desperate man.
> The tiger fell before him with her head split![78]

Superstitious as they were the villagers abandoned their village, because of the sudden death of someone, especially a pregnant woman killed by a tiger.

At the entrance of another village Bishop Marengo remembered having noticed a crucified leopard. It was a reminder to other wild animals that the same fate awaited them too.[79]

The excellent start given to the Catholic Church in the Lotha area by Fr. Bollini, Bishop Marengo and Fr. Larrea entered its second phase with the plan to pen a centre a Wokha some 40 kms away from Lakhuti. Hopes were running high. People were willing to provide the land for the centre, and they even promised to obtain a residential permit for Fr. Larrea. But the permit did not come through.

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78. Ibid., 80.
79. Ibid.

And the land could be acquired only in August 1964 by Fr. R. H. O'Hara who was being prepared to look after the Lotha mission. In the meantime the erection of the new diocese of Tezpur was announced with Bishop Marengo as its first Bishop. In his place in Dibrugarh there came Bishop Hubert D'Rosario. The change of Pastors did not affect the Lotha Mission adversely. In February 1965 Bishop Hubert visited Golaghat and decided to open a Catechist Training Centre at Dibrugarh and to develop Wokha as the mission centre for Lotha area. Fr. O'Hara was posted at Wokha from 1965 and Wokha was formally erected as a parish on 8 September of the same year with Fr. O'Hara as the parish priest.

Before I conclude, a word on Lungsa, a large Catholic community close to Wokha may be in order. The advice of the *dobashi* to Bishop Marengo in November 1953 when he first came to Lungsa began to be a reality in 1962. That year three persons from Lungsa were received into the Church by Fr. O'Hara. The beginnings were not that encouraging. The perseverance shown by Mothungo Peter Ezung and his family and later on the hard work put in by Rishumo Leonard Patton as catechist, as well as the visits and follow-up by the missionaries from the nearby Wokha centre made Lungsa what it is at present. Fr. Larrea had first visited Lungsa in January 1960. The Mass he celebrated in the house of Mr. Nyamo Lotha was the first Eucharist in Lungsa. The hope it contained took several years before it bore fruit.

The mission among the Angamis during the time of Bishop Marengo has to be seen in the light of more than one factor.

It is true that the so-called Chin Hills Regulations was abolished in 1946, thus removing from the police sweeping powers to expel from the North East anyone they thought harmful and who was not a native of the place. Thus the

law that kept the Church out of the region was finally abolished. Thus, with the dawn of independence the Church was free in principle to enter anywhere in the North East to preach the Good News. However, there were several hurdles to be overcome.

First of all, there was the lack of personnel and means. It was not possible to reach out to every corner of the diocese. Secondly, as far as the mission among the Naga tribes in Nagaland and Manipur was concerned, the situation soon became rather ambiguous. The demand for full and sovereign statehood by the Nagas made the political scenario complex with the resultant restrictions in movement, especially of non-Indian nationals. Thirdly, the antagonism and prejudices against the Catholic Church were too widespread in the beginning to expect a better treatment for the Catholics at the hands of their non-Catholic brethren. In good faith the latter tried their best to prevent the spread of the Catholic Church among the different Naga tribes. In some cases the opposition was so severe that the growth of the Church among them was nothing short of a miracle. And finally, the Angami area with Kohima as its main centre was the scene of anti-Catholic feelings going back to the early 1950s. The small Catholic group of two Sisters[80] who had come to the Naga Hospital at Kohima to render their services as nurses along with their chaplain lived under strict restrictions right from the beginning. Neither the Sisters nor their chaplain were allowed to do any missionary preaching. Their activities were limited to the four walls of

80. The first two who came were Sr. Guadalupe and Sr. Margherita. When Sr. Guadalupe was transferred, Sr. Mercedes came. When Sr. Mercedes had to leave for Tura, she was replaced by Sr. Pilar. At the time of their leaving Kohima, the three Sisters were Sr. Margherita, Sr. Pilar and Sr. Dolores.

the hospital. A small group of well-wishers and friends became the admirers of the selfless service of the Sisters and their chaplain. They began to doubt the calumnies they had heard about the Catholics. They enquired further. A good many of them came to accept the Catholic faith. The non-Catholic brethren could not stand it. They started secretly to manoeuvre "to dislodge the Catholic Sisters from Kohima in the hope that the Catholic Father too would have to go".[81] "They prevailed on the Nursing Superintendent of Assam [Nagaland as a State did not exist then] to issue the order recalling the Sisters from the Kohima Hospital".[82] Man proposes, but God disposes.

When everything seemed to go against the fledgling Catholic community in Kohima, rays of hope appeared. The Deputy Commissioner of Kohima, Mr. S.J.D. Carvalho, found no reason to ask the chaplain of the Sisters to go from Kohima. So Fr. H. Marocchino continued to stay in Kohima even after the Sisters had to leave the Kohima Hospital.[83]

The story how the Catholic Church took root among the Angamis after Fr. Marocchino was allowed to stay in

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81. SHTCD-MM,I, 57.
82. Ibid.
83. Regarding the departure of the Sisters from Kohima Bishop Marengo wrote in his memoirs: "I could do little or nothing to avert the removal of the Sisters from the Kohima Hospital. Only once during my first two years in Dibrugarh was I permitted to visit Kohima and that was by way of passing through on my journey to Wokha and Lakhuti to visit at least the crowd of our Lotha Naga catechumens. I could only write to the Bishop of Shillong and his secretary Fr. Bianchi to see into this fishy matter. In Shillong nobody seemed to know whether and why and by whose order the Sisters [had]... to go from Kohima". See, SHTCD-MM, I, 57.
Here we may also note that according to some, allowing the Catholics to grow and expand in Nagaland meant also a check on the dominant and undisputed position the Baptists enjoyed. It is said that the same was verified in Garo Hills. See, A. Pianazzi, *Don Bosco nell'Assam*, 215.

Kohima is a combination of courage and perseverance, of faithfulness and cooperation.[84]

Fr. Marocchino succeeded to reach out to some of the nearby villages and to establish Catholic communities: In Khonoma in 1955, in Meziphema in 1956 and in Keruma in Nerhema in 1959. In 1962 he baptized John Bosco Jasokie who later became a prominent Catholic leader and Chief

84. Among the lay people who helped Fr. Marocchino as he took the first steps to build up the Catholic community in Kohima we may mention in particular Mr. Paulus Keviprale, Mr. Samuel Belho, Mr. Philip Suosahie, Mr. Louis Neizo, Mr. Samuel Mezhur and Mr. Dominic Mezovilie. John Kevipele, son of Paulus Keviprale, was the first to be baptized on 14 December 1952 in the hospital chapel. In his effort to stick on, Fr. Marocchino had to change his residence five times in a matter of a few years. From the room he had in the hospital complex (1952-1954) he went to live with Mr. Samuel Mezhur (till the middle of 1955) close to the War Cemetery, then in the house of Mr. Neisalhou Alexander (from middle of 1955 to June 1956). Next he was supposed to stay with Mr. Vilanuo in L. Khel. But he kept his belongings with Mr. Philip Suosahie and went to Imphal on urgent work. When he returned at the end of 1956 he found that all his belongings were destroyed by fire that took place on 11 June 1956. He then spent a few months in a house put at his disposal by the Deputy Commissioner of Kohima, Mr. S.J.D. Carvalho. Fr. Marocchino then found some accommodation in the house of Mr. Levi (1957-1960). From 1960 to September 1963 he stayed in the house of Mr. Neizo Louis in the veterinary colony. Fr. Marocchino was transferred from Kohima end of 1963.

In spite of the stress and strain of these early years, Fr. Marocchino built a small church in the heart of Kohima village. It was blessed by Bishop Marengo on 5 October 1957. On that occasion he also baptized 16 converts and administered over 100 confirmations.(See, D. Syiemlieh, *op. cit., 47)*. The *Kohima English School* and the *Don Bosco School* in Kohima owe their origin to the initiatives of Fr. Marocchino. He also brought out an elementary catechism in Angami, *U Kevi Cha* in 1954. It went into a second edition in 1956 and became a text book in the Don Bosco Elementary

Minister of Nagaland.[85] Mr. Paul Keviprale, one of Fr. Marocchino's converts in 1954, became God's instrument in bringing the Catholic faith to the Rengma Nagas during the second half of 1950s. Mr. P. Keviprale was an agricultural officer at that time.

Bishop Marengo remarked that Fr. Marocchino and his motor cycle were inseparable. He would traverse long distances on it. But "he helped the motor cycle more than the motor cycle helped him," for, it had to be repaired constantly.[86]

Fr. Marocchino along with the first group of Sisters and the lay people who helped him can rightly be called the founders of the Catholic communities among the Angamis. Bishop Marengo encouraged him and helped him as he went through the first difficult years of the Church in Nagaland.

**Pioneers among the Diocesan Clergy**

Assam missions needed personnel. At the request of Bishop S. Ferrando, Archbishop L. Mathias allowed some of his more generous priests to volunteer for the Assam missions. Bishop Marengo sent Fr. Dal Zovo to speak to the seminarians of Sacred Heart Seminary, Poonamallee, Chennai, inviting them to join the Assam missions. That

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School he had started. A small bible history *U Kelakeliu* was published in 1958. 1959 saw the publication of an illustrated life of Christ and a book of apologetic *Katholic Kristanko Kerdipuo Peleya*. In 1961 saw another publication *Keche Mu Tsalida*, a prayer and hymn book. In all these the help of Mr. Philip Suosahie is to be gratefully acknowledged.

85. Mr. Jasokie appreciating the efforts Fr. Marocchino made to learn the difficult and tonal Angami language, narrated how in Nerhema village Fr. Marocchino asked for a spoon (*keche'*) and people brought him a stone (keche')!

86. Interview with Bishop Marengo by J. Puthenpurakal at Garobadha on 10 December 1991.

was in 1957. At first several Brothers came forward generously. Finally, only Deacon Joseph Kachiramattam and Brother Mathew Planthottam, one year junior to Deacon Joseph, came to Dibrugarh. The others dropped out for one reason or another.

Fr. Mattam (as Fr. Joseph Kachiramattam is "affectionately" known)[87] after his ordination in Kerala on Thursday 24 April 1958, reached Dibrugarh in the middle of July of the same year. Bishop Marengo received him with a warm embrace. He himself accompanied him to Imphal where he was appointed assistant parish priest. They travelled to Imphal first by train in a third class compartment up to Dimapur from Dibrugarh. From Dimapur they proceeded by bus to Mao Gate. There Fr. Peter Bianchi with a group of Mao catechumens gave them a hearty welcome. It was Saturday 26 July 1958. Fr. Mattam would never forget the fatherly kindness and warm solicitude of Bishop Marengo.

That first night in Mao was biting cold, especially for Fr. Mattam coming from sunny Kerala or warm Dibrugarh. He had no pullover. The shawl which the people presented to him was used as an additional blanket at night. But he could not get a wink of sleep for a good part of the night. On getting up in the morning he realized that Bishop Marengo had quietly entered his room at night and had put all the shawls he had received on Fr. Mattam. No wonder Fr. Mattam had a sound sleep for the rest of the night. The Bishop's gesture of concern made a deep impression on him.

87. In recognition of his service to the Church in Manipur, Pope John Paul II conferred on him the title "Monsignor" and elevated him to the rank of an Honorary Prelate with effect from 2 March 1998. See, *The Herald*, August 28-September 3, 1998,III.

That experience stood him for the rest of his life. It was the best lived experience of his priestly motto *to spend and be spent* for the sake of Christ.

On the following day Bishop Marengo and Fr. Mattam reached Imphal. Fr. Ravalico and Fr. George Venturoli were happy to get one more helper in the person of Fr. Mattam. The boarding children who sang their hearts out to welcome Fr. Mattam, the first diocesan priest to join the Manipur missions, gave him a taste of what was to come.

With Imphal as his base Fr. Mattam visited first the Sugnu area. He set out together with Fr. George Venturoli. But the police stopped Fr. Venturoli from proceeding beyond 10 kms from Imphal centre. So Fr. Mattam had to do it alone. It was night when he arrived at Singtom village. The Catholic community received him with open arms even though at that time he did not know how to converse in their language. Later on he widened the circle of his visits every time picking up something more of Meitei. He toured the Churachandpur, Tengnopal and Jiribam areas. Within a few months he could speak and write in Manipuri. He came across several communities founded either by Bishop Marengo or Fr. A. Ravalico or Fr. P. Bianchi.

Fr. Mattam's first missionary tour from Churachandpur to Rawakot, and then from Tipaimukh to Lakhimpur over the Barak river and finally to Silchar and to Shillong during October - November 1958 was a memorable one. From Shillong he returned to Imphal together with Fr. Ravalico and the catechists after taking part in the annual Eucharistic procession.

His second missionary journey in December 1958 to the Thadou-Kuki area of Tengnopal was equally exciting and apostolically fruitful. He and his group of young people

visited Lonpi, Aibol Joupi, Wayang, Khengjang, Khengjoi, Changpol, Chalson Tengnopal, Lamphei and Tuidam. From Tuidam they walked back to Singtom and then to Imphal. In some of these villages he instructed further the communities started by Fr. Ravalico and visited by Bishop Marengo. During 1959 he toured the Mayol-Monsang area.

Fr. Mathew Planthottam who was ordained on 23 April 1959 at Sacred Heart Seminary, Poonamallee, Chennai, reached Dibrugarh by the middle of June 1959. He was lucky to get the company of Mr. John Kapani of Punanamei, a student at Dibrugarh and who later became an IAS Officer. He accompanied Fr. Mathew to Imphal. They reached Imphal at 7.00 p.m. on Tuesday 16 June 1959. Both of them were welcomed by Fr. Ravalico who told Fr. Mathew that he had disappointed him and the boys. Because they were waiting for a long time on the roadside with the Don Bosco band to welcome them.

> "How's that you did not reach yesterday?", enquired Fr. Ravalico.
>
> "It's simple," explained Fr. Mathew. "There was no bus from Dimapur and so we had to halt one day there".

Staying at Imphal Fr. Mathew picked up Manipuri. But by September of the same year Bishop Marengo asked him to go up to Hundung to replace Fr. Felix. It was supposed to be a temporary arrangement. But that lasted over sixteen years during which Fr. Mathew endeared himself to the Tangkhul communities and did much good among them.

Fr. P.C. Mani, who first joined the Tezpur mission and later was sent to Manipur in exchange of Fr. Boscardin whom Bishop S. Ferrando wanted for Dhekiajuli, is another

pioneer diocesan priest to work in Manipur. His unassuming ways, hard work and *rough-it-all* spirit assure him a pre-eminent place along with the other two pioneers we have mentioned above. All three of them were affectionately remembered by Bishop Marengo and they in their turn have the highest regard for him.

In the words of Fr. Mattam, Bishop Marengo is "a true Pastor according to the heart of the Good Shepherd".[88] He is:

> humble and unassuming in his dealings with the people;
> has personal concern for his flock, especially towards the poor and the suffering.
> He goes out of his way to help them.

Bishop Marengo's sense of availability was astonishing. The number of languages he has mastered is amazing. He seldom visited a village for the second time without knowing something more of the language spoken there. His example of prayer life, care for the spiritual needs of his flock were beyond parallel in the mission history of North East India. He found time to pray even during his tours - a fact which had great influence on young priests.[89]

Fr. Mattam recalls how one day during a tour Bishop Marengo came to make his confession to him in front of the people who were in the church. Fr. Mattam considers it as a remarkable example of humility. Bishop Marengo saw Christ in the poorest of the poor. From his example of missionary life, Fr. Mattam drew great strength and encouragement.

Bishop Marengo was not so much an administrator or a builder. But he was a spiritual giant, a learned Bishop, a pastor to the core and an admirable example of a person-to-person

88. SHTCD-MF,46.
89. Ibid.

relationship. His fatherly figure impressed everyone who came in close contact with him. People speak of him as a "loving father".

For Fr. P.C. Mani and Fr. Mathew Planthottam, Bishop Marengo is, above all, a man of God. He loved his people. Trusting in God he went out of his way to do whatever good he could. He was sincere and transparent. There was no hidden agenda in what he said or did. One day there was no money to pay the salary of the teachers and the catechists in Hundung. Bishop Marengo happened to be there too. He, like a father, called them together and explained the situation. Then he asked :

> "Shall we close the school? Stop paying the catechists?"
>
> The people in one voice said:
>
> "Bishop, there is no need of closing the school. We shall do our best. We shall give our full cooperation". Together they tided over the difficulties.
>
> "Bishop Marengo," Fr. Mani admits, "had an extraordinary capacity to remember people by their names. He also had the ability to tell the truth without hurting'.[90]

In 1962 Bishop Marengo asked Fr. Mattam to give a message from him to Fr. Mani. Among other things the Bishop wrote to Fr. Mattam:

> "Tell good Fr. Mani, that if a person has the humility to apologize, he must have the graciousness to forgive".

This advice Fr. Mani remembers with gratitude. He recalls how during the Chinese aggression in 1962 when Arunachal Pradesh was run over, all were asked to go

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90. Ibid.

to a safer place. But Bishop Marengo stayed back with his flock.

Bishop Marengo had sincere words of appreciation for the self-sacrificing works of the diocesan clergy. He noted that the priests whom we have mentioned above were formed in the Salesian way by the Salesian staff of the Poonamallee Seminary near Chennai, and that they came right at the nick of time to help in the newly established Imphal mission.

Fr. M. Planthottam and Fr. Mani were subsequently in charge of the Hundung mission started by Fr. P. Bianchi. When Fr. P. Bianchi was sent to found the Punanamei mission, Fr. Wollaston and Fr. Felix Joseph who had been Fr. Bianchi's Assistants, took charge of that mission. It was during their time that the Church of the Sacred Heart in Hundung was built. When Fr. Ravalico whose health had greatly deteriorated left Imphal for Shillong, Fr. Wollaston, himself in rather poor health, had to take charge of the Don Bosco Centre in Imphal. Fr. Planthottam who had been working for nearly two years by Fr. Wollaston's side in Hundung assumed the responsibility of that mission. Fr. Mani was sent to help him. Fr. Joseph Kachiramattam who was helping in the Imphal mission as a touring priest later went to open the Sugnu mission.

**Fr. A. Ravalico and Fr. P. Bianchi**

Among the pioneers of the Catholic mission in Manipur Fr. A. Ravalico and Fr. P. Bianchi are of special significance. In them Bishop Marengo found valiant and generous helpers. They spared no pain to carry the Gospel to far flung villages. The Catholic communities of Manipur remember them with gratitude.

It was hard to cover the 600 kms which separated Dibrugarh from Imphal. Only Indian citizens could reside

in Manipur or Nagaland. Fortunately, Fr. Ravalico and Fr. Bianchi had obtained Indian citizenship while they were in Chennai and Calcutta respectively. Many other missionaries had tried to obtain it. But they could not. Once Fr. Gutierrez, Fr. Albera and Bro. Michael Cahoj went to see the Commissioner of Police in Shillong to start the process to obtain Indian citizenship.

> "Yes, Fathers, what can I do for you?", enquired the Commissioner.
>
> "We are thinking of applying for Indian Citizenship", they said.
>
> The Commissioner sat up in his chair as if taken aback!
>
> "What! Do you want to betray your own country!"
>
> "Certainly, not, Sir!" - all rejoined in a chorus. "But we would like to feel more at home in this country of our adoption".
>
> The Commissioner promised to do his best. But the fact is that nothing came out of it.

At the end of 1954 when Fr. Ravalico returned from his tour of Europe and America where he had gone to secure help for the missions, the work in Manipur could be followed up better. About Fr. Ravalico and Fr. Bianchi Bishop Marengo wrote:

> "I could not have wished for two better elements. Both of them [Fr. Ravalico and Fr. Bianchi] were already pretty familiar with the Tangkhuls and the Chin Hills Catholic communities".[91]

Before leaving for Europe, Fr. Ravalico had visited Ukhrul for the first time in February 1953 to be present at

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91. SHTCD-MM, I,70.

the wedding of a past pupil of Don Bosco Guwahati. The Tangkhul friends who had arranged for his visit also prepared a nice little altar in the open where he celebrated Mass. It gave him an occasion to explain something more about the Catholic faith. Later in the day he attended the Tangkhul wedding. He was impressed by the many buffaloes and pigs killed for that grand wedding.

On the following day he stopped at Hundung where he baptized some catechumens. Encouraged by Bishop Marengo, both Fr. Ravalico and Fr. Bianchi made several visits to Manipur in the following years.

Fr. Peter Bianchi's missionary experience in Manipur started on 30th March 1955 when he was given the obedience for the diocese of Dibrugarh and was asked to work in Manipur. His maiden tour with Bishop Marengo started on Tuesday 12th April 1955. They set off from Dibrugarh by train. They reached Manipur Road (Dimapur) the following morning. From Dimapur they left by bus for Imphal. After nine hours of tiresome trip they landed at Imphal. It was already dark. They put up at the Inspection Bungalow for the night.

Next morning, that is Thursday 14th April, they came to know of a certain Captain L. H. Hartnett and his family who were very kind towards the two missionaries. In their own home they placed a room at the disposal of Bishop Marengo and Fr. Bianchi. Not only for those few days, but for any time in the future when the missionaries would come to Imphal.

In the afternoon they found a vehicle, a heavy dodge, going to Ukhrul. Both Bishop Marengo and Fr. Bianchi were delighted to get a chance to visit Ukhrul. On the way, the dodge collided with a down coming truck. Fortunately,

nothing very serious happened. When they reached Hundung village, the sun had already set. Nevertheless, the Christians who had been waiting for hours for the arrival of the two, ran out of their houses to welcome them as soon as they heard the noise of the vehicle. The people sang for them. Garlanded them. They considered it a privilege to shake hands with them. Their *chingrihairanu* echoed and re-echoed with ever greater love. Both Bishop Marengo and Fr. Bianchi kept on repeating 'chingrihairanu'.

From Hundung they went to Choithar, then to Nungshong and Pushing. From there they walked up and down the hill until they reached Khamasom-Phungrei. And through Nungi Khonou, Nungbi Khullen, Chingjaroi and Paoyi, finally they came to Ukhrul.

At Ukhrul they rested their weary limbs and had a nice meal prepared by Achahao. They were on their feet again on the way to Shinkhap. It took two days to get there. From Shinkhap they proceeded to Tangkhul Hundung. The journey was short. But the distance from Tangkhul Hundung to Mawai was rather long and tiresome. Keihao was their next destination. At Keihao a good number of Baptists came over to the Catholic Church. They spent the night at Keihao. Next morning they walked down to Yariphokthana from where they got a truck that took them back to Imphal. They were indeed tired. But very happy to have visited a number of villages.

One of Bishop Marengo's longest tour with Fr. Bianchi was from 13th November to 15th December 1955. This time they visited several Zou villages. They started from Singtom. Reached Shingkhampai. Then to Kuangtal and along the Burma border to Changpol. On their way back they visited Lamphei. Moving on to the Anal area they came to Lamphou Charo. Since the two could not find a

cook to prepare some food, Fr. Bianchi volunteered to be a cook. Bishop Marengo enjoyed the chicken prepared by Fr. Bianchi.

On the following day they reached Sungu. Fr. Bianchi was taken aback seeing the poverty of the people. At the same time he realized that they were eager to embrace Christianity. The Zou and Thadou Catholics of the area were once living in Myanmar. Even after they settled in the Indian side, they were looked after by the Fathers of the Foreign Missions of Paris (MEP) staying in Myanmar. As soon as Fr. Marocchino who was staying in Kohima in those days came to know about those communities, he arranged for a catechist to look after them.

**The Last Days in Manipur**

It was the 18 of January 1964, the time of the Phungrei Extreme East Thangkhul Catholic Convention. Phungrei is, by the Tangkhul standard, a small village. It lies on a small plain hemmed in all round by very high hills. It was the peak of winter. And Phungrei was much colder than the top of the surrounding hills. The paddy fields were a sheet of ice and the whole village was one single white frost.

Bishop Marengo wanted to hold a solemn Eucharistic Procession as a fitting conclusion to his last convention and to his last days in Manipur and especially among his Tangkhul flock. Perhaps, nobody else would have thought it possible to attempt a procession up and down those paths "fit only for goats". But Bishop Marengo succeeded to have it.

Since the people were used to the terrain they could climb up and down and pray and sing all the while. Bishop Marengo managed it only clinging to Christ in the monstrance. When the procession reached Khamasong village which is

on the top of one of the high hills, he saw the people running frantically down the slope back to the camp. Soon he found himself alone with Jesus. All the others had fled from the procession. For, a fire started by some small children to warm themselves had broken out among the lines of small huts rigged up with frondage and straw. The people seeing the fire raging high had to rush down to save their clothes and their baskets and their posts. Since the people were brave and creative, the fire was extinguished without much damage to their belongings.

**Unnecessary Harassment**

There were times when the future of mission work in the North East appeared rather uncertain. The spells of anti-missionary feeling and propaganda that kept coming up every now and then were ominous signs that missionary activity was "an eyesore to many highly placed people". Accusations that missionaries were converting by intimidation, bribery and doling out money came to a head with the enquiry carried out against the missionaries and the missions of Bihar by the famous "Nyogy Enquiry Committee". Its reports were so unfair that the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru shelved them after a cursory reading.

In Assam Missionaries were accused of being at the root of the hostile movement in Nagaland and Manipur. In Dibrugarh the missionaries were obliged to send in quarterly returns of baptisms administered. At first Bishop Marengo thought that he was not obliged to comply with the order. Then one day a police inspector came and demanded the parish records. Bishop Marengo refused to comply with unless he produced an authorization by the Government.

"Am I not in uniform?," he answered annoyed.

Bishop Marengo still maintained that he did not feel bound to show any records. The gentleman left in an instant muttering some threats. Bishop Marengo did not delay. He wrote to the Inter-nuncio at Delhi acquainting him with what had happened and asked him to let him know what he should do. Mgr. Mathias, the Archbishop of Madras, happened to be at the Nunciature in those days. The Inter-Nuncio must have discussed the matter with him. Because, it was Mgr. Mathias who wrote to Bishop Marengo instructing him not to comply with the order, but to try and find out from which quarters the order had been issued. At the Nunciature they knew about similar orders issued in other States too. But they did not know whether it was by the central government or by the local government.

Therefore, Bishop Marengo took it upon himself to write to the Assam Government in Shillong, clarifying the following points:

i) How could a secular State interfere with a purely religious matter?

ii) He was not authorized to do what they were asking without the prior approval of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India which was the representative body of the Catholic Church before the Government of India.

iii) He thought that he had a right to know whether the order to submit quarterly returns was from the Central Government or from the Assam Government.

At first since his letter was not acknowledged, he began to feel uneasy and suspected some foul play. Then unexpectedly he received a letter form Mr. John Perry, a personal friend, who had been for many years a highly esteemed government officer. Mr Perry was quiet popular in government

circles. His letter said that the government of Assam was taking a very serious note of the refusal by the Bishop of Dibrugarh to comply with its order. At the same time the Bishop was informed that the order had been issued by the Central Government. It seems that Bishop Marengo might have sent a copy of this letter to the Nunciature. He also sent the required quarterly returns, but not for more than a year.

The local papers kept on maligning the missionaries and their activities. As a result many simple people who had scarcely ever heard the name *missionary* began to think of them as some sort of criminals.

One day Bishop Marengo was returning with Fr. Peter Bianchi from a very long tour among the Christians on the Myanmar border. They were bringing with them two little Thadou boys whom their parents had practically forced on them to be fed and clothed and taught in the boarding school at Dibrugarh.

Fr. Taverna came to meet him at the Naharkatiya station, since he was informed that Bishop Marengo was passing that way. Engrossed as he was in his conversation with Fr. Taverna, he scarcely noticed the two men from Uttar Pradesh who showed great interest in the two little Thadou boys. The began casting suspicious glances at the Bishop. As the train was about to proceed the man who had come with Fr. Taverna to the station cautioned Bishop:

"Bishop," he said, "there are two men who are very angry with you because, they say, you have abducted these two boys from their homes. They are now sitting in the same compartment with the boys".

Bishop knew that those were RSS members at large whose work was to spy on the missionaries and possibly

reconvert those who had embraced Christianity. He understood that something might happen at Tinsukia station where they had to change over to the train for Dibrugarh. Right enough the train had barely stopped in the Tinsukia station that the two men stood at the door of the compartment and in a very loud voice demanded to know where the two boys were from and why he had cajoled them away from their families. Immediately a crowd gathered around them.

Many started siding and shouting with the two men from Uttar Pardesh. Others were watching curiously to know how that showdown was going to end. A Punjabi gentleman however took the side of Bishop:

"I know the Fathers and I know how they treat our children in their schools", he said.

His bold defence of the Bishop and Father Bianchi, however, had little effect on the crowd. Some even insulted him for defending a foreign missionary. Standing at the compartment door and lifting both his hands Bishop Marengo begged them to allow him to speak.

When they heard him speaking Hindi, silence was restored:

"I have been asked a very unfair question," he said, "which I am prepared to answer if you are willing to hear". "I have not even been to these children's village," he continued, "their fathers brought them to me and begged me to educate them. You may ask them if you want. Only they cannot speak your language and you do not know theirs. And why are you two people from Uttar Pradesh so much interested in these two boys?"

"Because they are our brothers, and we must defend them".

"If they are your brothers," rejoined Bishop Marengo, "come on, talk to them. But I know you cannot speak Assamese, the language we all speak here." Bishop Marengo said these last words purposely, since most of the people gathered there were Assamese.

"Anyway, Dibrugarh is not far away and the gates of our mission and our schools are open to all," explained the Bishop. He also invited them to come and see for themselves and talk to the boys in the boarding in Dibrugarh. He convinced them further by saying that the two little boys were from the last corner of India, and that they did not know anything at all about her. They could speak neither Hindi nor Assamese.

However, Bishop Marengo assured the two men from Uttar Pradesh that in a matter of two or three years in the mission school they would pick up enough in Hindi and Assamese, and would learn enough about India to be proud of their own country.

"This was what this Punjabi gentleman was trying to tell you," concluded the Bishop.

On hearing these words, the two men from Uttar Pradesh felt ashamed. They quitely turned round and walked away. As they moved out, the crowd that had gathered admired the Bishop's ability to handle Hindi and Assamese as well as English. They did not know that he could speak several other languages as well.

# VI. MISSIONARY BISHOP (TEZPUR 1964-1969)

It was hard for Bishop Marengo to leave Dibrugarh and the flourishing missions of Manipur and Nagaland. But obedient as he was, he accepted the proposal and God blessed him abundantly.

**Events Before Leaving for Tezpur**

In 1961 the Apostolic Pro-Nuncio, Mgr. R. Knox, made a visit to Dibrugarh. Before leaving Dibrugarh he called Bishop Marengo and appraised him of Rome's plan of creating a new diocese in the North Bank with Tezpur as the diocesan centre. He also told Bishop Marengo that his name had been suggested for the new diocese. Seeing the surprise on his face the Pro-Nuncio reassured him that it was only a proposal. He was free to accept or forget about it. Bishop Marengo confessed with all sincerity that "it would be a great wrench" for him "to leave Dibrugarh and the very promising mission fields of Manipur and Nagaland".

Besides, he felt that he was no organizer to start all over again. Still, he expressed his goodwill by adding that if Rome desired it, it was his duty to be willing to make himself available, whatever be the cost. The Pro-Nuncio thanked him and said that one of the reasons why Rome thought about him was that as a rule Rome would not appoint an Indian as Bishop in a new diocese where like in the North East, the economic conditions are poor and where he would find it difficult to manage without donations from abroad to assist

him financially. He, however, added that the creation of the new diocese would not be very soon. Then with a knowing smile added:

"Do rest assured that this time, when the time comes, our information will not miscarry".[1] Bishop Marengo hoped that his transfer from Dibrugarh would not be too soon.

However, during the Second Vatican Council Bishop Marengo received a letter from the Sacred Congregation of *Propaganda Fide* seeking his opinion about the new diocese of Tezpur to be created. In that there was no mention of him as its first Bishop.

In the meantime the Chinese attack on the North East towards the end of 1962 interrupted all his plans in Europe. He returned to his diocese to be with his dear flock in those days of great anxiety. Valerian Cardinal Gracias of Bombay and Bishop S. Ferrando too returned to India. The future seemed so bleak and the fear of the North East being cut off from the rest of the country appeared almost certain. The Pro-Nuncio even visited Shillong to acquaint himself of the situation. Bishop Marengo too was called to meet him. After the meeting Bishop Marengo saw him off at the Guwahati airport. Before leaving, the Pro-Nuncio told him not to worry about his transfer to Tezpur, since in the changed situation it was thought better not to have a "foreigner" as Bishop there.

Things were taking a more serious turn. On 1 May 1963, the Pro-Nuncio granted to the Bishops of Assam many extraordinary faculties to be used in the event of a "communist rule" in the area.

1. Here it may be remembered that when Bishop Marengo was nominated as the first Bishop of Dibrugarh, for reasons unknown to him, the news of the nomination had reached him late. In fact, people who came to congratulate him surprised him.

Bishop Marengo requested to stay back from the Council, since his Vicar General, Fr. Dal Zovo, became ill, and since military experts, diplomats and politicians were of the opinion that there was the possibility of a Chinese attack again.

However, it may surprise the reader that in spite of the above-referred to political developments, Rome went ahead with nominating Bishop Marengo for Tezpur.

In fact, on the 2 January 1964 Bishop Marengo received a letter from Mgr. Mathias, the Archbishop of Madras, who had shortly before returned from Rome appraising him that Rome had nominated Bishop Marengo, the Apostolic Administrator of the new diocese of Tezpur. Mgr. Mathias also informed him that when the new Bishop of Dibrugarh would be elected, he would move to Tezpur as the first Bishop of that diocese. The news surprised him. Because less than a year before the Pro-Nuncio had assured him at the Guwahati airport that there was no plan of his transfer to Tezpur. So, feeling that he might have misread the letter, he read it again more carefully. What he understood was that after taking charge of the new diocese for a while as the Apostolic Administrator, he would return to Dibrugarh, and that a new Bishop would be elected for Tezpur. But that again did not make any sense to him. So he read the letter once again. It then became clear to him, that he would have to *leave* Dibrugarh and Manipur and Nagaland, and start all over again in Tezpur.

Who was to be his successor in Dibrugarh was not known. Until his name was made public he would continue to be the Bishop of Dibrugarh.

He, therefore, went to attend the Tangkhul Christian Convention. He knew that it was his last visit to his beloved Tangkhul flock. He had loved them so tenderly that it was not easy to suffer the pains of impending separation. He could

not speak or share with anyone what was going on in the depth of his heart.

On his return journey from Imphal, at Mao Gate there was a crowd of little ones from Punanamei waiting to wish and garland him. He tried to hold back his sorrow. He had to keep the torturing secret to himself that soon he would have to say "goodbye" to his dear Naga flock. However, something unexpected took place which compelled him to focus his attention elsewhere.

Among the crowd at Mao Gate listening to the singing of the children and watching the affection they were bestowing on him, was a small gentleman dressed in black, with necktie, black hat and goggles. In that barefooted and generally poorly dressed crowd of people, he was certainly a very prominent figure. When he could conveniently do so, he approached the Bishop and said very seriously:

"Perhaps, Sir, you will be interested to know who I am".

Bishop said: "I would certainly be pleased and feel honoured to know who you are. You do not strike me as being a man of this area".

"No, I am not a Mao, but I have recently only come to work among them as the Seventh Day Adventist Pastor".

"Well, I wish you luck and hope you will be happy and successful in your work".

Knowing his flock of Mao Nagas, Bishop Marengo knew that there was little or no hope of his dear children becoming Seventh Day Adventists. Nevertheless, he felt that an unwelcome element was making its way into the Punanamei flock. But he had no real fear. In fact, the Seventh Day Adventists never made any dent into the Punanamei commu-

nity which is still strong in the Catholic faith, thus proving his impression of the Punanamei flock.

News regarding the new diocese of Tezpur moved fast. On 7 February 1964 Fr. A. Alessi, the provincial, announced over the phone that a new diocese has been created in Assam with Tezpur as its centre. By the middle of February Bishop Marengo paid a visit to Borpukri and Tezpur to take a first look at his new responsibility. But it was only in August that Bishop Marengo came to know, that his successor in Dibrugarh was to be Fr. Hubert D'Rosario.

The new diocese comprised the districts of N. Lakhimpur, Darrang, N. Kamrup and Goalpara on the N. Bank of the Brahmaputra and the Nowgong district on the South Bank. It had an area of 1,20,000 sq kms, and a population of nearly three million of whom only some 46,000 were Catholics. Its existing mission stations were Tezpur, Salana, Barpeta Road, Tangla, Dhekiajuli, Borpukri and N. Lakhimpur. In addition, Bishop S. Ferrando requested Bishop Marengo to look after also about 1000 Mikir Catholics who had settled during past 20 years in the Nowgong district, even though they actually came under the Shillong diocese.

With the exception of N. Lakhimpur all the missions of the new diocese of Tezpur belonged to the Shillong diocese. As a priest, Bishop Marengo had the privilege and experience of working in all of them.

On 17 July 1964 Bishop Marengo received an official communication from the Inter-Nuncio that he was transferred to Tezpur, and that the news would be out on the following day. When the transfer was told to the people in Dibrugarh, it was like a "stunning blow" for them.[2]

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2. See, Chronicle of Bishop's House Dibrugarh, July 1964.

At Mawlai, Shillong, a meeting was held by parish priests of Dibrugarh and Tezpur with Fr. Provincial presiding. It was decided that the official send off for Bishop Marengo at Dibrugarh would be on 16 August and that his taking possession of Tezpur would be on 23 August.

On 12 August the people of Dibrugarh gave a touching farewell to Bishop Marengo. On the same day Fr. Daniel arrived late at night from Manipur leading a big group of boys and girls to take part in the Bishop's send off on 16 August. On 15 August several Fathers arrived. Among them were Fr. Gerard, Fr. Frassy, Fr. Aguilar and Fr. Pernia. On the 16th Bishop Marengo spoke to his flock in moving words exhorting all to bow to the will of God. The farewell programme took place after the Mass at Don Bosco School. The people were so heart-broken at the thought of the departure of their beloved Shepherd, someone remarked:

"It was as good as a funeral".

The songs by the hill boys and girls were the saddest of all. Many eyes were moist. The Bishop himself spoke with difficulty. On Thursday 20 August the Catholics of Dibrugarh town gave a tea party to Bishop Marengo. Mr. M. Nicklette, manager of Shaw Wallace, an exemplary Catholic, always ready to help, read and presented the address. In it he pointed out how during the Bishop's tenure of office the number of mission stations and Catholics had multiplied. He expressed the sorrow of every Catholic in the diocese at the transfer of their most-loved Pastor.

On 21 August Bishop Marengo left for Tezpur by jeep.

He spent the night of Friday 21 and of Saturday 22 August in Dekhiajuli. He reached Tezpur at 7.30 a.m. on Sunday, 23 August 1964. He was received in front of

the Cathedral Church. Present among others were Bishop S. Ferrando and Fr. A. Alessi, the Fr. Provincial, and Fathers, Sisters, Catechists, Lay Leaders and faithful from the different mission stations. The installation service was followed by the solemn pontifical Mass. As the Mass was over and the people were coming out of the Cathedral Church, two jet planes flew overhead and made several rounds as if to salute the new Pastor. During the welcome entertainment immediately after the Mass the Catholic community expressed their filial love for Bishop Marengo.

In the afternoon there was the Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament. It was followed by a well-arranged tea-party for all. At dinner several telegrammes of congratulations were read. On Monday 24 August Bishop Marengo left for Dibrugarh to be present at the reception of the Bishop-Elect, Mgr. Hubert D'Rosario. Bishop Marengo returned to Tezpur on 27 August. When he came away from Dibrugarh, he could hardly speak, so full of emotion he was. Present at the airport to see him off were Mgr. Hubert D'Rosario, the provincial Fr. Alessi, Fr. Dal Zovo, Fr. Lopez, Fr. U.V. Mathew, Fr. Visentin, Fr. Svirnelis, Bro. Pancolini and Bro. Michael Cahoj.

Since the third session of the Second Vatican Council was to open in the second week of September, Bishop along with Bro. Michael who joined him in Tezpur end of August 1964, left for Rome from Tezpur on 2 September. On 6 November of the same year Bishop's House Tezpur received Bro. Fausto Pancolini who was transferred from Dibrugarh to join Bishop Marengo in Tezpur. Bro. Pancolini and Bro. Cahoj were two of Bishop Marengo's most faithful and helpful Salesian confreres both in Dibrugarh and in Tezpur. Another of Bishop Marengo's valiant helpers in Tezpur was Fr. Paul Taverna. He joined him on 23 May 1964.

**Recalling the Past**

In 1982 Tezpur parish celebrated its Golden Jubilee. 31st May and 1st June of that year were sacred for Fr. A. Alessi SDB. In far away Don Bosco Matunga, Mumbai, he spent as many hours as he could in front of the Blessed Sacrament in the Shrine.

He prayed:

thanking the Lord for 50 years' of blessings,
remembering his companion Fr. A. Ravalico,
and all the catechists and Christians who had gone
to their eternal reward.

He asked the Lord:

to bless the diocese of Tezpur with its bishop, priests,
religious and faithful.

Then opening a window to the past he allowed his readers to get a glimpse of the first days of the Tezpur Mission.

Fr. A. Alessi was ordained a priest on 26th April 1931. He loved the Khasis and was hoping to work among them as a new priest. But his hopes were given a new direction when a month after his ordination he was told by Mgr. L. Mathias, the Prefect Apostolic and Provincial, that he should pack up and get ready to take charge of the communities in lower Assam valley with its headquarters in Guwahati.

Within a week or so we find Fr. Alessi visiting the villages of the Nowgong and Darrang districts to take care of the nearly 2000 Catholics among the Adivasis of the tea gardens. Their language, he did not know. Their customs he had to find out. Thus began a new chapter among the Adivasis of Assam. That was some time in the beginning of 1932.

One day Fr. Alessi had just come back from a long missionary tour. Mgr. L. Mathias was waiting for him in

Guwahati. He saw in Alessi a generous disposition. Ready to do anything for the Lord. So he invited him to accompany him to make a trip to Tezpur. Mgr. Mathias being a leader with a vision had great plans for Tezpur.

They boarded the boat bound for Tezpur. The only means to reach it in those days. On the way Mgr. Mathias unrolled his dreams for a big catch. Realizing the great prospects of Church growth, he promised to give him an assistant. That assistant was the equally daring, generous and hard-working Fr. A. Ravalico who was to be ordained on 2 April 1932 along with Orestes Marengo.

We have no record of the conversation in the boat between Mgr. Mathias and Fr. Alessi. But surely it must have been that of a 'General' whose spirit of undaunted vision must have filled Alessi with equally undaunted resolutions.

They reached Tezpur, the land of Fr. Alessi's new dreams. They celebrated the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as their best gift to the future "Queen of the Brahmaputra", a name with which Fr. Ravalico would baptize Tezpur when he reached there for the first time a few weeks later.

After the Mass, they had a quick bite and called it their 'first breakfast' in Tezpur before they went round the town in search of a corner where the missionaries could stay. They found an empty little house belonging to a certain Mr. Dhas. This first residence was not far from the site of the present Bishop's House. The deal was struck. They hired it for one year at Rs. 60 per month starting from June 1932. It was like closing a big deal with a bright future all wrapped in it.

Mgr. Mathias and Fr. Alessi took the first available steamer and returned to Guwahati to move into Tezpur more permanently as early as possible.

It took hardly a month for great things to happen. Fr. Ravalico was ordained on 2 April. His destination Tezpur. He and Fr. Alessi came down from Shillong to Guwahati with all their possessions - all in two big boxes – and got ready to board the steamer on 31 May 1932 for Tezpur. It was a Tuesday. The boat with them on board made a historic pilgrimage the whole day and the whole night. Wednesday 1 June 1932 became unforgettable for them. They landed in Tezpur on a great mission. The significance of that arrival is better understood when seen against the fast development of the Church in that area.

The first thing they did was to turn the central room of their rented house into a chapel. Within an hour or so Jesus took His place in the Blessed Sacrament in a simple, humble Tabernacle, the harbinger of hundreds of others in the years to come.

On the following Sunday, there was Mass with a sizeable gathering of Christians from nearby villages and tea gardens. It was a solemn High Mass. It was followed by *sobha*, the first of a series of innumerable *sobhas* not only among the Adivasis, but also among the other tribes of the Tezpur mission.

**First Mission Tours**

Both Fr. Alessi and Fr. Ravalico were "novices" as far as any of the languages of the area was concerned. Hence, they purposely avoided touring the villages together, lest they speak Italian or English. Besides, they could not afford to go together, since the prospects were so immense and the harvest so great. Hence, not withstanding bad road, poor communication facilities, and inclement weather, they started off "one to one part, and the other to another side" of their vast mission territory which comprised the whole of the Darrang and

Nowgong districts. In the words of Bishop Marengo, Frs. Alessi and Ravalico were equipped with "admirable zeal and enthusiasm and very little else".[3]

Once during a tour in the Nowgong district Fr. Alessi got a strong attack of malaria. He couldn't get back to Tezpur to join his companion Fr. Ravalico. So he took shelter in Don Bosco, Guwahati. He went to bed with high fever. In the meantime a certain Mr. Ducchi informed Guwahati that Fr. Ravalico too was down with malaria. He was unable to move.

Immediately Fr. Scuderi, the Rector, dispatched the young and energetic Fr. Marengo to fetch Fr. Ravalico by all means. On their arrival in Guwahati and after listening to them, Fr. Scuderi had no other go but to declare Tezpur mission closed, though hardly one year had passed since it was opened.

But fever or no fever, the two would not receive the news lying down. After four days, the two unbeatable pioneers got up and made for Tezpur. This time they literally went with "fever".

Here it may be noted that there were days when one had to nurse the other, both being sick. Still, Fr. Alessi recalled that at the end of the first year his diary showed that he had been out touring 221 days. It was the same with Fr. Ravalico. As a result, the number of Catholic communities increased: 48 communities, 33 of which had chapels for the Sunday services. The same chapels served also as school during the week days. There were also 16 permanent catechists and 17 acting catechists. They helped to keep up the faith in their communities and to instruct others to join the Church.

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3. Tezpur Parish Golden Jubilee Souvenir, 4.

**From Bishop Marengo's Memory**

The first impression he had of Tezpur was the best impression. He called it the "happiest" one. And that was in 1926. As a Brother in the second year of philosophy he had come to Guwahati to replace Bro. Cinato. There he got a chance to go with the Adivasi boarding children for a few weeks to Tezpur. He remembered their simplicity, love and hard work. He also remarked that the return journey to Guwahati came to about one rupee per boy!

He remembered that a 'benign' Assamese gentleman was so impressed by the disciplined behaviour of the boys who were with Bro. Marengo that he came up to "congratulate" him!

During Bro. Marengo's practical training in Don Bosco, Guwahati from 1927 to 1928, he had made it a point to learn by heart the names of the Adivasi boys, of their villages and of the different tea gardens. Every time Fr. Piasecki and Fr. Marmol returned from their tours he was all ears when they described their visits to the villages and tea gardens.

Of his special love were the boarding children. He knew them by name. He was so happy when the first two, the Topno brothers later on became the first Adivasi priests from Assam: Fr. John Topno and Fr. Joseph Topno.

Bro. Marengo began his theological studies in Shillong in February 1929. In the following year he took a chance to visit N. Lakhimpur from Dibrugarh during the winter months.

In 1933 he visited Tezpur with a group of Adivasi children from Guwahati for the feast of Blessed John Bosco under whose patronage the Tezpur mission was started. That was also the occasion of the first big Adivasi *sobha*: He recollected that:

The mission compound was small.

The *pandal* that was put up served as church during the day and dormitory for the night.

Of that visit he remembered in particular an announcement made by the parish priest who declared:

'*Missa bali ke age Monsignor shadi karenge'* (before the Mass the Monsignor [Louis Mathias who had come to grace the occasion] will marry). Perhaps very few understood what was said. But there was a smart fellow among the boys who, Bishop Marengo was to recall later on, "without batting an eyelid greeted the astounding announcement" with a monosyllabic "*Le*". This has no exact English translation.

"It meant", Bishop Marengo wrote years later, "Eh, is that so? - my goodness!"

After the Mass when the Fathers came together for lunch Mgr. Mathias had this comment to make:

*"And this notwithstanding my daily prayers*
*for my perseverance!"*

Bishop Marengo also recalled how during a *sobha* there were several weddings. The ceremony used to be before Mass. And it so happened that the priest wanting to speed up the function of blessing several rows of couples asked a young bride the ritual question:

"Are you willing to take so and so as your husband?"

What followed can best be described by Bishop Marengo himself:

"The coy little bride shook her head vigorously. The Father nonplussed and impatient curtly repeated the question. 'Are you willing or not?' The girl giggled and whispered: 'He is not my boy!' The priest had mistakenly

paired her with the boy on her left who belonged to the next couple".

In 1933 Mgr. Mathias bought 'the Chummery' (Planters' Club).[4] Without much alteration it served as the mission residence. Its dance hall was converted into a study hall for the boarders. Bro. Mantarro's architectural skill helped to transform it into a more functional building. That was in 1949. It was only in 1964-65 that the present Bishop's House was built in its site.

The perceptive reader would note Bishop Marengo's deep humility when he wrote about it in the Tezpur Parish Golden Jubilee Souvenir. He effaced himself. Where some others may have said:

"During my first year as the *bishop* of the newly created diocese of Tezpur, I demolished the Ladies Club, and built the present Bishop's House". In stead, he wrote: "In 1964-65 the present Bishop's House was built in its site, by Fr. Paul Taverna, the First Vicar General of Tezpur".

4. From 1 June 1932, the house rented out from Mr. Dhas was the first residence of the missionaries. At the beginning of 1933 Mgr. Mathias spent nearly a week in Tezpur looking for a better accommodation. After some time he came to know that the "Coolies' Depot" of the Planters' Association in the town was on sale. But for various reasons it was not bought. Then in February 1934 Mgr. Mathias was again in Tezpur. A plot of land measuring 10 bighas in the outskirts of the town on the way to Bindokuri was sighted. High price prevented Mgr. Mathias from buying it. Providence had something better to offer. And that was the Chummery (Planters' Club), a bungalow on a land measuring some 20 bighas. Rs. 50,000 quoted by the Planters' Association was too frightening for the missionaries. Mgr. Mathias took courage and offered Rs. 20,000 and was willing to offer another Rs.10,000 more, in case the Association refused to sell it for Rs. 20,000. To make the story short, it is still a wonder how the planters could agree to the bid at the first offer. Mgr. Mathias attributed it to the special intercession of Don Bosco. In fact the deal was finalized on 1 April, the day of Don Bosco's canonization.

In 1934 the Salesian Sisters opened their first house in Tezpur with boarding house for Adivasi girls. The Sisters toured the villages. Thanks to the missionary leadership of Sr. Vallino, the tiny seed has now grown to be an influential institution with a large boarding house for nearly 200 Adivasi children and a school with Assamese and English sections catering to about 2000 students.

Within a few years of the start of Tezpur mission the number of Catholics increased three-fold. Catholic communities grew also among the Boro-Kacharis of the Mongoldai area.

Paying his tribute to the first two valiant and zealous missionaries - Frs. Alessi and Ravalico - Bishop Marengo wrote:

"Indeed, what our two pioneers achieved was little short of miraculous, but they and God alone knew at what cost".[5]

Fr. Alessi was transferred to Don Bosco, Guwahati, towards the end of 1935 as Rector. Fr. Ravalico with the help of Fr. Bonomi and Fr. Devalle began the construction of the Church in Tezpur. After the transfer of Fr. Ravalico to Don Bosco, Liluah, Fr. Joseph Dal Broi was appointed to Tezpur. The War years were difficult not only for Tezpur, but for all the other missions in the North East. The Mawlai theologate which too had to be closed and which was turned into a rest camp for American soldiers spared Fr. E. Gutierrez who lent a helping hand to Tezpur. He was followed by Fr. T. Lopez.

The work on the church building was completed only by 31 January 1947. Its present shape owes much to Bishop J. Mittathany.

In the early days the river journey from Guwahati to Tezpur took 15 to 20 hours, if the steamer did not run aground in sand, and if it did not come across any other hazard.

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5. Tezpur Parish Golden Jubilee Souvenir, 5.

In 1946, Fr. Marengo's last year in Sonada, he met three young aspirants from Tezpur. One of them had to return home because of poor health. Of the other two, one became his third successor in the diocese of Tezpur (Bishop Robert Kerketta SDB) and the other is Fr. E. Kerketta.

When he returned to Assam in 1946, and was put in charge of the missions of Nowgong area with base in Tezpur, there was yet no ferry boat between Tezpur and Silghat. There was only a passenger steamer serving between Tezpur and Newmati (Jorhat). Since this service was only on alternate days, one had to calculate well his trips lest he had to spend the night stranded "on the sand on the wrong side of the Brahmaputra".

Fr. Marengo's beard was of some help in crossing the Brahmaputra by steamer. All crew and personnel of the steamer company (The Assam Bengal Rly., Co., and the River Steamer Navigation Co., - both with headquarters at Chittagong) were Muslims. They were quite friendly with the missionaries. Fr. Marengo's long beard was something that made him their "kindred". After India's independence these companies stopped functioning in Assam. Soon North Guwahati and Tezpur were linked by motorable road and the East India Railway, which replaced the old Assam Bengal Railway. This new line connected Rangya with Rangapara and N. Lakhimpur. From Rangapara it proceeded to Tezpur.

**A Disaster that Saddened Bishop Marengo**

At the time of the Chinese invasion in 1962 when it was feared that the Chinese would be coming into Tezpur a sad event happened in Borpukri mission centre. Nearly 180 boarding children after they had a good meal of chappattis began to feel heavy in their legs and within a short time were seized by paralysis. They had to be carried to their bed. Fr. Joseph

Mittathany (the future Bishop of Tezpur) happened to be alone at the mission centre when this happened. The Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians from Tezpur were rushed to Borpukri to render help. Bishop Marengo who happened to be still in Dibrugarh was anxious to know the outcome of it.

The children were given all possible medical assistance. Among the many who rendered their service to look after them was also Mrs. Patricia Ross, the wife of a tea garden manager and a Catholic. Describing those troubled days Bishop Marengo observed:

> This [the affectionate care], more than anything else is what helped those poor boys. The anxiety and the painstaking care of the Fathers, Sisters of Borpukri during those days defies description.[6]

He also noted that even after an year and a half when he visited Borpukri again the sight of so many boys dragging themselves, a few scarcely able to walk, was more than he could bear with dry eyes. During his visits to the different villages he used to meet occasionally some of those boys badly dragging their feet and suffering.

The actual cause of the incident was that a consignment of American food stuff that reached Borpukri had been loaded in railway carriages that had been used for the transport of some chemical fertilizer. Hundreds of oil cans were contaminated. The chappattis which the boys ate had been fried in that contaminated oil with disastrous result.

### Starting All Over Again

Bishop Marengo started afresh the work of building up the new diocese of Tezpur with the same enthusiasm that

6. SHTCD-MM, II, 3.

accompanied him when he began Dibrugarh some 14 years earlier. Before leaving Dibrugarh he had sent a circular to all his benefactors exhorting them to continue to help Dibrugarh. At the same time he had also informed them of the new responsibility he was beginning on the North Bank as the first Bishop of Tezpur. The new diocese, as mentioned earlier, comprised of the districts of N. Lakhimpur, Darang, North Kamrup and Goalpara on the North bank of the Brahmaputra and the Nowgong district in the South bank. In addition, he was also asked to look after that part of the Mikir Hills (Karbi Anglong) where some 1000 Catholics from the Nowgong area were settled.

One of the first things he did after coming back from Europe was to be present at the official welcome to Bishop Hubert D'Rosario, his successor in Dibrugarh. That was on 13 December 1964. During the pontifical Mass on that day he preached a touching sermon both in Hindi and English.

In his new diocese of Tezpur Bishop Marengo was very happy to come across communities which he had begun as priest, especially the Adivasi and the Boro communities. An overview of the centres show that Tezpur, Tangla and N. Lakhimpur are like key centres which in the course of time gave birth to other mission centres.

Borpukri mission opened in 1955 by Fr. H. Boscardin was part of Tezpur. Fr. Cherian Moolamattam who belonged to the second batch of priests who volunteered from Sacred Heart Seminary Poonamallee was sent there on 14 April 1956. At the time of Fr. Cherian joining it, it was still at its very beginning stages. When Fr. Boscardin had to absent himself due to illness, Fr. Cherian was appointed parish priest with Fr. J. Mittathany as his assistant. Fr. Cherian is the first Indian diocesan to be appointed parish priest in the North East. After

the creation of the diocese of Tezpur when Tetenbari became a parish Fr. J. Mittathany was sent there as parish priest.

Right from the beginning Bishop Marengo was eager to start a centre for the Boro communities at the earliest. So after discussing with the Fathers who were working among the Boros like Fr. Zubizarreta, Fr. Morra, Fr. Guido, Bengtol and Udalguri were opened in the next two years. Fr. George Venturoli pioneered in Udalguri and Fr. Zubizarreta in Bengtol. Earlier they were part of Tangla parish. From Tangla would come Mangaldai centre in 1973 and Dimakuchi in 1984. In the course of time Udalguri would give rise to Ambagaon in 1970, and Rowta in 1977. These centres with church, residence for priests, convent for sisters and with schools and boardings are the home of fervent Catholic communities of Boros and Adivasis who include also the Santals. Today Bengtol in the Archdiocese of Guwahati is a flourishing mission centre with over 10,000 Catholics in about 85 villages. Bengtol has the presence of a community of MSMHC. So too Udalguri in Tezpur diocese has 5500 Catholics living in 41 villages. It has a community of the MSMHC.

In Udalguri two Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians - Sr. Paulina for the Boros and Sr. Theresa for the Santals - were of particular help to Fr. G. Venturoli. Bishop Marengo greatly appreciated the work of the sisters:

"Both did a very precious work, and it is especially due to the zeal and patience of Sr. Theresa that many pagan Santals found the way to the fold".[7]

Just as a number of mission centres were branched off from Tangla, so too from the mother parish of Tezpur came during the time of Bishop Marengo, Rangapara in 1965, and Dholaibil (from Borpukri) in the same year. Rangapara would

7. Ibid., 6.

give rise to another mission centre, Misamari, in 1979. Rangapara has now over 11,000 Catholics in 45 villages and Dholaibil over 4000, in 23 villages. Misamari started by Fr. G. Kannathara has nearly 2000 Catholics in 9 villages.

Fr. Peditto who was a touring missionary in Tezpur and who had been helping Fr. Guido in Tangla earlier went to open Rangapara. Fr. Alexander Nalliyil started in Dholaibil. Fr. H. Boscardin who had pioneered in Borpukri and who had earlier been for many years in Jowai, Dibrugarh and Naharkatiya was in Dhekiajuli. In Dhekiajuli he started construction work for a big parish Church and a three storey school and boarding. Though he was sick and was suspecting cancer, Fr. Boscardin continued to put in his best to build up Dhekiajuli mission centre. When Bishop Marengo allowed him to go to Italy for medical care, he knew that he would not be able to come back.

When Fr. Boscardin passed away, the 4th Session of the Second Vatican Council was on and Bishop Marengo who was in Italy, preached the funeral oration. While Bishop Marengo was away in Italy, Dhekiajuli lost also Fr. M. Botto. Hence Bishop Marengo had to ask Fr. U. Turco to come from N. Lakhimpur to replace them in Dhekiajuli. To Fr. U. Turco goes the credit of completing the constructions started by Fr. Boscardin in Dhekiajuli and of developing the mission centre further. Today Dhekiajuli has nearly 13,000 Catholics in 46 villages. It has the presence of a community of Sisters of the Sacred Heart.

From Dhekiajuli which was opened in 1959 was born another mission centre, Mazbat, in 1970. It was ministered to by Fr. G. Kannathara who later on opened Misamari in 1979 as we have mentioned above. Mazbat too is a flourishing mission centre today with over 7000 Catholics in 35 villages. Mazbat has the presence of a community of FMAs.

Fr. A. Cerato who pioneered in N. Lakhimpur from 1944 onwards built up that centre with school, boarding houses and a convent. The convent (MSMHC) was opened in 1961. N. Lakhimpur was almost cut off due to floods following the earthquake in August 1950. Besides the Adivasi communities, there are also the Nishis and Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh looked after from the N. Lakhimpur mission centre.

When Fr. Cerato was served the quit order along with the other missionaries of non-Indian origin in the latter part of the 1960s, he preferred to continue his service elsewhere in India rather than leave the country. So he went to Bombay where he worked till his death in May 1976.

In January 1976 when Bishop Marengo was in Bombay for the CBCI meeting he met Fr. Cerato in Don Bosco, Kurla. Fr. Cerato's mind and heart were still in the North East among his dear Adivasi and Apatani boys of N. Lakhimpur boarding school.

In Tezpur Bishop Marengo was once surprised to see two small Apatani boys returning from Bomaby where they had gone all by themselves to meet Fr. Cerato to request him to help them study there. Fr. Cerato advised them to return to N. Lakhimpur. In Bombay they also met Fr. A. Alessi who arranged for their journey back to Assam.

We mentioned above that it was Tangla mission centre from which Bengtol and Udalguri branched off during the time of Bishop Marengo. During the same period Fr. G. Colussi built up a spacious two storey building which serves as parish Church and parish hall and a big boarding for over 200 children. It was very painful for Fr. G. Colussi to be served the quit order from the government after working there for over 15 years. In stead of returning to Italy, he worked in the

Salesian province of Calcutta till his death in 1997 at Hatia. Besides, Bengtol and Udalguri during the time of Bishop Marengo, Tangla also gave birth to Mangaldai in 1973 and Dimakuchi in 1984.

In the mission centre of Barpeta Road was Fr. R. Morra who had been there for nearly 25 years, and who brought up that mission from every aspect: mission work among the Adivasis, Boros and Santals, school, boarding and farm. Fr. Zubizarreta too had been in Barpeta Road for several years. From there he was looking after the Goalpara area and developed the mission centre of Bengtol among the Boros. Fr. L. Kerketta, Bro. Fioredda and Fr. Benedict Kiro are remembered by Bishop Marengo for their valuable contribution for the development of Barpeta Road. The last two mentioned were his novice and aspirant respectively in Sonada.

In 1969 Bishop Marengo acquired the land for the present Borgang parish. When Bishop J. Mittathany chose Borgang as a place to start a Catholic hospital, Fr. Cherian Moolamattam who is interested in medical ministry was sent there to begin the parish and to start the work for setting up a Catholic Hospital. From Borgang Fr. Cherian looked after the spiritual needs of the Karbis in the North Bank and organized the apostolate among the Assamese.

At the time of Bishop Marengo there were about 15,000 Karbis living in the plains along the hills of the North Bank in the area belonging to Tezpur diocese. The rest of them were in the South Bank mostly in the Mikir Hills in Karbi Anglong district. Bishop Marengo remembered a Karbi boy who used to accompany him in his tours among the Adivasis when he was a touring missionary priest in Nowgong area during 1946-1951. He was very helpful and had a "likeable

character, appreciated and loved by all the Adivasi flock".[8] He was also his "teacher" for Karbi which, according to Bishop Marengo, is "soft and sweet, rich in very vivid and meaningful expressions" compared to other languages of the same group. The Karbis are "a shy, peaceful, not very thrifty" people. But Bishop Marengo remembered some of the excellent Karbi students of the boarding house in Tezpur. In particular he recalled a boy who after three consecutive double promotions still stood first in class six.

Once when Fr. Marengo was discussing a knotty problem with him and asked him if he had any suggestion to make, he thought for a while, shook his head and said:

*Voti ason, aphuta kokno, amita kokno*

which in English would read

*It is like an egg, hard to tie at the head*
*and hard to tie at the tail!* [9]

Bishop Marengo had great appreciation for all the Adivasi confreres who sacrificed themselves - each in his own way - for the diocese of Tezpur. They brought honour to the different groups they came from. Especially remembered by him are Fr. L. Kerketta and Bro. Samuel - both Oraons; Fr. Benedict, a Kharia and Bro. Athanasius Guria, a Munda.

"All of them are among the first Salesian Adivasis. Splendid Religious and Salesians all of them".[10]

Bishop Marengo bestows due praise for everyone who works sincerely for the spread of the Gospel. He has the following to say about his team of diocesan priests in Tezpur:

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8. Ibid., 14.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 10A.

"In the new diocese I had an excellent team of diocesan Fathers who got on very well among themselves and with their Salesian colleagues. All of them loved their flock and could speak the language fluently. With the exception of one who was a Goan all of them were from Kerala. The foreign missionaries were now not many and one could feel that soon very few of them would be left. So it was really providential that Kerala was providing so many priests to take over in the North the fast increasing number of missionary parishes and fill up posts vacated by foreign missionaries who were not allowed to reside on frontier zones and in protected or sensitive area".[11]

"All of them were hard and intelligent workers with a peculiar gift of making the most of the land annexed to the Fathers' residence for the support of the mission and the mission boarding school".[12]

Bishop Marengo recalls the new Salesian missionaries who arrived in his time: Fr. Mathew Narimattam, "a real Assamese scholar", Fr. George Pudussery and Fr. K. Thomas. All three helped out in Dhekiajuli along with Fr. U. Turco after the death of Fr. Botto.

Besides the diocesan priests whom we have mentioned above, Bishop Marengo remembered in particular Fr. George Kannathara, Fr. Sebastian Pouvath, Fr. Job Appathara, Fr. Mathew Palatty, Fr. Joseph Palakattathukunnel, Fr. George Prakash, Fr. Mathew Thayil, Fr. Thomas Thotunkal and Fr. A. Nazarene.

Speaking of Tezpur Mission Centre in particular Bishop Marengo spoke about the Little Flower School and convent of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians not far from the Bishop's House in Tezpur. It was opened in March 1946 under

11. Ibid., 11.
12. Ibid., 12A.

the able guidance of Sr. Innocenza Vallino, the leader of the first group of the Salesian Sisters to the *then Assam Mission*. At first it seemed there was not enough place for their activities. But Bishop Marengo was impressed by the way in which the Sisters adjusted the small area they had to accommodate the growing number of students. In connection with the Salesian Sisters in Tezpur and sharing a conviction he has gained over the years, Bishop Marengo wrote:

> "the Sisters, it is my long-lived experience, far more than the Fathers, have a knack of making the best of a bad situation".[13]

Bishop Marengo summed up his work in Tezpur by expressing:

> "... a colossal debt of gratitude to all the personnel of the Tezpur diocese for the welcome, obedience and affection"[14] he experienced during the five years he spent as the first Bishop of Tezpur. During these years he was able to open Bengtol, Udalguri, Dholaibil, Tetenbari, Rangapara and Borgang with schools and boardings. During the same time boarding school for girls and convents for Sisters were built in Borpukri, Udalguri, Salana and Tetenbari all of which are entrusted to the MSMHC. The two big churches of Dhekiajuli and Tetenbari too were built during this time, and extension works were carried out in several centres. In Tezpur the old Fathers' Residence was demolished and in its place the present one was built.

## Anxious Days of Quit Orders

The Quit Order of 1967 and after served on several foreign missionaries working in the North Bank caused much

13. Ibid., 13.
14. Ibid.

anxiety and sadness for the Church in the North East, especially to the diocese of Tezpur. Not so much the quit order as such that grieved the Catholics, but the calumnies and false propaganda that appeared in the press of the time. All this seen against the self sacrificing service which the missionaries were rendering to the people made the situation confusing. To accuse them of failing to create a spirit of 'Indianness' among the hill people or of misuse of funds was misreading the whole situation. In fact, if there was any place where the different tribal groups were formed into one heart and one soul and made part of the mainstream of India, it was the boarding houses and the schools which the missionaries were conducting in their mission stations in North East India. It was there that boys and girls who had never seen each other mixed among themselves and lived as members of the same family. The joy and cheerfulness of Church-run institutions spoke for themselves. Moreover, the students who have passed through them remain ever grateful to their teachers, priests, sisters and lay leaders.

It is strange, felt Bishop Marengo, how the very government machinery that kept the missionaries out of the hills should be the ones to blame them for not creating a spirit of oneness among the hill people! The accusation that the missionaries were converting people should be answered, affirmed the Bishop, by the people themselves who accepted the Christian message for reasons they found suitable.

The troubled years of the quit order were handled calmly and prudently by Bishop Marengo. Even when he received anonymous letters accusing him of "forging" money for mission work, he understood the hand behind it, the hand that wanted to discredit the cause of the Church. When some papers published that he and a few of the foreign missionaries were served the quit order, he knew it was only to "steal a

march on other papers".[15] For, personally he himself was never served a quit order. It was only the usual newspaper craze for "sensational news". It appeared on 23 August 1967, the day in which the priests were gathered together in Tezpur for their annual retreat.

The priests on hearing the news suspended their retreat, called a meeting and decided to mobilize public opinion to ask the government to reconsider the question of "quit order". Finally, the government postponed its decision against the missionaries. Sometime later Bishop Marengo received a copy of a letter from Delhi informing him that the foreign missionaries would have to withdraw from the North Bank within the next two years and that he himself would be allowed to stay on in consideration of his long stay in Tezpur.[16] It, however, put a condition that Bishop Marengo should appoint an Indian as "deputy Bishop".

One day in March 1968 Bishop Marengo was at the confessional in the chapel of the Corramore Tea Garden when Fr. G. Colussi came to meet him. He had come all the way from Tangla on a motor cycle to hand over a letter and to break the news that the government had served an immediate quit order on Bro. Michael Cahoj. Till the end of his life it was a mystery for Bishop Marengo why and how the government targeted a Lay-Brother who "scarcely ever went out of Tezpur", and who was busy with looking after the poor boys in the boarding.

However, since the matter was urgent, Fr. Guido took Bishop on his motor cycle to Tangla and from there he made him reach Tezpur by jeep. It was past mid-night when they

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15. Ibid.,15.
16. The letter mistakenly referred to Bishop Marengo's long stay in India as long stay in Tezpur.

arrived in Tezpur. There and then they drafted a letter to the Chief Minister of Assam and sent it to him the following day. The letter had its effect. Bro. M. Cahoj got an extension of six months. It meant that he had to quit India only by the end of September 1968. But fortunately for Brother, he fell sick. He developed kidney trouble. He was operated in Tezpur itself, and the doctors certified, that he was not fit to travel. Eventually Bro. Cahoj was transferred to Shillong, and later on to Tura to be with Bishop Marengo there when the latter was the Apostolic Administrator, and again back to Shillong where Bro. Michael passed away on 1 July 1994.

Bro. M. Cahoj was Bishop Marengo's very close collaborator for over 25 years in Dibrugarh, Tezpur and Tura. He showed me one of his letters from Shillong after he had to 'quit' Tezpur. He kept up his humour in spite of a quit order and the loss of a kidney. He wrote to Bishop Marengo:

> "I am now quite well, but minus one kidney. For this reason the doctor cautioned me and the superiors that I should not do heavy works that make me perspire. But then my good superior asks me to give a Good Night Talk to the community. And that makes me perspire profusely!"[17]

**Resignation From Tezpur**

In the meantime Bishop Marengo had submitted to Rome his resignation from the diocese of Tezpur on "health reasons".[18] His request was accepted on 25 January 1969. He was also told that *L'Osservatore Romano* would publish the

17. SHTCD-MM, II 17.
18. Here the reader should keep in mind that it was the political situation in the border area in the aftermath of the Chinese aggression rather than any health reason which prompted him to send in his resignation letter.

news on the date that was intimated to him. But soon after he received another letter in which he was asked to continue as Bishop of Tezpur *ad nutum Romani Pontificis*, that is, as long as the Roman Pontiff would desire it.

By July of that year several of the foreign confreres had to leave Tezpur for good: Fr. P. Taverna, Fr. A. Cerato, Fr. G. Colussi, Fr. G. Venturoli and Bro. Pancolini.[19]

Things moved fast. On 23 August 1969 Bishop-Elect Fr. Joseph Mittathany received the letter of nomination as Bishop of Tezpur. His Episcopal ordination as the Second Bishop of Tezpur took place on 27 September 1969.

19. Bro. F. Pancolini like Bro. M. Cahoj worked with Bishop Marengo for many years. He was with him in Dibrugarh and in Tezpur. He organized Bishop Marengo's office of procurator and accompanied him in some of his journeys to Europe. After he had to leave Tezpur, he placed himself at the service of the provincial of the Salesians of Calcutta. He helped Bishop Mathew Baroi of Krishnagar to set up his Propaganda and Procure Office. After he developed heart trouble, he returned to Italy for treatment. He came back to work again in Krishnagar. Finally he went back to Italy and served in the Salesian headquarters in Rome. He passed away on 27 March 1978. Bishop Marengo owes "a very special debt of gratitude to Bro. Pancolini".

# VII. STILL AT THE SERVICE OF TEZPUR (1969-1972)

Moving from the "episcopal" office to an adjacent room to write letters and seek funds on behalf of the new Bishop was not difficult for Bishop Marengo, because he was a holy man. He was essentially a man of the Church and was happy to offer any service for the spread of the Good News.

### At the Procure Office and Other Services

Generous and sacrificing as ever, Bishop Marengo responded to the need. As soon as he was relieved of his responsibility as Bishop of Tezpur, he moved into Bro. F. Pancolini's office to carry on the work of procuring funds for Tezpur diocese. We see him as a humble "secretary-cum-correspondent" working hard in the office, functioning at the same time as a chaplain to the communities around and taking part in *sobhas* and celebrations whenever he was able to attend.

Sometime in 1972 Bishop Marengo was invited to preach a retreat to the Boro community of Bongaon right at the foothills of Bhutan where there were also a few communities of Adivasis who were employed in the big tea gardens of Doomni area.

Though the Boros are not addicted to drinking generally, Fr. Morra who had invited him requested him to touch upon the point of drinking. Without considering it as a big problem Bishop Marengo on the last day of the retreat asked the people

to offer something pleasing to Our Lord and at the same time something particularly hard for some of them to practise. It was supposed to be a proof of their determination to be good Christians.

Bishop Marengo, therefore, prepared a pledge and suggested that they should make that promise to Our Lord giving up drinking altogether. At the end of the talk the fathers of families came to Bishop and requested him to write down their names for the pledge. Their desire to be good Christians did not stop at that. At the offertory of the concluding Eucharist, Bishop received a list of all the village elders too ready to give up drinking completely. He placed it on the corporal and made the whole congregation repeat the pledge after him.

It was indeed very touching to see with what fervour they recited that promise to Jesus.

Some eight years later when the Bishop met the priest in charge of Bongaon, he enquired how his Boro community of Bongaon was behaving. Bishop Marengo was so happy to hear that the community had been keeping their promise to Jesus and that the list he had received years back at that offertory procession was framed and was still hanging by the side of the main altar.

The story of Bahadursing and Rosa Dulut of a Boro village near Bongaon could be mentioned at this point. Bahadursing was one of Bishop Marengo's first Boro converts. Even after many years he remembered him and his wife by name. It was Bishop himself who had blessed their marriage.

Once Bahadursing had complained to Bishop saying that he was unhappy with his marriage because he had no children. Moreover he felt that Rosa Dulut was not good enough to

entertain guests. Bishop understood what he was aiming at. So he spoke to him about Catholic marriage, its unity and indissolubility and so on. But Bahadursing pretended not to understand much. This took place before 1936 when Bishop Marengo was a touring priest in Doomni area.

Years later when Fr. Morra came to know that Bahadursing had divorced Rosa and had taken a non-Christian as his wife, he visited him and made him understand that what he did was not correct. To Fr. Morra who concluded his advice saying:

"God cannot bless you after what you have done,"

Bahadursing responded calmly:

"But God has blessed me. See, before I had no children. Now I have plenty of them and also enough to feed and clothe them!"[1]

Bishop Marengo who visited Bahadursing's house after the Bongaon retreat which we have mentioned above found him old, but materially somewhat well-off. He reminded him of God's love and asked him not to forget God. What Bishop Marengo felt at that moment reveals to us also his positive approach to problems of that sort even in difficult circumstances:

"What could I tell him!" wrote Bishop Marengo, "He had wanted children and saw in them God's blessing ... I could not help remembering certain of Our Lord's anathemas ... and felt that on judgement day it will be more bearable for people like my poor Bahadursing than for those who in their heart and in their life have no place for children! I blessed my old friend, himself an old man now and told him not to forget God who had blessed him with children and with enough to feed and clothe them."[2]

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1. Ibid., 21.
2. Ibid.

Returning from Bongaon after preaching the retreat to his dear Boro community Bishop Marengo stopped for a night in one of the Adivasi communities on the outskirts of Doomni. Next morning he celebrated Mass for a full Church of Adivasi Catholics many of whom were his first Christians.

**An Unexpected Telephone Call**

Soon after his return to Tezpur from Bongaon Bishop Marengo was invited to Dibrugarh to officiate during the Holy Week, in the absence of Bishop Robert who was away in Italy. It was always a joy for him to meet the old flock of his first diocese. This time he knew he would meet many of them because a big crowd was expected in Dibrugarh to celebrate Easter in the spacious and beautiful cathedral renovated with real artistic taste by Fr. Ignatius Rubio who was Vicar General there with Bishop Hubert D'Rosario.

Fr. Casarotti, the Salesian provincial, also happened to be in Dibrugarh at that time on a visit to the community of the Don Bosco School.

It must have been on Holy Saturday when the Provincial who was having lunch with the Bishop's House community, was called to the phone which was in the dining hall itself. As he took up the phone and listened to the speaker, he became distinctly ill-at-ease. Bishop Marengo could catch his words "Yes he is here". But he was not interested in the conversation Fr. Casarotti was carrying on in a rather subdued tone. Little did he suspect that Bishop Marengo was the object of the conversation.

**Yet Another Telephone Call**

Back in Tezpur a few days later, Bishop Marengo received a phone call from Guwahati. It was Fr. Casarotti:

"I must meet you in Dhekiajuli," he said.

"Please be there without fail tomorrow at noon, and possibly let nobody know about it". This last request was not possible because Bishop Marengo could not absent himself without anybody knowing it, and besides, someone had to drive him to Dhekiajuli that same evening.

The Bishop's secretary, Fr. Sebastian Pouvath drove him to Dhekiajuli that evening itself, and left him to the warm Salesian hospitality of Fr. Turco. After supper both of them fell to thinking what might be the matter why the provincial wanted to see him with such urgency and secrecy.

Next day Fr. Casarotti was with them. He explained to Bishop Marengo that both the Archbishop and the Salesian Superiors in Turin had thought of him in connection with the shortly to be created diocese of Tura and wished to know whether he was willing to accept and proceed to Tura to take charge of the Garo Hills mission as Episcopal Vicar in the name of Archbishop Hubert D'Rosario. He also informed that they had already discussed the matter with the new Pro-Nuncio, Mgr. John Gordon. He was favourable, and had said later on that the proposal of sending Bishop Marengo to Tura had been recommended by him to Rome and that Rome would surely sanction it.

This was the message conveyed to Fr. Casarotti by that phone call to the provincial on Holy Saturday, in Dibrugarh.

Bishop Marengo replied, that if the Archbishop and the Salesian Superiors desired it and the Pro-Nuncio agreed to it, he would gladly accept the new responsibility.

# VIII. EPISCOPAL VICAR APOSTOLIC ADMINISTRATOR (TURA 1972-1979)

Bishop Marengo had already founded two dioceses - Dibrugarh and Tezpur. The Lord asked him to found yet another. He did it willingly and with equal missionary zeal. He had no problem in being called "Episcopal Vicar" or later "Apostolic Administrator" till the first Bishop was nominated.

**"What about Bishop Marengo?"**

The Garo Hills mission - though part of the Archdiocese of Shillong- Guwahati, was its tail end. It could not have received all the attention it called for. Some of the priests had even sent a memorandum to the Archbishop asking him to do something more for Garo Hills. It is said that Fr. B. Busolin even received a scolding from Archbishop Hubert for affixing his signature to that memorandum.

One day Fr. Busolin was going to Shillong with the Archbishop. In those days Bishop Marengo was humbly doing the work of "a secretary-cum-correspondent" for Bishop J. Mittathany of Tezpur. As the jeep hurried towards Shillong Fr. Busolin's fertile imagination brought out something new: "What about asking Bishop Marengo to come and look after the missionary work in the Garo Hills?"

This time the Archbishop did not scold him. He pondered over it for a while and added:

"I will speak with the Pro-Nuncio".

For Fr. Busolin that was the end of that idea. But it took root in Archbishop's mind. It sprouted. It flowered into several telephone calls and many more correspondences.

That Bishop Marengo agreed to move out of Tezpur in obedience to the wishes of the Salesian provincial and the desire of the Archbishop was something natural for him. But not all could see it in that light. The work which he was carrying out in Tezpur was a big help for Bishop J. Mittathany.[1] It was therefore understandable that Bishop Mittathany tried to find a solution for Tura other than removing Bishop Marengo from Tezpur. When Bishop Mittathany expressed his desire to continue to have Bishop Marengo with him, the latter had only one answer:

"I am a Salesian, and I feel it my duty to comply with the express desire of my Religious Superiors".[2]

Then came a magnanimous assurance so typical of Bishop Marengo's generous heart and total trust in Divine Providence.

"I assure you that the benefactors of the diocese would all carry on helping you".[3]

On his part Bishop Marengo was ready to start from scratch. He would continue to trust in God's Loving Providence.

Bishop Mittathany in his great desire not to lose the inspiring company of Bishop Marengo made a trip to Delhi to see if Bishop Marengo could be retained in Tezpur.

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1. Nearly all the benefactors of Tezpur diocese were from Italy, and from Canton Ticino of Switzerland. Correspondence with them was a great service which Bishop Marengo was rendering even at his advanced age and after pioneering in two dioceses in the North East.
2. SHTCD-MM,II, 22.
3. Ibid.

When he realized that he would have to move to Tura shortly, Bishop Marengo prepared his last Mission Sunday appeal from Tezpur. He asked his benefactors to keep on helping the promising diocese of Tezpur, and if they could remember him too at his new address in Tura, he would be grateful.

21 January, 1972 : the two districts of Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills become a state of the Indian Union under the name 'Meghalaya' (abode of the clouds). The Garo Hills which had been the topic of conversation in the ecclesiastical circles in those days became part of the newly created state of Meghalaya. To reside in Tura (the capital of Garo Hills) Bishop Marengo had to be registered as a resident of the new State of Meghalaya. This presented difficulties, because despite his 50 long years in India he was still a foreigner in the eyes of the Government. Besides, his registration certificate for India had been withdrawn in 1967 when the foreign nationals were given notice to leave India. Though he was then allowed to stay on, no new registration certificate was issued for him till then. So Bishop Marengo had to obtain a residential permit to stay in Tura.

Mid June 1972: as he was preparing to leave Tezpur for Shillong he had a slight attack of phlebitis, the first ever such experience. He was greatly moved when he offered his last Mass in the Cathedral for the Tezpur parishioners and the boys and the girls of the boarding schools.

Bishop J. Mittathany with some of the Fathers and Sisters then accompanied him to Shillong. After reaching him to Shillong they returned to Tezpur late that same day. Only after they had left, Bishop Marengo learned that Bishop Mittathany had left his car behind as a parting gift to Bishop Marengo. "However," wrote Bishop Marengo in his memoirs, "Fr. I. Rubio, the Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Shillong,

who was not be outdone in generosity made it up liberally to the Bishop of Tezpur".[4]

**Residential Permit and Entry into Tura**

Since Fr. Mario Bianchi who had been nearly thirty years Bishop Ferrando's secretary was well known to and quite influential with most government officers in Shillong, he managed to get the residential permit for Bishop Marengo within a comparatively short time. While he was waiting for the permit in Shillong, the Archbishop was all attention and took good care of Bishop Marengo.

On the 21 July 1972 the Archbishop and Fr. M. Bianchi along with Bishop Marengo left for Tura. They stopped for the night in Damra. The next day they broke the journey in Resu Belpara where they had lunch and a welcome by a few parishioners and the children of the English medium school which Fr. E.V. George had started only a few months before. Then they left for their journey's end. On their way to Tura they spent sometime visiting the great work dear Fr. Costa had done in Mendal where a tragic death had cut short his big plans on 17 April 1970.

At this point it is necessary to open a small parenthesis to honour the memory of one who shed his blood and sanctified the Garo Hills Mission which now Bishop Marengo was called to shepherd.

**Fr. J. Costa SDB and Mendal**

Fr. Costa had, for sometime been carrying on relief work for the East Pakistan refugees. He had great plans for Mendal: the setting up of a dairy farm, piggery, poultry, weaving and tailoring to help the Garo refugees irrespective

4. Ibid., 23.

of religion. A number of big and solid structures had come up within a short time, thanks to Fr. Bertuzzi the Salesian Mission Procurator at the Mother House in Turin and the friends of *La Stampa*, an Italian daily, which helped to organize the funds for Fr. Costa's plans for Mendal. Some of the benefactors had come to see what was being done and were very favourably impressed by Fr. Costa's work.

One night Father Costa was called out of bed by a voice he knew. Unsuspecting he got up, thinking perhaps it might be some sick call and opened the door. But the moment he stepped out to the verandah, a group of people assaulted him and stabbed him to death. The money which, as shown by the registers, should have been with him was found missing.

Some people in the area, perhaps, knew far more than they cared or dared to tell. The case went on for at least three years after engaging a renowned High Court lawyer from Guwahati. A lot of money too had to be spent. Then, finally, the case had to be dropped for lack of evidence.

It is believed, and perhaps people take such things for granted, that most of the stolen money was spent on bribery. It is a mystery still that no one in Mendal dares to mention or allude to this sad and tragic end of a great, sacrificing, generous and far-sighted missionary.

Bishop Marengo was in Tezpur at the time of Fr. Costa's sorrowful passing away on 17 April 1970. He made sure that he attended Fr. Costa's funeral services in Shillong. He also preached the farewell message at the cemetery.

**The Journey's End and Welcome**

To continue with their journey to Tura, when Bishop Marengo, Archbishop Hubert D' Rosario and Fr. M. Bianchi reached the Mission Centre in Tura on 22 July there were

most of the Fathers, the Sisters of Christ Jesus from St. Xavier's School, the Don Bosco boys, boarding children and the parishioners to welcome them.

Bishop took charge of the Garo Hills Mission as the Episcopal Vicar of Archbishop Hubert D' Rosario. He made his acquaintance of the Fathers, 14 in all, working in 7 mission centres for 36,000 Catholics, many of whom were refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) since 1964. Of the Fathers, 6 were Salesians, 5 Diocesans and 3 from the Missionary Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament (MCBS).

**The Garos: A Brief Overview**

The earliest contacts with the Garos can be traced back to the time of the Salvatorian missionaries who came to North East India in 1890. Though at first they were busy with the Khasis, they were not unaware of the prospects of preaching the Good News also among the Garos. In 1913 Fr. Rudolph Fontaine stationed at Guwahati visited the Garo Hills and took note of the possibilities of starting work among them. But he could not do much for lack of personnel and resources.

The Jesuit missionaries who replaced them during the First World War when the German missionaries had to leave Assam (North East India) too found it hard to keep up the work. However, in 1921 Fr. Carbery from Guwahati visited Laskarpara to bless the marriage of a Catholic couple.

Among the Salesians of Don Bosco, the first one to tour the Garo Hills was Fr. Gil. It was during 1923-24. After seeing the excellent chances to start work among them, he wrote in great detail to Mgr. L. Mathias, the Prefect Apostolic of Assam.

During one of Fr. Gil's visits he was fortunate to baptize a few catechumens in Baigumbari and later on to help them to start a small school there. The roots of the Baigumbari

community can be traced back to a group of Garos of Mymensingh district who some time before Fr. Rudolph Fontaine's visit (1913) had asked a Baptist pastor to tell them which indeed was the first Church. On receiving his reply that the first Church of Jesus Christ is the Catholic Church, they set out to go to Dacca, there to meet some Catholic priests and to get more information about the Catholic Church. After clearing their doubts with the Holy Cross Fathers, those zealous Garos were baptized and returned to Mymensingh with a few Catholic books in Bengali. From these contacts there was established the Ranikhong mission in Mymensingh district at the foot of Garo Hills in 1922. This good news reached nearby villages in Garo Hills. Among them was also Baigumbari.

Fr. Gil's visits to Baigumbari which we have referred to above, were followed up by occasional visits to the Garo villages by Fr. L. Piasecki and Fr. F. Marmol when they were stationed in Guwahati.

Bishop Marengo came to know about the Garos for the first time in 1926. He was convalescing from a rather strong attack of beriberi during his 2nd year of philosophy. As we have mentioned elsewhere, since he had a few free hours to himself he was asked to write an account of some true missionary story for the Salesian Bulletin. Perhaps the story he wrote about never came into print. It was about a Garo old man who was instrumental in bringing an entire village to the Catholic faith, even though the old man himself, it seems, did not become a Catholic.

Both the story and the typewriter he used to type it have remained clear in Bishop Marengo's mind. It was a special typewriter. Special, because he called it an "archaic contraption"! He was sure that none of us have seen such a one. We give below Bishop Marengo's own description of it:

"The letters were engraved on zinc cylinder fixed in the centre which, as one thumped on the keyboard would rise, turn and fall printing the letter".

The beginnings of the Church in Garo Hills were fraught with difficulties. One of those who tried to strangle the infant church of Garo Hills was a certain Mr. Walker, the Deputy Commissioner. Once he ordered a Catholic chapel and school in Chocholja village to be destroyed.

"If the Catholics want to build any church," he said, "they should do it somewhere in Goalpara district".

By then small Catholic presences were found in the villages of Loskorpara, Damas, Kharkutta on the border of Assam and in the village of Netri on the border of Mymensingh district. The Catholic community of Netri, is perhaps the oldest one in Garo Hills. Its Catholics must have come from Ranikong mission or the Biroi Dakoni mission from across the border.

In March 1928 Bro. Marengo was doing his regency in Don Bosco School, Guwahati Mission. In those days Fr. Uguet had come to Guwahati from Jowai. Fr. Piasecki sent Bro. Marengo to accompany Fr. Uguet who was going to Damra to visit the young Catholic communities in that area. Neither of them knew Garo, but Bro. Marengo could manage a little Hindi. So he was of some assistance to Fr. Uguet.

They reached Dalgoma Ghat by steamer. From there they walked to Loskorpara. In Loskorpara and nearby villages they were helped very much by a certain Peter Shem Momin, an agricultural demonstrator who during his training in Upper Shillong had come in contact with a zealous Catholic, Babu Nelson. It was in Upper Shillong that Peter received the gift of the Catholic faith. Both Babu Nelson and Peter were instrumental in bringing the Catholic faith

to Loskorpara. Later on Peter dedicated himself more completely to spreading the faith even at the cost of the government job he had. Through his preaching the faith was planted in Damra area, in Chocholja, Damit Apal, Kharkutta, Dilma, etc.

In later years Bishop Marengo spoke of a copy book which Peter was using and which he saw when he accompanied Fr. Uguet. It contained hymns written by Peter himself and sung to tunes he had learnt from his Upper Shillong days. One of the hymns was entitled *Khasia Git.* It was the text of the Latin hymn "O Sanctissima". For anyone with no knowledge of Latin, Peter's *Khasia Git* could very well go as a 'Khasi' song in any far away Garo village where one would not know what is Khasi and what is Latin!

Fr. Uguet and Bro. Marengo along with Peter Shem Momin visited Damra where Fr. Uguet blessed the marriage of an old couple. Next they came to Chocholja and Kharkutta. The former that had gone through persecution has a flourishing Catholic community now. Bishop Marengo remembered, that in Kharkutta a young man who had been to confession and communion in the morning was "among those who received baptism in the evening of the same day!" Of course, they were days when priests could visit Catholic communities very rarely and even when they could come, the language barrier remained until they could learn the language of the people. "Notwithstanding this very poor beginning", observed Bishop Marengo, "Kharkutta is today one of the biggest and the best communities of the diocese."

On returning to Guwahati both Fr. Uguet and Bro. Marengo "paid dearly for their enjoyable trip at the foot of Garo Hills". Both were laid up for several days with a severe attack of malaria.

The work among the Garos received more attention when Fr. A. Pianazzi was appointed by Mgr. L. Mathias as assistant parish priest in Guwahati in 1931 and put in charge of the Garo communities while at the same time caring for the communities in Goalpara district. At the beginning of the same year, Fr. V. Scuderi visited Garo Hills. He travelled on foot from Damra to Tura and Baghmara.

Fr. A. Pianazzi was the first Catholic priest who took up the study of Garo systematically. His first teacher was Mr. Jobang Marak who was staying in Guwahati and who later on would accompany Fr. Pianazzi when the latter would take up his residence in Tura.

In those early years of very little or no Baptist-Catholic contacts, Garo Hills, where the Baptist brethren had a sizeable community, were considered by them out of bounds for Catholic missionaries. And Mgr. Mathias's firm decision to dare into the "forbidden" territory was occasioned by the threats and penalties imposed on Peter Shem and the intimidations made on the poor and helpless Catholics by some Baptist authorities. Mgr. Mathias also protested against Mr. Walker's discriminatory behaviour, mentioned earlier, and personally visited the Catholics of Damra area before deciding that the "moment had come to start a Mission" right among the Garos.

In 1932 Fr. Pianazzi was given an assistant, Fr. L. Rocca. They rented a house in Dhubri, since Catholics were not allowed to stay "in Tura or anywhere else in Garo Hills". The training of a group of young men as catechists, the publication of the first Garo Catechism (Jisuna Rasong) by Fr. Pianazzi during that year helped to lay a firmer foundation for the Garo mission. A small beginning was also made in Dalu at the same time.

Fr. Rocca had made several visits to Tura. In the beginning of 1933 he succeeded in renting close to the market place in Tura a small rickety wooden house belonging to a Nepali. A good portion of the "pillars [of the house] had already been eaten up by white ants". All the same, Fr. Rocca took possession of it in June of the same year. Fr. Pianazzi joined him a month later. They lived in it from 1933 to 1937 when they managed to buy the hill on which stands the present Bishop's House. It was on that steep hill that they built the first Mission House and Church. By the time the Fathers took possession of the House, Fr. L. Rocca had already been transferred and Fr. Zanon came in his place.[5]

In the meantime Bro. Marengo was ordained a priest at Shillong in the Church of the most Holy Redeemer by Archbishop Ferdinand Perier SJ on Saturday 2nd April 1932. His first appointment was to Guwahati mission. He remembered that - because of poor road conditions and frequent breakdown of buses - it was not unusual to find Fr. Pianazzi leaving for Goalpara early morning from Guwahati and back again in the house famished sometime in the evening! Those were the difficult beginnings of the apostolate among the Garos.

In 1935 Fr. Scuderi, the new provincial, asked Fr. Marengo to accompany him in his first visit to Tura as provincial superior. What happened to both of them can best be heard from Bishop Marengo himself as narrated by him in 1983:

"One of the Brahmaputra streamers took us to Rowmaryghat whence a launch landed us at Mankachar. There

5. Here it may be added that in spite of its unfavourable location on the hill top, the Fathers' residence attracted many people. For, the radio set - the first ever of its kind in Tura - built by Fr.Rocca was a big novelty for everyone. It is said that even the Deputy Commissioner paid a visit.

was one solitary bus doing service between Tura and Mankachar, belonging to Pyara Singh, the father of Mr. Singh, who now owns a garage in Dudhnoi.

"It was an old and much battered bus which, only the mechanical skill of a Punjabi could keep it going, but even so it was often off the road. The day we reached Mankachar was an off-the road day, and so was the day after.

"In the evening of the second day we hired a bullock cart on which, after loading our personal effects, there was room for nothing else. So we started walking by the side of the bullock cart. We walked from 6.00 p.m. to 6.00 a.m. when we reached Tura. Of that night-long trek I remember only two names i.e., Rangapani and Garobadha, but most of all I remember a torturing thirst. But was there no water along the road from Mankachar to Tura? Of course, there was. In fact, how I remember those tantalizing springs jutting forth from the roadside through bamboo pipes! But those were the days when one drop of water could not be swallowed from midnight to Holy Communion time the following morning.

"Never before had I felt this rule so hard. I remember that on reaching Tura, after warm greetings and smothering hugs from Fr. Pianazzi, Fr. Scuderi went to bed trying to snatch some sleep; as for me, I said Mass as soon as I could and then had my fill of water.

"After breakfast we went to look for Mr. John Perry, the Magistrate, a good old friend. His ancestors were among the first British to come to live in Shillong. Mr. Perry asked us how we had come. We told him and were expecting, at least, a mildly flattering comment, but his comment was very blunt and direct: "You did a very foolish thing. All that area is infested by tigers". Mr. Perry was a very keen *shikari* and certainly knew what he was saying ... then we felt like heroes!

"Our return journey was quite comfortable; Pyara Singh's bus was again road worthy and it took us to Mankachar without a hitch".[6]

It was during this visit to Tura in 1935, said Bishop Marengo, that Fr. Pianazzi took him and Fr. Scuderi to the top of a steep hill, the sight which the government authorities had agreed to allot to the Catholic Church keeping in mind the distance that had to be kept from the American Baptist Church building. On that occasion Fr. Scuderi asked Fr. Pianazzi:

"Who will carry water to this height?"

"With a studied confidence he was far from feeling," wrote Bishop Marengo in his memoirs, Fr. Pianazzi answered:

"Yes, that is a little problem we will have to solve, if we don't want to go on living in our present hole!"

For a number of years the missionaries had to sweat profusely to get water to their residence. But Divine Providence had its own way to adjust things magnificently and beyond all human imaginations. Today there is on that hill the water supply complex which supplies water to Tura town. To construct it the government needed a piece of land which the Catholic mission was happy to give in exchange for an abundant supply of water free of water tax! Yes, God provides water not only in the desert, but also on mountain tops. Bishop Marengo commented:

"How true that the mills of God grind,

They grind slow,

But they grind exceedingly fine!"

6. See, Bishop O. Marengo, "Old Memories of a Young Man" in *Golden Jubilee of the Catholic Mission in Garo Hills 1933-1983,* Tura: Bishop's House, 1983, 5-6.

After that adventurous visit to Garo Hills in 1935 Fr. Marengo got his next chance in 1949. At that time he was a touring missionary in Nowgong area with base in Tezpur. He and Fr. H. Colzani of Damra were asked by the provincial to preach a retreat in Sonada. After the retreat Fr. Colzani insisted that he should go with him to Damra and visit the missions there before going back to his Nowgong missions.

Of that visit Bishop Marengo remembered the wooden house built by Fr. Colzani in Damra. Here is how Bishop Marengo described it and the earthquake that shook it!

"Like the temple of the Celestial Jerusalem, it was as high as it was broad and long, but, of course, the similarity ended there. The whole house shook as soon as anyone stepped on the plinth. The story goes that a Father who was spending the night there, alarmed by what he thought was an earthquake tremor shouted to Fr. George Stadler in the next room. 'Oh don't worry', shouted back the imperturbable Fr. Stadler, 'it is the dog scratching itself in the verandah!'"

37 years had passed since that adventurous journey, when in 1972 Bishop Marengo came by car to Tura as Episcopal Vicar of Archbishop Hubert D'Rosario.

**Tura and the other Mission Centres**

In those days on the top of the hill where the Fathers were living, there was a five-room "Assam type" building, in somewhat good condition. One of the 5 rooms was later converted into Bishop's Chapel, and another served as dining room for the community. The community consisted of the Episcopal Vicar, Fr. Stadler - who was both parish priest of the Tura parish and Rector of the Don Bosco school and boarding - Fr. K.A. Thomas, Fr. A. Valluran and two Salesian Brothers in regency.

A little way off from the Fathers' residence on the small area which had been levelled at the top of the mission hill, a rather dilapidated building divided into two by a partition, housed the chapel of the boarders and a small press of which Bro. Eligius Khain (known and loved by all as Bro. "Elik") was in-charge. At the East end of the compound there was the boys' hostel, a new two-storey building which was, however, badly leaking. At the back of the Fathers' residence where the Bishop's House is now, there was a line of ramshackle old sheds. In two of these sheds Fr. George had started a carpentry and tailoring school. The rest was used as godowns.

The parish church was a little way down the steep mission hills. Though only a few years old at that time, it was already showing signs of decay and was evidently out of place as the parish church of Tura. In fact, another parish house and the boys' new hostel had to be built in 1989 some 20 minutes walk down from the mission centre, in Wadanang, a section of the town where the Catholics are more numerous. About five minutes walk from the Parish House and the boys' hostel, then under construction, was the Don Bosco School frequented by some 350 students from all over the town.

The Catholic flock in Tura was then just over one thousand, but some 4,000 Catholics were scattered far and wide in the vast territory of the mission looked after from Tura.

When Bishop Marengo took charge as Episcopal Vicar, the mission centres that were existing were Tura (1933), Damra (1947) which now is in the Archdiocese of Guwahati, Baghmara (1949), Dalu (1959) and Rongjeng (1971) and Resubelpara just being opened.

The centres that were started during his term were Chokpot and Selsella in 1973, Tikrikilla in 1974, Dadengiri

in 1976, reopening of Mendal in 1977 and Williamnagar in 1977, and Garobadha in 1978. He also gave encouragement and help for the work among the Rabhas.

In Damra,[7] the first mission opened for the Garos after the beginnings in Dhubri and Tura, there were Fr. Victor and Fr. Joseph Maliekel, both Salesians. Fr. Victor was the parish priest. In the words of Bishop Marengo, Fr. Victor is "sparing in words, but unsparing in work". The late Fr. Maliekel was headmaster of the High School and was helping in the mission to the extent his work in the school allowed him.

Damra situated in Assam and having an Assamese medium school has had much trouble during the latter part of the 1970s. The headmaster of the school has always been a

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7. Fr. Marengo was present at a discussion that took place several years ago regarding Damra and Kharkutta between Fr. V. Scuderi and Fr. A. Pianazzi. At that time Fr. Scuderi was the Rector of Don Bosco School and mission centre of Guwahati and Fr. Pianazzi was in charge of the whole of Garo Hills mission. That was when Tura was the only mission centre in Garo Hills. The discussion was about the location of a new mission centre for the Garos. Fr. Scuderi was favouring Damra which was already then a fairly developed centre, with a small market, a post office and even a telegraph office. Instead, Fr. Pianazzi was for establishing the new centre in Kharkutta which was a rather big village with promising Christian community. Bishop Marengo remembers that Fr. Pianazzi after listening more or less patiently to Fr. Scuderi's arguments replied very calmly: "All right, if you wish to preach to the telegraph posts, surely Damra is a better place".
The discussion took place years ago. At that time neither Fr. Scuderi could imagine (that with the advent of the Meghalaya state, Damra would fall to Assam) nor could Fr. Pianazzi believe (that even after so many years) the 10 kms of approach road to Kharkutta from the main road would still be a nightmare. Here it may also be remembered that on 8 May 1946 when Fr. Colzani opened a centre, he started it in Kharkutta first. It was only after sometime when he found it really inconvenient, that he moved to Damra.

Salesian Father. The Assamese staff of the School, Bishop Marengo recorded, abetted by some officers in educational department had been trying to get the headmastership, and with it the running of the school. They have caused disaffection with the Fathers, among the Assamese students and to create trouble they had time and again tried to perform the *Saraswati Puja* in the school, inside the mission compound. Fr. Chittattukalam Kuriala as headmaster had to deal with a difficult situation. He was firm, but had to put up with a lot of opposition and ill feeling. The higher educational officers have on the whole been fair and understanding, but they seemed to fight shy of the students and did not take a decisive and firm stand. They always gave plenty of promises to stave off for a time the opposition, but they never gave anything in writing.

In 1980 the situation was threatening to take a serious turn. But order was restored with the intervention of the government, and particularly, through the stand which the MLA, Mr. Purno Agitok Sangma, (a national political leader and a Catholic from Garo Hills, Meghalaya, who acknowledges with gratitude the services the Church has done in his life) took in the matter.

Damra parish was vast and its jurisdiction extended to many communities in the plains of Assam both of the Goalpara and Kamrup district, and over a pretty vast territory in Garo Hills.

In 1960 the Sisters of Christ Jesus built a convent with hostel for Garo girls, and opened a dispensary where daily many poor people received medical assistance. After doing excellent service for many years, the Sisters of Christ Jesus passed on the centre to the diocese in order to go and start elsewhere. The diocese handed over the Damra Convent to the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians in 1975.

The third mission centre established in Garo Hills is Baghmara, right on the border of the present Bangladesh. It was opened by Fr. G. Stadler, though pioneers like Fr. Francis Cawenberg (who had already toured the area in 1949), Fr. Dominic Curto, and Fr. B. Busolin had contributed their share for the development of that mission.

At that time the Garos living on the border were greatly harassed by the Muslims of the Mymensingh district on the other side of the border.

Bishop Marengo narrated how once Fr. Stadler happened to shout at some Muslim border police. He shouted because they were harvesting for themselves the fields of some Christian Garos. The police, therefore, were looking out for an opportunity to avenge themselves against Fr. Stadler. It was when Fr. Stadler during one of his tours happened to cross for a moment the not-too-well-defined Bangladesh (at that time East Pakistan) border.

They grabbed him and marched him to the District Headquarters and kept him there for some fifteen days. He remained there until the Holy Cross American Fathers in Mymensingh heard about him and brought him to the mission, standing *parole* for him. When the German Ambassador protested, the East Pakistan Government set him free with apologies.

For some time the Fathers of the Missionary Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament (MCBS) helped in the Baghmara and other mission centres in Garo Hills.[8] The Missionary

8. At the invitation of Bishop Stephen Ferrando and with the help of the contact person, Fr. E. V. George, the first group of MCBS Fathers reached Guwahati on 29th May 1969. They were received by Fr. Patrick Burns who accompanied them to Shillong. After a few months of language study, they were posted in Damra. Soon Fr. Joseph

Sisters of Mary Help of Christians had their first convent in Garo Hills in Baghmara. It was housed in the first floor of the Don Bosco School. When the Indo-Pakistan conflict broke out, the Sisters were asked to move out to Rongjeng. Not long after a bomb fell on the Lower Primary school in Bagmara and destroyed a good part of it.

Rebuilding this school in 1973 was Bishop Marengo's first work in Garo Hills. He tried to get indemnity from the Indian Army, but nothing came of it.

The Dalu Mission Centre, 50 kms from Tura, was started in 1959 and was later built up by Fr. Costa in 1964. Fr. George Mamalassery and Fr. Mathew Elangipuram were working there at the time of Bishop Marengo's coming to Tura. The St. Joseph's convent and girls' hostel constructed under 'the skilful supervision of Fr. G. Mamalassery', in the words of Bishop Marengo, 'is perhaps the best convent cum hostel'. It was built during Bishop Marengo's second year in Tura. There is a community of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians too.

Barely three years before Bishop Marengo's arrival in Garo Hills, Fr. Busolin had been sent to open the Rongjeng

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Madathikandom and Fr. Sebastian Ettolil were appointed as assistant parish priests in Dalu and Baghmara respectively. Since they found the Garo Hills a fertile mission field, other MCBS missionaries too joined them in course of time. They were Fr. Philip J. Karott, Fr. Mathew Kizhakemury and Fr. Joseph Puthiedath. These Fathers served with great zeal in other mission centres at different times like Chokpot, Resubelpara, Tikrikilla and Selsella and in areas which are now part of Purakasia, Rongara, Nongwalbibra, Ampati and Balat (which is now in the Archdiocese of Shillong) . Fr. Joseph Poopillil and Fr. Thomas Thulumpanmackal served in Karbi Anglong (in Dokmoka, Doboka, Chokihola and Diphu). After fifteen years of dedicated service in North East India, the MCBS Fathers withdrew from the region in May 1984 to render their services elsewhere.

Mission Centre. Fr. Colzani and Fr. G. Stadler and their catechists used to tour the present Rongjeng area during 1947-1950. Fr. Busolin himself did a lot of pioneering tours during the next four years. He baptized some 40 families at that time. In 1954 when Fr. Busolin went to Baghmara it was Fr. Curto who worked in the Rongjeng area between 1954 and 1968 during which he began the Church building in 1965 and put up a Garo medium L.P. school in 1967. When he had to leave the North East because of the quit order from the government in April 1968, Fr. M. Caligaris came to Rongjeng in the same year and completed the work of the Church which Fr. Curto had started. At the insistent request of the people and seeing the prospects for a mission centre, Archbishop Hubert D'Rosario sent Fr. Busolin to take care of Rongjeng community in 1971. The effort to open a centre at Williamnagar did not materialize, and finally the centre at Rongjeng was formally opened on 8 September 1971 by Fr. Busolin and Fr. Mathew Kizhakemury of the Missionary Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament.

As we have mentioned earlier, the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, who had to leave Baghmara because of the Indo-Pakistan war, were sent by the Archbishop Hubert D' Rosario to Rongjeng where they started the convent and a small hostel for girls in a few small makeshift structures in 1971 which also housed a small weaving school.

Whereas other mission centres have a certain amount of paddy fields for the maintenance of the boarding school and the mission work, Rongjeng is in an area where no paddy fields are available. Fr. Busolin with the generous help of his benefactors was able not only to make both ends meet but also to open several sub-centres.

Several new centres came up from Rongjeng mission. Fr. Mathew Kizhakemury MCBS was transferred to Chokpot in 1975 which was existing already from 1973. Fr. George Parampukattil MSFS replaced him in Rongjeng. In 1977 Fr. H. Frassy opened Williamnagar along with Fr. G. L. Victor, and Fr. G. Stadler opened Mangsang in 1979 whereas Fr. George MSFS started the Nangalbhibra centre in the same year.[9]

The mission centre of Resubelpara, only some 25 kms from Damra, was opened in 1971, an year before Bishop Marengo's arrival. In 1971 when the Archbishop Hubert

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9. The two MSFS pioneeers who came to Garo Hills in September 1975 at the invitation of Bishop O. Marengo were Fr. George Parampukattil and Fr. Joseph Kuttiany. They remember the fatherly love with which the Bishop welcomed them. Fr. G. Paramukattil was sent to Rongjeng, Fr. J. Kuttiany, to Baghmara. In the following years many others too came to minister in Garo Hills. Fr. G. Parampukattil and Fr. Sebastian Paredom pioneered in Nongwalbibra mission especially from January 1979 onward. They were blessed by the earlier contacts in the area of Fr. Dominic Curto SDB from the 1940s and the wholehearted cooperation of excellent lay leaders of whom Elising Shira of Bolsalgittan village was one of the more outstanding. Fr. Sebastian Paredom who had come to Dalu in June 1976 had worked also in Rongjeng before he joined Fr. George Parampukattil in Nongwalbibra. Fr. Pius Nelliany who reached Resubelpara in March of the same year served also in Tikrikilla and Nongwalbibra. Among the other MSFS Fathers who worked in Nongwalbibra are Fr. Augustine Vellaramkuzhy, Fr. Joseph Thazhathukunnel, Fr. Sunny Aranjanil, Fr. Sebastian Neendukunnel, Fr. Joseph Thekkel and Fr. Abraham Puthenpurackal. Fr. Augustine Vellaramkuzhy who had joined Dalu mission in August 1978 and who had worked for some time in Nongwalbibra pioneered the work in Chima-Impel along with Fr. Chacko Varapadavil from March 1984. At the time of this writing, Fr. Joseph Thekkel and Fr. Joseph Thettany are parish priest and assistant parish priest in Chima-Imphal respectively. Fr. Joseph Thazhathukunnel who had come to Rongjeng in March 1979 worked also in Dalu. In January 1997 he opened the MSFS Siju mission.

D' Rosario had requested Fr. E.V. George, then assistant parish priest of Damra and who was touring the Resubelpara, Mendipathar and the nearby villages to open a centre either at Rongjeng or at Tikrikilla, he put forward to him his preference for a centre at Resu so that he could as well care for the Rabha community at Cessapani between Damra and Mendipathar. At Resu Fr. E.V. George was helped by Fr. Jacob, a volunteer from the diocese of Changanacherry, Kerala, who stayed with him till 1975 when he was transferred to Dadengiri. Later on Fr. E.V. George had the help of other volunteer priests from Kerala.

Three Medical Mission Sisters, who had arrived in Resubelpara only 2 months before the Bishop's coming to the Garo Hills as Episcopal Vicar, were at first accommodated in Resu. Then they moved out to Mendipathar in 1974 where Fr. E.V. George had obtained a big plot of land measuring about 35 bighas from Mr. Kulen D. Shira in 1972. In 1975 Fr. E.V. George procured the services of a community of the Daughters of St. Thomas from Kerala. They opened a house in Resubelpara in the same year.[10]

Just a few months before Bishop Marengo took over as Episcopal Vicar the new mission centre of Chokpot was opened. There Fr. E.O. Mathew who was not keeping too well was living alone in a bamboo and thatch hut which

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All the above-mentioned mission centres witnessed the hard work of the MSFS. The make-shift quarters of the first years in Nongwalbibra, the kilometres of slush trekked in Chima-Impel are now part of history. The Nongwalbibra mission has the presence of the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod (SCC) from 1986. The Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate (SMMI) are in Chima-Impel from 1990.

10. Daughters of St. Thomas (DST) is a missionary congregation of the Syro Malabar Church. It was founded at Aruvithura (Kerala) on 3 July 1969, by Mar Sebastian Vayalil, the then Bishop of Palai. Besides Resubelpara the DSTs have a community in Songsak (opened in 1991) in Garo Hills.

was both the Father's residence and church for the people of the nearby communities. Before Fr. E.O. Mathew's coming to stay there, Chokpot was looked after by the Fathers of Baghmara and Dalu.

The Chokpot mission land is a rather vast plot of hilly land about 3 kms before reaching the Chokpot market. Fr. Mathew, in spite of his poor health, soon had a plot levelled where during the next two years the present church came up with the help obtained from Rome.

The Chokpot mission had the services of a group of Fathers of the Missionary Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament who with their zeal and missionary spirit had trebled the Catholic population of the area, establishing over 30 new communities.

A visit which Bishop Marengo made to Chokpot remains unforgettable. It was at the beginning of 1973. After spending a very happy day with the Children's Training Camp at Dadengiri, Bishop had to go back to Tura and leave the next day to attend a convention of Chokpot Mission. The Christians wanted to give an official welcome to the Bishop.

Bishop got ready to go to Chokpot. But no amount of coaxing could get the car start from Dadengiri. More than coaxing it needed a mechanic. But to get the services of a mechanic was possible at the most, and if one is lucky, only on a market day when a bus or two would come.

Hence, Fr. Stadler advised that he should leave very early the next morning by the longer road to a small bazar 9 Kms away. From there, he advised Bishop, to get a seat (if Bishop was lucky enough) on the bus plying between Tura and Phulbari, through the hill road. It was also arranged that two boys would leave a little later with Bishop's luggage by a short cut through the forest for Boldamgiri, a small village

on the road side some 14 Kms above the market where Bishop would catch the bus.

Bishop Marengo left when it was still dark and covered the distance in less than two hours. The people there who had seen him passing by car two days earlier were surprised to see him walking alone and wanted to know what had happened to his car.

"It is dead!," he said, "and I am in a hurry to get back to Tura. When is the bus coming?"

"Any time now," they replied.

That "any time" turned out to be more than two hours!

In the market Bishop Marengo met some Christians from Selsella. They had brought huge baskets stuffed with cotton for sale. The next day would be market day and merchants would come with trucks from Phulbari to buy cotton. The two main cash crops of Garo Hills are ginger and cotton. Next come oranges and pineapples, but their transport from far away places is not as easy.

Finally, when the bus arrived, it was packed to spilling. But in those local buses there is always room for one more and those who are inside are always good enough not to mind the inconvenience. And Bishop Marengo had learned from experience to appreciate the "always-room-for-one-more" policy, because after waiting a long time for a bus, on the road side with the fear that a full bus would pass you by it was seldom that the driver did not stop to accommodate the passengers and to give a smiling welcome.

That morning Bishop Marengo was lucky to get the edge of a seat in the upper class! Here it may be remembered that in any bus the first three or four front benches are "upper class" and the rest is "lower class".

The men sitting on the bench were turbaned pagan villagers. They gladly squeezed themselves to give some space for the Bishop. But he had to hold tight to the back of the seat not to be thrown out at every turn of the road!

The two boys who had carried his luggage were waiting for him in Boldamgiri, and on seeing them Bishop Marengo heaved a sigh of relief. They were carrying his luggage as well as his hand bag without which he could not even have paid for his fare!

Bishop Marengo had told the driver that he would get down at the Tura water works road, which was a shortcut to Chokpot mission. But there was no need to have bothered because 2 kms before that place, the bus stopped of its own accord and would not proceed! Whether it was for lack of diesel or some engine trouble, Bishop had no time to enquire. He did the rest of the journey on foot. He managed to reach Chokpot on time according to the programme.

*Williamnagar*: Fr. H. Frassy, who came from the Salesian province of Bombay at the request of Bishop Marengo to help in Garo Hills, was sent at first to Rongjeng and later to Williamnagar to start the mission centre there. Here it may be noted that Fr. Frassy who had been working in the North East was one of those who received the Quit-Order (order served by the Government on non-Indian nationals to leave the country) and had left the North East in 1969. He was serving as Economer and Bursar in the Salesian school at Borivli at the time of Bishop Marengo's request to him to come and serve in Garo Hills.

In less than 3 years Fr. Frassy built up the Williamnagar mission centre. But the going was hard. Since the land which the district council authorities gave for the mission was too small, Fr. Busolin procured a better piece of land at Samandagiri

quite central to the territory of the new mission. When the work of levelling was going on, some people brought up objections to proceeding with it. Bishop Marengo himself went to meet the chief executive member of the district council to sort out the matter. The officer was in favour of the mission, because the *Nokma* or village headman as well as almost all the people were for setting up a Catholic mission centre there.

In those days an old Catholic woman in Williamnagar was willing to offer to the Catholic mission about 6 acres of land in a very convenient location. Negotiations for it too had its own story. It is a very narrow strip of land hemmed in by a stream that flows parallel to the road. The mission would have lost a good bit of this land to the soil conservation department when they came to survey it for a road to be built along the mission land, had not some helpful authorities intervened on behalf of the mission.

The contribution of Fr. H. Frassy to the development of Williamnagar mission is particularly remembered by Bishop Marengo.

After telling Fr. George Stadler and his assistant, Fr. A Valluran, the idea of Archbishop Hubert D' Rosario that there was no urgency in opening a mission centre in Garobadha Bishop Marengo decided to open one at *Selsella*. In the Selsella block Mandagiri was chosen and a mission centre was established there in 1973.

*Mandagiri* was central enough for the Selsella block and it was in the interior. Both Christians and non Christians were very happy to have the Father there. They gladly gave the mission a very large plot on the low hill of Mandagiri. Bishop Marengo provided the mission with enough paddy land to make it almost self-supporting. He also helped to build a temporary house for the Fathers and another one to be used as

chapel. Soon enough other huts were built for boys who would board at the mission and attend the school of the Selsella block only a little way off from the mission centre. Later on at one end of the mission compound a hostel for a few girls was built. A lady was put in charge of it.

Here Fr. Valluran's work was by no means an easy one. The majority of his flock was made up of refugees from the East Pakistan who had been resettled in his mission area and whose life was rather grim. Fr. Valluran helped them through various development schemes, particularly the Food for Work Programme.[11]

In 1975 Fr. Valluran organized a Children's Training Camp in Thakimagri. Fr. K.A. Thomas who had gone from Tura to substitute Fr. Valluran in Selsella was informed that Bishop Marengo who was on his way to Thakimagri to be present at the Children's Training Camp was stuck up somewhere between Rajabala and Thakimagri because of jeep breakdown. Since the two boys who had come from the place of the breakdown to Selsella after informing about it had gone away and could not be traced out, Fr. K.A. Thomas could not find out the exact location where Bishop was. Nevertheless, he started off immediately on his motor cycle. He reached Rajabala and from there proceeded to Thakimagri. After knowing from Fr. Valluran the exact place where the Bishop was, Fr. K. A. Thomas reached the spot by midnight. There he found Bishop Marengo sitting in the jeep which was held up there from afternoon onwards.

From there he took Bishop Marengo by motor cycle, came to Rajabala, had some tea in a family and reached

11. A programme organized by the Catholic Relief Services - CRS - of America to carry out developmental work in rural areas. People render manual labour and receive food in exchange.

Thakimagri by 2.00 a.m. of the following day. But just before reaching Thakimagri both Bishop and Fr. K.A. Thomas had a fall from the motor cycle. Fortunately none of them was seriously injured. On getting up, Bishop Marengo was all anxious about Fr. K.A. Thomas and had only praises for his endurance in driving the whole day and night almost non-stop!

To return to our narrative about Fr. Valluran and the Selsella mission Centre: with the generous help from the Salesian Headquarters in Rome Fr. Valluran built a convent at Rajabala. The Medical Mission Sisters are having a large and much frequented dispensary there, while they carry on different kinds of social service for the people of the area. The Sisters of Mary Immaculate too has a convent there from 1981.

The *Tikrikilla* Mission centre was opened at the same time as the Mandagiri (Selsella block) Mission centre. The Christian communities of this area scattered over a large territory were earlier looked after from the Resubelpara mission centre. Tikrikilla has a church built by Fr. Curto. He had built it much before a mission centre was established there. The far sighted Fr. Curto had also acquired for the future mission centre, paddy fields very close to the church. These paddy fields went a long way towards the maintenance of the mission and the convent.

Fr. E.V. George of the Resubelpara Mission had built a small masonry godown to collect the mission paddy. This godown was converted into a temporary residence while the house for the Fathers and the one for the Sisters were under construction. Both of these building came in record time under the expert supervision of Fr. J. Larrea. Fr. Sebastian Ettolil and Fr. Philip Karot - both of the Missionary Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament - lived for a whole year in the temporary residence which, in the words of

Bishop Marengo, despite all the alterations that had been made, was little better than a hole in the steaming heat of Tikrikilla.

The Sisters were luckier, because in a few months Fr. Larrea built a six class room school building, part of which served as convent and girls' hostel. Later, when the two storey building was ready the Sisters and the boarders shifted to that.

A motorable road was built through the three furlong stretch of paddy land that separates the Fathers' residence and boys' hostel from the convent. All around the mission centre there are Rabha and Boro villages. To lead them to the Church was one of Bishop Marengo's greatest desires.

The *Dadengiri* mission about 40 kms from Tura was opened in 1976. In 1973 Bishop Marengo was invited by Fr. G. Stadler and Fr. A. Valluran to attend the Children's Training Course organized by them in Dadengiri. Dadengiri being a promising area Bishop Marengo explored the possibility of opening a centre there and asked Fr. Valluran to look for a suitable plot of land. When the land which was found became a bone of contention between the Catholics and the non-Catholic Christians, Fr. Valluran handled the case well and got the land in favour of the Catholic community.

Today the Dadengiri mission centre has a big piece of land stretching on both sides of the public road that passes through it. The convent and the girls' hostel are very conveniently situated at one end of the mission compound. Due to lack of personnel the work among the non-Christians could not be pushed forward during the time of Bishop Marengo. However, Dadengiri mission is a promising mission field. Soon after opening that centre, it was decided during the first yearly convention to put a young man who would be both catechist and village master in 8 pagan villages where the

people were well disposed to accept the faith. But the difficulty in getting a suitable catechist and the lack of means to look after him in the villages prevented the full realization of that plan.

Dadengiri was the only mission centre where there was a community of the Sisters of Mary Immaculate at the time of Bishop Marengo.

After the tragic death of Fr. J. Costa in April 1970, *Mendal* mission centre had to be closed down. It was reopened in August 1977 when Fr. A. Valluran volunteered to go and work there. When Bishop Marengo came to Tura as Episcopal Vicar, Archbishop Hubert D' Rosario had advised him to find a way to open Mendal. So he was happy when the Salesian province came forward to send Fr. Valluran there.

Bishop Marengo soon erected Mendal a new parish with parts from Resublepara and Tura missions. Two Sisters from the Congregation of Christ Jesus came to help Fr. Valluran in the mission centre. The school was rejuvenated, a boarding for boys was started and life began anew in Mendal. As we shall see, Bishop Marengo at the suggestion of Fr. Valluran would choose Mendal to stay, once he retired from Tura.

As we have mentioned in connection with Selsella, in July 1972 when Bishop Marengo was coming to take charge of the Garo Hills Mission, Archbishop Hubert had cautioned him not to be in a hurry to open a mission centre at Garobadha. And hence the first centres opened were Selsella, Tikrikilla and Chokpot.

*Garobadha* is about 30 kms from Tura and can be reached by vehicle in less than an hour; the opening of the Garobadha centre was intended to lighten the burden of the Tura Parish whose territory was really too large.

Sometime in 1973 Bishop Marengo and Fr. K.A. Thomas came to Sankaragiri village where the people after the usual welcome presented the Bishop a memorandum in which they requested him to open an English Medium School in Garobadha. Bishop Marengo gave a positive signal and promised some help to start off. When he returned to Tura, he spoke about the people's desire to Fr. Valluran and asked him to see about the proposed school in Garobadha.

The school was started in March 1973 with 58 children divided into 5 classes from Kindergarten to Class II. In the meantime the decision to open the mission centre at Selsella was made and Fr. Valluran was busy with that. Fr. K.A. Thomas who was sent to Garobadha to take charge of the Savio English Medium School shuttled between Tura and Garobadha from 1973 onward, and from 1976 went to Garobadha on a more permanent basis. In 1978 Garobadha was raised to a parish. Soon Garobadha was blessed with some more development. A boys' hostel under Fr. K. A. Thomas' own supervision and a girls' hostel with two lay teachers to supervise it were started.

For several years the Garobadha mission continued to be an ensemble of small and big *bashas* put up at the cost of several years of work and large food for work programmes. Garobadha would have had a better growth had not a series of difficulties prevented Bishop Marengo from developing that mission centre.

Towards the end of 1975 Bishop Marengo had gone to attend the Children's Camp in Baghmara. On his return to Tura he found a telegram which informed him that his elder brother, Fr. Joseph Marengo, in Italy was seriously ill. He therefore decided to anticipate his journey to Italy. He was scheduled to go there to attend the missiological seminar for

Missionary Bishops organized by the Salesian Congregation. On reaching Turin he received the news that his brother had passed away on the same day in which the telegram reached Tura.

While in Italy Bishop Marengo had to give a thought as to who would replace Fr. G. Stadler in Tura, since Fr. Stadler was sick and had to return to Germany for medical care and rest. It was then that one day he met Bishop S. Ferrando in Rome who suggested the name of Fr. Buccieri. Little did Bishop Marengo think that Fr. Buccieri who had been the predecessor to Fr. G. Stadler in Tura and who had come back to Italy with him, perhaps with no intention of returning, would become Fr. Stadler's successor in Tura.

Following the advice given by Bishop S. Ferrando, Bishop Marengo wrote to Fr. Buccieri who at that time was in Sicily. Though Bishop Marengo was somewhat sceptical about the whole plan, to his surprise he soon received an affirmative reply promising to come and help out in Tura for at least two years. Bishop Marengo was happy. He knew Fr. Buccieri from the time they were together in Sonada. He was also aware of his capacity for work, his knowledge of Garo and his love for the Garos.

Fr. Buccieri proved Bishop Marengo right. He came back to Garo Hills. What began as a two-year term turned out to be a long stay in Garo Hills. Writing about him Bishop Marengo remarked that the three big masonry chapels of Barjek Agal, Dobasipara Rawalkanggiri and Arhai Mile with the attached English Medium School have all come up soon after Fr. Buccieri's return to Garo Hills and taking charge of Tura parish again.

The care of the Garo communities in *Mallangkhona* even though they are territorially in the Archdiocese of Shillong-Guwahati has received much attention from both Bishop

Marengo and Fr. V. Ampanattuvila. So too, the care of the Garo community at Songsak Kasia which too is territorially in the Archdiocese of Shillong-Guwahati. The Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians have a convent there. Songsak Kasia is helped pastorally from the Rongjeng mission Centre.

Bishop Marengo happened to come to Garo Hills soon after the Indo-Pakistan hostilities had ceased, which particularly hit the many Garos living on the other side of the East Pakistan border. Many thousands of these poor Garos, and not fewer Hindu Bengalees, crossed over to the newly created Meghalaya State, especially into Garo Hills area. Between Baghmara and Damra there were a number of refugee camps, especially among the poor Bengalee refugees not as hardy as the Garos and not used to life in the forest. Their condition was frightful. Thanks to the generous help from abroad and thanks especially to the self-sacrifice of the Fathers, Sisters and Lay people most of the 9 million refugees were taken care of, and hence they managed to survive.

It was very painful for Bishop Marengo to see the poverty of the people and the large number of beggars who flocked to Tura in those days with the hope of getting something to live on.

Fr. Stadler who had been working in Garo hills since his ordination in September 1945 had taken the resolution never to turn away empty handed anybody who came to him for help. He kept up that practice all through his life, as many can testify to it.

One thing that struck Bishop Marengo - and it strikes anybody who spends his time in Garo Hills - was the incredibly large number of blind people. They are found not only in Tura where they come from villages, because begging

in Tura is more rewarding, but wherever one tours in Garo Hills. Though some people ascribe this to marriage unions with too close blood relations, Bishop Marengo felt from the experience he has of Garo Hills and its people, that it could not be the only reason, since such close unions are not so common. He strongly believed that malnutrition and neglected conjunctivitis in infancy might be responsible for blindness being so common in Garo Hills.

Bishop Marengo had only praise for Fr. George Stadler's weakness to help the poor who used to come to him from wherever he had been in Garo Hills - Tura, Damra, Baghmara and Rongjeng in particular. He also helped a very large number of youngsters for their studies. A frontline missionary, cheerful and jovial, Fr. Stadler must have baptized some 10,000 people among the Garos.

Fr. George had a counterpart in Sr. Maria de los Angeles and Sr. Isabel of St. Xavier's convent, Tura. They too did their best not to turn away any poor person who came to them for help. The service the Sisters of Christ Jesus did for over 30 years in the government Leper Colony is something which Bishop Marengo could never forget. There are lepers in several places in Garo Hills, especially in Rongjeng area where Fr. Busolin used to help them.

The examples of Fr. Stadler, the Sisters and of Fr. Busolin remained etched in Bishop Marengo's memory. His greatest pain was when he was not able to help someone in need. He did not know how to say 'no' to those who appeared to him in need of some help.

**The Rabhas**

In the Tura Diocese along with the vastly predominant Garo tribe there are strong groups from several other tribes

of the same ethnical family like the Atong, Rabhas, Boros, Koches and Ajongs.

The Atong in Garo Hills, although they live in separate villages, have practically been absorbed by the Garos. They speak Garo, even though they have a dialect of their own. They have the same tribal traditions and customs and social set up as those of the Garos. It is hard to tell an Atong from a Garo. The Koches and the Ajongs, although their villages are interspersed with Garo villages, keep to themselves.

The Rabhas and the Boros live mostly in the Assam part of the diocese of Tura. There are several communities of Catholic Boros in the Darrang, Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam.

The Rabhas are supposed to be a section of the Atongs who from Garo Hills migrated into the plains. They are scattered over a very large area. Most of them are found in the Goalpara and Kamrup districts. There are two old communities of Catholic Rabhas in the Udalguri mission of the Tezpur diocese, though the latest statistics on Tezpur diocese does not mention them. They formed a very small island of Rabhas among the overwhelming Boro majority and they also entered the church with their Boro neighbours.

The Rabhas also have a dialect of their own with a marked similarity between them and the Garos. But today many Rabhas have forgotten their own dialect and the young people are rapidly adopting the Assamese language which is already the medium of instruction in all their schools.

So far very little was done for the evangelization of the non-Garo tribes. The first converts from the Garo communities living far from each other kept the missionaries busy enough so that the latter could not dedicate themselves to

other tribes who, with the exception of the Atong, had no social relations with the Garos.

Pioneering work among the Rabhas started with Fr. George Elavumkunnel in 1969. He began his work among them when he was in Damra which at that time was part of the Archdiocese of Shillong. With the erection of the diocese of Tura and with the encouragement and help received from Bishop Marengo Fr. George has been able to push forward his apostolate among the Rabhas.

He educated a good number of boys and girls in the mission boarding schools, secured land for poor families and organized several social works on their behalf. In the beginning the Rabha Catholics had to meet severe opposition from their non-Catholic Rabha brethren. That Bishop Marengo stood by Fr. Geroge is something for which Fr. George is ever grateful. The major contact with the Rabhas during the time of Bishop Marengo in Tura is mostly the one carried out by Fr. George.

At present the more numerous Christian Rabha community is that of Gojapara a big Rabha village in the Goalpara District very close to the border of Garo Hills.

Once during a convention of the first Rabha Catholic in Sesapani village a group of pagan Rabhas turned up after sending information that they wanted to meet the Bishop. The leader of the group was an open minded, soft spoken young man, a good speaker. He approached Bishop Marengo and said:

> "Sir, some of our tribe have just joined your religion and we heard from them that they were happy so we too have become interested. But first we would like to satisfy ourselves that your religion is good for us".

"If what you really seek is our religion," said Bishop Marengo, "I can assure you that you will be happy in it. But why should you take my word? Here is a crowd of your people, the first Catholics from among your tribe, in this area, you may find out from them all you desire to know. But I can tell you one thing for sure and it is my duty to say it: on becoming Christians you will be opposed and reviled by others of your tribe and almost surely you will be discouraged by the police and others higher up." The Rabha Christians of today only know too well how prophetic his words were.

"Sir, how long do you think they will oppose us and give us trouble?"

"They will desist," the young Rabha continued, "when they see that it does not move us".

Seeing that these courageous words received the approval of the others, Bishop Marengo continued:

"Then go ahead, my friends,", encouraged Bishop,

"I can assure you that you will be happy".[12]

This happened several years ago. Today most of the Gojapara village people have embraced the faith, and there is now no one who is not friendly with them. The police of the nearest Police station were alerted, perhaps dismayed having heard of this big village going over to Christianity in a body. When the officer in-charge went there to satisfy for himself that there had been no foul play or coercion by anybody, he asked Lokhikanto, the young leader, who is quite a well known and popular figure in that particular area.

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12. SHTCD-MM,II,69.

"Say, Lokhi, why do you and your village want to give up your religion for Christianity, a foreign religion?"

"We did not give up our religion," replied Lokhi, "because we had no religion. We felt the need of one and so we have adopted Christianity which has brought peace and harmony to all of us. Besides, does not our Indian Constitution allow everyone to practise the religion he wishes?"

The officer had nothing to add. Since then the Gojapara community has never been harassed. There are many who are looking with interest to this Christian village which is improving fast in every respect.

When Bishop Marengo came to Garo Hills, he was 67 years old and had pioneered in two other dioceses - Dibrugarh and Tezpur. He accepted willingly the desires of his superiors. But he had a feeling that his stay as Bishop would not be more than 5 years. And so it was.

**The Meeting with the Pro-Nuncio at Silchar**

In 1976 when Bishop Robert Kerketta invited Bishop Marengo to the Silver Jubilee celebrations of the diocese of Dibrugarh, he had insisted with him that he should travel to Dibrugarh by plane. Bishop Marengo understood the reason for his insistence only when in Dibrugarh he was presented with an ambassador car.

"When the enormity of the gift dawned on me," wrote Bishop Marengo, "I could not believe my ears, and I could scarcely sleep that night thinking of the magnanimity of Bishop 'Bob', my young Salesian aspirant when I was Rector of Sonada".[13]

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13. Ibid., 60.

An year later, that is in 1977, Bishop Marengo was invited to attend the Silver Jubilee of Doom Dooma mission. He went because it afforded him a golden opportunity to meet some of his first Christians of Dibrugarh. Since there were a few days free between the celebrations in Doom Dooma and his going to Silchar to attend the functions there, Bishop Robert arranged for Bishop Marengo to visit some of the places en route. So they passed through Jorhat, Sarupathar, Dimapur, Diphu, and Lumding before reaching Silchar.

At Silchar Bishop Marengo met Mgr. Luciano Storero, the Pro-Nuncio, who during the course of a conversation intimated him the Holy See's plan for Tura and hence, the possibility of Bishop Marengo tending his resignation. As a result, Bishop Marengo submitted his letter of resignation on 2 January 1978. On 8 February 1979 the Holy See relieved Bishop Marengo of the office of Apostolic Administrator of Tura.

Towards the end of 1978 when the Bishop-elect Fr. George Mamalassery, came to meet Bishop Marengo with the letter of nomination, he told him that he would accept the nomination on condition that Bishop Marengo would continue to help him as diocesan procurator, since the Bishop-elect would not know how to manage without his help.

Bishop Marengo's answer was again a marvelous blend of humility, readiness to serve, spirit of sacrifice and, above all, total trust in God. Fr. George Mamalassery was ordained Bishop on 18 March 1979. After he took over as the Bishop of Tura, Bishop Marengo moved to Mendal. Whether it was Mendal, Garobadha or Rongkhon, Bishop Marengo helped the diocese of Tura till he breathed his last.

# IX. MENDAL (1979-1985), GAROBADHA (1985-1992), RONGKHON (1992-1998)

As in the case of Tezpur, so also it was with Tura. Tura too needed Bishop Marengo's continued help. He was happy to give it. First, from Mendal and then from Garobadha and Rongkhon - notwithstanding his advanced age - Bishop Marengo proved that the growth of the Church was his primary concern. He helped the diocese in every way possible.

**Mendal**

In August 1977 at the conclusion of the welcome given to Fr. A. Valluran who had come to Mendal to start again that centre after the cruel and dreadful death of Fr. J. Costa, Bishop Marengo had said:

"As soon as the function is over all of us will go away. Only Fr. Valluran will be left behind. I request all the Fathers and Religious not to leave him alone. Whenever possible, drop in and make him feel at home.[1]

That these were not mere empty words and that they were coming from the heart of a father, was proved when Bishop Marengo himself volunteered to come and stay in Mendal after his resignation from Tura was accepted by the Holy See.

It was true that some people had suggested to Fr. Valluran that he should invite Bishop Marengo to come and stay in Mendal. Fr. Valluran did invite him. Nevertheless,

1. SHTCD-MF, 69.

Bishop Marengo's readiness to help out as diocesan procurator and as an assistant to the parish priest of Mendal revealed his kind and humble heart. He stayed in Mendal from 1979 to 1985. During this time at the insistent request of the Salesian superiors he wrote down his memoirs literally from his own 'memory' alone without the help of any diary or notes. In 1981 Fr. Antony M. Alessi of Leumann, Turin, published it in Italian under the title *Il Vescovo delle Tribu' Imalaiane*. It was meant primarily for Bishop Marengo's Italian benefactors.

He helped in the parish by visiting villages, administering the sacraments - especially the Sacrament of Reconciliation - besides continuing the work as diocesan procurator.

While he was in Mendal he made a long tour of Assam and Meghalaya accompanying Fr. E. Vigano', the Rector Major of the Salesians of Don Bosco, who was on a visit to the North East in October 1979. In November of the same year he did the same for Mgr. Luciano Storero, the Pro-Nuncio, accompanying him to several mission centres in Garo Hills.

One in heart with missionaries who spent themselves for the spread of the Gospel in North East India, Bishop Marengo felt it his bounden duty to be present whenever someone departed for his/her eternal reward. Thus he was in Shillong on 2 October 1982 for the funeral of Fr. E. Albizuri (+30-9-1982), and on 17 April of the following year when he officiated at the funeral services of Fr. I. Rubio (+15-4-1983).

On 16 August 1984 Bishop Marengo was present for the blessing and laying of the foundation stone of Bosco Mount, Rongkhon. Nearly two years later when the building was completed he came from Garobadha and had the joy of inaugurating it on 17 October 1986 in the presence of Bishop George Mamalassery of Tura. In the providence of God, the

inmates of Bosco Mount, Rongkhon, had the joy of looking after him during the last six years of his life here on earth.

**Garobadha**

When Fr. Paul Panachickal, who was Parish Priest of Mendal from January 1982, was transferred to Garobadha in May 1985 Bishop Marengo too went to Garobadha to help him in the mission work there. His nearly ten-year stay in Garobadha is marked by visits to nearby mission stations, presiding over celebrations of different kinds, and above all, his generous help to the many poor people who used to visit him. He travelled all the way to Shillong to take part in the funeral of Fr. J. Arminana (+28-10-1987) on 29 October 1987.

Age and long years of relentless missionary labour slowly began to tell on his health. Hernia in June 1989, malaria in August 1990, and again in December of the same year, phlebitis in July-August 1991 forced him against his will to be confined to bed. But every time he bounced back to his usual energetic life in spite of his advanced age. After remaining nearly two months in Bishop's House Tura - most of the time confined to his room - he returned to Garobadha on 2 September 1991. On the same day writing to Sr. Annie Enchanatil FMA in Damascus who had nursed him for over five years in Garobadha before leaving for Damascus, Bishop Marengo confided:

> "I came back to Garobadha on 2nd September (1991) after nearly two months at Tura Bishop's House confined to bed by the longest bout of phlebitis I ever had. I am now quite alright, though my legs are very shaky. Both doctor and Bishop wanted me to stay on permanently in Tura where, they insisted, I would be much better physically since medicines and medical care are more easily available. But

> I told them I would be psychologically much better in Garobadha where I can still do a little work.[2]

People used to go to Bishop Marengo for money to buy medicines. It was his custom to write a note to Sr. Annie so that they could get from her whatever medicines they required. He used to visit the dispensary where the poor were cared for. Sr. Annie recalls how the Bishop would take pain to teach her some more Garo so that she could understand the people's ailments better.

Recalling an incident of 1990, Sr. Annie tells us that one day Bishop Marengo himself was sick. He developed some urinary infection. At first he did not reveal it to anyone. And so he suffered the pain silently. When he could not bear any longer, he divulged it to Sr. Annie. On being told that he had to be admitted in the hospital in Tura, he expressed his unwillingness to go saying that he would like to die in Garobadha.

The Sister then left for Tura to consult the doctor. She came back to take Bishop's blood for testing. On examination it was found out that his urea was very high. Finally, he was persuaded to go to the hospital. But before leaving Garobadha, he prepared himself as if he would not return there. He handed over everything to Fr. Paul Panachickal, the parish priest. He was brought to Guwahati and had an operation for urinary trouble.

Sr. Annie who looked after him during his convalescence attests to Bishop Marengo's spirit of prayer, humility and obedience. He had no complaints.

> "I have never found," writes Sr. Annie,
> "a happy man like Bishop Marengo."[3]

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2. Ibid., 59.
3. Ibid.

During all the six years she spent at his side looking after him she never heard him speaking about the faults of anyone. He always spoke well of others. He encouraged them and, whenever possible, helped them in their apostolic works.

> "He knew," says Sr. Annie, "how to appreciate others. That indeed was one of the reasons why he was loved by one and all".

Reminiscing Bishop Marengo's stay in Garobadha the Sisters narrated how one day an old man came to the dispensary from Wakantagiri village in Garobadha parish. It happened in 1985. The man was brought there on a bullock cart. He was admitted in the dispensary. On talking with him it was found out that he was a Catholic, but had not practised his religion for nearly twenty years. On Bishop Marengo being told about it, he made sure to visit him daily and talk to him. Before returning home he expressed his desire to make his confession. But he had forgotten how to make it. So Bishop Marengo himself instructed him, administered the sacrament and gave him Holy Communion. A week later the old man passed away in his village.

Sr. Annie who went for his funeral was told by the people that the old man had a very peaceful and happy death. When Bishop Marengo came to know about it, he was full of joy.

> "Bishop Marengo," says Sr. Annie "lived like Jesus in his concern for the sick and the poor".

One day in 1986 a young lady of twenty years old named Lucia from Mukdangra village in Garobadha was suffering from acute acidity. She was an orphan and was staying all alone in a hut. Every now and then she used to come to Garobadha to meet Bishop and get some help.

One day when she came to him he realized that she was critically ill. He did not send her back to the village. Instead, he asked the Sisters to admit her in the dispensary and to look after her. Everyday he used to visit her and pray for her. He expressed his willingness to do anything provided she could get well. That was Bishop Marengo's love for that poor sick lady. He also prepared her for a good death.

Bishop Marengo's heart was with the poor and the needy. The case of Rosalin from Balnangri, in Garobadha parish, is only one out of many other such examples. Rosalin was very sick. Bishop Marengo, though aged and infirm himself, used to visit her going along with the Sisters and carrying whatever food items he himself could take for her!

During his stay both in Mendal as well as in Garobadha, Bishop Marengo distinguished himself for his obedience to his parish priest. He remained in Garobadha till March 1992. He was brought to Bosco Mount, Rongkhon, on 11th of the same month.

**Rongkhon**

In Rongkhon Bishop Marengo enjoyed the company of his dear Salesian confreres and aspirants and the visit of his many friends and acquaintances. He prayed much. He liked to read or have something read to him. The Rongkhon community solemnised the Diamond Jubilee of his priestly ordination on 7 December 1992.

His inseparable 'guardian angel' was Salesian Brother Eligius.[4] Sr. Rose Kurian MSMHC attended on Bishop

4. Bro. Eligius Khain ("Elik"), a Salesian of Don Bosco, was born on 6 March 1932. Ever cheerful and always ready to help anyone in need, Bishop Marengo was lucky to get him as his personal secretary particularly during his stay in Rongkhon from 1992 till Bishop's death on 30 July 1998. Bro. Elik is known for his attachment to Don

Marengo in the morning and whenever her help was needed. In August 1992 he became very ill and had to be rushed to Guwahati for medical treatment. Dr. Hazarika, his personal doctor, treated him and he recovered fast and was back again in Tura. One of the major celebrations during his stay in Rongkhon was the Platinum Jubilee of his Religious Profession. It was solemnised on his 90th birthday on 29 August 1995.[5]

Fr. Francis Cheeramban, the Salesian vice-provincial of Guwahati, in his homily described Bishop Marengo as that "truly good and faithful servant who accepted the gift of life and lived it fully" in sincere thanksgiving to God for the innumerable gifts he received.[6] Recalling his early life as a missionary, Fr. Francis noted that the Bishop's greatest happiness was "touring the vast plains of Assam" as a young and energetic priest. He also highlighted his spirit of obedience and deep faith in the providence of God as well as his remarkable example of humility when he volunteered to work as "an assistant parish priest" in Mendal and in Garobadha. With the Apostle Paul, Bishop Marengo could very well say that the grace of God has not been in vain in his life.[7]

During the felicitations that followed the Eucharistic celebration, Bishop George Mamalassery compared Bishop Marengo to Moses and to Abraham, and taking a cue from

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Bosco. When on 6 March 1982 he celebrated his 50th birthday in Tura, he had already spent 14 years there. Like a faithful friend, he looked after Bishop Marengo till his last day here on earth.

5. Savio Juniorate, the Salesian aspirantate in Shillong, kept the Platinum Jubilee of Religious Profession of Bishop Marengo on Thursday 17 August 1995. He was present for the occasion.
6. Fr. Francis observed that the Jews had no word for "thanks". Their praise of the Creator was their thanks, a praise understood as a life fully lived for God.
7. SHTCD-MF, 59.

the saying that in Piedmont (the region from which Bishop Marengo hailed), Bishop George said that the people are either soldiers or saints.

"Bishop Marengo," he affirmed,"is both a soldier of Christ and a saint".

Citing Pope Leo XIII who, when asked by someone the secret for a long life, said: "eat less, sleep less and work, work ...", Bishop Mamalassery explained that Bishop Marengo's long life too had the same answer. The thing that pained him most was praise from others, for Bishop Marengo was indeed a genuinely humble person. In fact, God blessed him and raised him up to be the father-shepherd of three dioceses because of his great humility, the Bishop added.

When Bishop Marengo's turn came to speak at the close of the felicitations, he recalled the great landmarks of his life from the time he left home at the age of 13 to study in Valdocco, and expressed his immense gratitude to God for the grace of working as a missionary among the many peoples of North East India. Saying that soon he had to appear before his divine judge he felt somewhat frightened of his shortcomings and failures of 63 years as a priest and 70 years as a Salesian of Don Bosco. He asked for prayers so that God may be merciful to him.

During his stay in Rongkhon Bishop Marengo moved about whenever his health allowed him to visit mission centres or take part in various celebrations. On 9 August 1992 he became ill and was taken unconscious to Guwahati. However, he recovered, thanks to the loving care of Dr. Hazarika. On 7 January 1993 he was again taken to Guwahati for an hernia operation after which he stayed on there till 11 February before returning to Rongkhon. Strong will and a healthy constitution saw him on a long tour of Barpeta, Bengtol, Siliguri and

Sonada in April 1994. He was visiting Sonada for the first time in 40 years!

At the beginning of May he had to be hospitalised again in Guwahati for *herpes*. He returned to Bosco Mount, Rongkhon, only on 30 May. July 1994 brought a shock to the inmates of Bosco Mount. On 20 July Bishop was not keeping good health. On the following day his condition became worse. He became unconscious. Fr. Buccieri administered the Sacrament for the dying while Bishop Marengo was already in the car ready to leave for the hospital in Tura. To the relief of all, his health improved and he was discharged from the hospital after a few days, on 24 July.

He travelled to Shillong to take part in the funeral services of Archbishop Hubert D'Rosario (+30 August 1994) on 1 September 1994. Towards the end of the month, that is, on 29 September he himself had to be hospitalised in the Holy Cross Hospital, Tura, for pneumonia, diabetes and phlebitis. Once again he regained his former health and was out of the hospital after a week. Again he travelled to Shillong accompanied by his ever faithful "guardian angel" Bro. "Elik" and Sr. Rose Kurian MSMHC to be present at the annual Eucharistic procession and for the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of the diocese of Shillong on 11 November 1994. It was also the Silver Jubilee of the Archdiocese of Shillong. On that occasion, more than anyone else, fond memories of the past must have crowded the mind and heart of Bishop Marengo, the patriarch-bishop of the North East. In him was summarised as in a "living monument" the entire Salesian mission history of the North East on that day.

On 9 February 1995 we see Bishop Marengo back again in Guwahati for a medical check-up by Dr. Mohanta and Dr. Borkakoti. His main complaint was weak legs which

did not allow him to stand up for any length of time. It was while he was in Guwahati for yet another medical check-up end of June 1995 that he came to the MSMHC Generalate in Hatigaon on 4 July and insisted, even to the point of appearing to be scrupulous, to sit through a meditation talk,[8] saying that he was not able to make his morning meditation well on that day. He left for Rongkhon on the following day.

End of September 1995 Bishop Marengo had to return to Guwahati from Rongkhon for medical treatment. He stayed in Don Bosco Guwahati for 10 days during which he was visited by Bishop Joseph Mittathany and Bishop George Mamalassery on 30 September.

The repeated relapses in health was no reason for him to stay back from attending the funeral of Fr. Noel J. Kenny (+ 8 November 1995) on 9 November 1995. He stayed on in Shillong and was present at the Missionary Day Celebrations on 10-11 November and took part in the *Proseshon Bah* as well as at the Bishop Ferrando-Birth-Centenary Celebrations at Mawroh on 13 November. Speaking at the conclusion of *the Proseshon Bah* on 12 November Bishop Marengo brought tears to the eyes of his listeners. He said:

> "Yesterday and today you have heard much about Jesus. And now you are tired after the procession. Still, please bear with me, for this may be the last time that I speak to you... [He then recalled an incident from his life where he was able to give Holy Communion to a person in the most unexpected of circumstances. And then he continued]: As a priest I find great joy in giving Jesus to others... Still, I have not done much... I am asked to carry the sins of others, but I have not come up to the expectation of Jesus. How shall I give an account of all

8. In those days a short course on mission-life was being conducted for the MSMHC junior Sisters at their Generalate in Hatigaon, Guwahati.

> this to him when he will call me to himself? [sobs]. Pray to Jesus and thank him. Pray also for me [sobs]. This may be the last time I speak to you ...[9]

Notwithstanding his weak health he loved to travel and visit as many people as he could. On 10 December 1995 he was in Hatigaon to be present at the perpetual profession of 16 MSMHC. Whenever he could, he came to Shillong accompanied by Bro. Elik. His Good Night talk at Sacred Heart Theological College on 20 May 1996 is especially memorable. He narrated in moving terms how God had been merciful to him all through.

Since the late Fr. George Kottuppallil was bed-ridden and was seriously ill, Bishop Marengo together with Bro. Elik came again to Mawlai on 19 July 1996 to visit him and to pray for him.

Bishop Marengo's 91st birthday was solemnised in Bosco Mount, Rongkhon, Tura, by his Salesian Confreres, the aspirants and the diocesan clergy and people.

The tragic death of Bro. Thomas Moore, superior of Montfort School, Tura, saddened him very much. Bishop mourned his death and wept a lot during the funeral service. In July 1997 he came to Hatigaon at the request of Mother E. Pakumala, the Mother General of the MSMHC, to help the Sisters in compiling the necessary background information on Bishop S. Ferrando for the introduction of his cause of beatification.

A few days later, on 11 January 1997, Bishop Marengo had the joy of baptizing Mr. Ram Kumar Gurung, the nephew of Mother Rose Thappa MSMHC at Hatigaon, Guwahati. Many years ago Bishop Marengo was the chief instrument of

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9. SHTCD-MF, 59.

God for Mother Rose herself becoming a Christian as we have mentioned earlier. On 13 January he was present at Hatigaon when Mr. Ram Kumar Gurung Mark wedded Miss Manju Sharma.

The passing away of Fr. H. Frassy of the Rongkhon community on 22 January 1997 was very deeply felt by Bishop Marengo. Fr. Frassy had been his novice in Sonada. All those who attended Fr. Frassy's funeral at Ronghkon will remember how sad Bishop Marengo had been on that occasion.

End of January he had a thorough medical check-up. A few days later, on 5 February 1997, Bishop went to Genjal, some 30 kms away from Tura, for the opening of the school there.

He succeeded to pay a visit to the ailing Fr. George Kottuppallil in Sacred Heart College, Shillong, on 27 June. On 11 November 1997 Bishop Marengo, Bro. Elik and Fr. Milon were on their way to Mendipathar when their car met with an accident some 3 kms before reaching Genjal. His calm composure, his eagerness to know if anyone was injured, and his readiness to help astonished all those who were present.

# X. THE YEAR 1998 : THE RACE TO THE FINISH

Though the first part of 1998 saw Bishop Marengo several times in and out of the hospital, as a whole it was very much uneventful. On 12 January he was admitted in Holy Cross Hospital, Tura. He was well again within a few days. He had to be admitted again on 10 February for acute gastritis. He remained nearly 3 weeks and was back to his normal health. On 9 May he was back again in the hospital. It was not too difficult for the doctors to make him hale and hearty within a couple of days, for he suffered from no chronic ailment. His only major illness was his advanced age and a body worn-out by 75 years of uninterrupted work in the missions of North East India, and which was fast becoming weaker and weaker. 20 May 1998 was the last time he was admitted to the hospital not knowing, perhaps, that he would remain there for 70 long days with loss of appetite gaining momentum day by day and living mostly on I.V. drips. Whenever the Sisters came in announcing that he had to be "poked", his serene reply was "please, do!" Among those who were continually at his bedside, besides the Sisters, were Bro. "Elik" SDB, his constant assistant for the last six years and more, and Sr. Rose Kurian MSMHC, the nurse, Bro. Sylvester Synrem SDB, other Salesian confreres and Sonindro Basumatary. Bishop George Mamalassery, Fr. Jose Kulathasseril, the Fathers and Sisters of Tura and of other places used to visit Bishop Marengo very often.

Hearing that Bishop's condition was worse, Fr. Francis Cheeramban SDB, the vice-provincial of the Salesians,

Guwahati, visited him in Tura on 29 May along with Fr. B. Busolin. He found him somewhat quiet, but cheerful. On the following day he visited him again. As soon as Bishop Marengo saw him, he recalled the accident Fr. Francis had on 28 May near Genjal when he was on his way to Tura from Guwahati and about which someone had told him.

Helped by the Sisters or some others, he used to make a round of the wards to visit other ailing patients, to comfort them and to bless them. Just two days before his death, he was taken around on a wheelchair. He himself had several visitors from the town, from nearby communities, from places as far as Manipur. Some of his old catechists and acquaintances came even from Bangladesh border. To all of them he was extremely grateful for their visit, prayers and whatever gifts they brought him.

Several of the Bishops of the North East visited him during his long stay in the hospital. Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil recalls from his visit middle of June 1998, that Bishop Marengo was very interested in hearing about missionary work that was going on in the different parts of North East India. "Even in his retirement and advanced age," remarks Archbishop Thomas, "Bishop Marengo was alert to programmes that were being carried out in various places. He rejoiced greatly at the spread of the Gospel, and received a new lease of life whenever he heard of progress in mission work."

The sense of gratitude which distinguished Bishop Marengo prompted him to enquire often about the doctors and nurses who were looking after him, but were transferred from the hospital.

Recalling the days when Bishop Marengo used to come to the hospital every Thursday for Mass along with Fr. Jose Kulathasseril of Bishop's House, Dr. (Sr.) Immaculate spoke

of Bishop Marengo as prayerful, affectionate and generous. He ate whatever was given him and was very accommodative. He felt quite at home in the community. This same spirit continued all through the 70 days at a stretch, even though every now and then he would become quiet and somewhat depressed.

In the words of Dr. Mahesh G. Rajendra of Holy Cross Hospital, Tura, the 70 days he took care of Bishop Marengo, were a unique experience for him. He was his longest inpatient. He never heard him complain or saw him angry. Senility with its accompanying loss of appetite was the only serious ailment of Bishop Marengo, according to Dr. Mahesh. Whenever Bishop was asked how he felt, his only answer was "I'm perfectly alright".

"Old-aged patients can be very fussy at times," says Dr. Mahesh, "but that was not the case with Bishop. The Rosary was always in his hands. He loved to pray. Even till the day of his departure from this world, he was full of humour. He made everyone feel at home with him." Both Dr. Mahesh and Dr. (Sr.) V. Immaculate attest that Bishop Marengo was an exceptionally good patient. One could cheer him up easily. It was a pleasant task to look after him. The only time he was irritated was when someone forced him to eat or praised him for his achievements.

Sr. Julia, the superior of the Sisters' community, who assisted Bishop Marengo during his long stay in the hospital spoke of him as a "holy man" who would never highlight negative aspects of people, but only their good qualities. This, according to her, was Bishop Marengo's most prominent trait. His mind was clear. His memory good. On Thursday 23 July Bro. Sylvester and one of the aspirants assisted Bishop for the night. He was calm. On Friday 24 and Saturday 25 July Bishop Marengo was happy to listen to all the three cassettes

containing the Gospel of Luke. After that he expressed his desire to listen to more of such cassettes. So he told *Bah Syl* (the affectionate name given to Bro. Sylvester SDB by Bishop Marengo) to bring some other cassettes. Bah Syl, therefore, brought six cassettes of Fr. Tony D'Mello SJ entitled "Wake-up to life". He managed to listen to the first three of them. He then wanted to make his retreat. Hence, Brother brought "Come aside and rest with me," a set of six cassettes containing a retreat by Fr. Thomas Green SJ.

On 25 July Bishop appeared to be very restless. The whole night of 25 July, he was saying "Jesus, are you coming?", "Jesus, have mercy on me". He also said some prayers in Italian. During the same night, Sr. Diana asked him, "Bishop, do you think your time has come?" He replied, "yes". He also repeated the ejaculatory prayers said for him by Sr. Diana.

In the early morning hours of 26 July he spoke to Bro. Syl in Khasi recalling a certain Mr. Doh who was a student in the carpentry in Don Bosco Shillong many years ago. Mr. Doh was somewhat dull and could not pass any exam. Bro. Ferraris who wished to pass him somehow had recourse to just one question only. Taking a hammer (in Khasi *U tyrnem*) he lifted it high and asked Doh what it was. Mr. Doh replied: "U tyrnem!" Bro. E. Ferraris gave him pass mark, and Mr. Doh's joy was boundless. After narrating all this in perfect Khasi, Bishop Marengo had a hearty laugh.

26 July Bishop was very peaceful. He slept on the easy chair as he used to do often. The water-mattress that was ordered from Shillong (because of the bed-sores) was brought in the night of 26 July. When it was got ready, he said that he was "okay", and that he did not want to use it. The Sisters made him rest on it only from the morning of 27 July.

During the day he was restful, and listened again to the Gospel of Luke. He also recalled Tezpur mission and spoke of Salana area where he had toured some 40 years earlier as a young priest.

On the same day, since Bishop expressed his desire again to make a Retreat, by evening when everything was more or less quiet, Bah Syl put on for him, first, the cassette *Rejoice* (a Divine retreat Centre, Muringoor, Kerala, production) on the Holy Spirit followed by the cassettes of Fr. Thomas Green SJ. He listened to two of them. He then asked to start the Rosary. Bah Syl led the Rosary, and Bishop responded to the prayers very distinctly. At the end of the five mysteries of the Rosary, he requested Brother to start the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Latin. But since Bah Syl could not proceed with more than the first few invocations, the Brother sang a few Marian hymns by way of conclusion. When the hymns were over, Sr. Rose Kurian prayed the Litany in English and Bishop responded to it loud and clear.

When the Litany was over, Sister asked Bishop whether she should pray the 3 Hail Marys. The Hail Marys were recited followed by the prayer "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, assist me in my last agony, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I breathe forth my soul in peace with you." Bishop then rested and seemed to fall asleep. It was about 9.30 p.m. of 27 July. Sr. Rose Kurian and Bah Syl were with him. Sr. Kusumam did the night duty. By 11.00 p.m. Bishop Marengo started to be restless. It continued till the morning of 28 July.

Though Fr. Jose Kulathasseril had come as usual to celebrate Mass, it was celebrated only in the evening at about 5.30 p.m. That was the last Holy Mass Bishop Marengo celebrated in the hospital.

In the same evening of 28 July Fr. John Mathew, the Rector of Bosco Mount, Fr. V. T. Jose, Bro. Elik and the Salesians from Don Bosco College and Don Bosco School came to see him. At night Bishop was calm. However, he could not get a wink of sleep. On Wednesday 29 July he continued to be restful. No Mass could be celebrated on that day, since no one could reach from Bishop's House due to *bandh*. He was cheerful on 30 July. In the morning he asked to put on the audio tapes containing the retreat talks by Fr. Thomas Green SJ. Everything was normal till 12 noon of Thursday 30 July.

At. 12.45 p.m. Bishop Marengo vomited and started having difficulty in breathing. Here it may be said that during the 70-day long stay in the hospital, three times he had a little chest pain indicative of mild heart attack.

To anyone who would recall his glorious past as a missionary and the good he had done, Bishop Marengo would admit that he had been "a naughty boy" and that he would have "to stay a long time in purgatory!" He would at the same time speak of the mercy of God and express his trust in him. During his stay in the hospital, Bishop Marengo was given the Anointing of the Sick by Fr. B. Busolin end of June, and again by Fr. Andrew R. Marak, the Vicar General of Tura, a week before his death.

Sr. Julia Kalarickal, the superior of Holy Cross Convent, Tura, Dr. (Sr.) V. Immaculate, Sr. Sheryl Kulangara and Srs. Avita, Felcy, Diana and Pauline along with Dr. Mahesh G. Rajendra and a few of the nurses were at the bedside of Bishop Marengo in his final hours. Though resignation came slowly, he was not afraid of death. He repeated the short prayers recited for him by the Sisters despite increasing difficulties in breathing. When he, finally, commended his "missionary" heart back to his creator,

the last word he uttered was "JESUS", as Sr. Sheryl Kulangara attests. It was 2.10 p.m. Thursday 30 July 1998.

When the sad news of Bishop's passing away was known, it was not possible for many to reach the hospital to pay their respects and pray for the departed soul because of the "bandh"[1] in Tura. Bishop George Mamalassery, the Bishop of Tura, was caught up in Guwahati. He was informed of Bishop's death by 2.15 p.m. Along with Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil of Guwahati and Archbishop Tarcisius Resto of Shillong (who too was unable to leave Guwahati because of another bandh in Shillong), Bishop George finalised the time of the funeral and other details before he was able to leave Guwahati for Tura. In the meantime, the people of Garo Hills, particularly the young, who loved Bishop Marengo dearly, expressed their veneration for him by lifting the bandh to allow the people to come from far and near to take part in the funeral services which was fixed for Saturday 1 August at 2.00 p.m. in the Cathedral Church of Mary Help of Christians, Tura.

On 30 July at 5.00 p.m. Fr. Andrew R. Marak, the Vicar General of Tura, celebrated holy Mass in the Holy Cross Hospital for the repose of the soul of Bishop Marengo. In his homily he described him as one who welcomed everyone, because he was a "holy man". For Bishop Marengo no one was really bad, reminded Fr. Andrew.

A Mass was also celebrated by Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil in the Cathedral of Guwahati for Bishop Marengo at 5.00 p.m. of 30 July. Admitting that it is not easy to describe such an eminent and rich personality as that of Bishop Marengo, Archbishop Thomas in his homily, highlighted his

1. Bandhs are general strikes paralysing vehicular movements and bringing to a standstill all public activities.

many gifts, and varied accomplishments and exhorted everyone to take a pledge to walk in his footsteps.[2]

After the Mass in the Holy Cross Hospital, Tura, the body of Bishop Marengo was taken to Bosco Mount, Rongkhon. A holy Mass was celebrated there at 7.00 p.m. It was presided over by Fr. John Mathew SDB, the Rector, and attended by 10 concelebrants, the aspirants, the Salesian Confreres from Tura, the Sisters from nearby convents, and people from the nearby parishes and institutions, and the entire village of Rongkhon. A prayer vigil started soon after the Mass. The whole night people prayed in groups for Bishop Marengo. At 3.00 p.m. of Friday 31 July the body was taken to Bishop's House, Tura, from Bosco Mount, Rongkhon.

The tearful farewell from Rongkhon where Bishop Marengo spent the last six years of his life in the company of his Salesian confreres and boys of Bosco Mount was indeed

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2. Here are some of the thoughts from his homily: Many-sided in his gifts and rich in his accomplishments, Bishop Marengo was a father, a zealous apostle, a wise pastor, a determined pioneer. Very few in Church history have had the privilege of founding three dioceses: Dibrugarh, Tezpur and Tura - each considering him as its own ... He showed pioneering skills penetrating new areas, visiting villages in the interior. Mgr. Marengo, continued Archbishop Thomas, exuded love and religious fervour wherever he went. His faith was communicative, his prayer-life most edifying. Affectionate to everyone, he drew children to crowd around him. He was a wise guide to religious and lay people alike. He was always attentive to those who were sick and suffering. For all these many qualities, Bishop Marengo was always humble. He sought unglamorous roles and gave importance to low-profile services. Ever laborious, what burdened him most during his later years was the fact that he could not do as much in his later years as he could earlier.
   As the leader of an apostolic team, the Archbishop affirmed, he [Bishop Marengo] was always most encouraging. He truly rejoiced in the success of others. He could never be jealous of someone else.

touching. The Bosco Mount Band led by Bro. Elik (Bishop's inseparable guardian angel) accompanied the body till the main gate where it was received by the members of Bishop's House, Tura. Some 400 people and 14 vehicles formed the entourage to the Bishop's House.

A prayer service was held at the Bishop's House. After that the mortal remains of Bishop Marengo was brought to the church of the Sacred Heart at Chandmari. A Holy Mass was celebrated there too at 5.00 p.m. presided over by Bishop George Mamalassery. The body remained there for the faithful to pay their respects till 11.30 a.m. of Saturday 1 August. Bishop Marengo's mortal remains were taken from the Sacred Heart Church and brought to the Cathedral of Mary Help of Christians at 1.15 p.m. for the solemn funeral services at 2.00 p.m.

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Even in his retirement, it was his joy to receive good news of apostolic successes in different places where he had worked, and to listen to the achievements of others. He would ask eager questions and rejoice at every step that the missionary team was taking in any field of activity. Even when he was weak and enfeebled, he wanted to visit places, meet people, and listen to reports. Skilful in languages ... he could communicate with people in their own tongue. He easily came on the wavelength of people. He shared pains with them, speedily manifested sympathy with the suffering, and adapted himself to every situation. Detached from things, his poverty was most exemplary. He needed few things for himself. He made India his home and the people he served his own...

# XI. THE FINAL FAREWELL

From the time the body reached the Cathedral Church till the funeral rites, people filed past to pay their last homage to their beloved Bishop. When the Mass began at 2.00 p.m. the Church and the surrounding areas were filled to capacity. An estimated 3000 people, 150 priests, 250 Religious Sisters and all the Bishops of the North East except two[1] were present at the last rites of Bishop Marengo.

Bishop George Mamalassery presided at the Mass and Archbishop Joseph Mittathany conducted the final rites. In his introduction to the Mass Bishop George Mamalassery said that Bishop Marengo completed in a marvellous manner the work God entrusted to him. He now returns to God.

In his homily Fr. Dominc Jala SDB, the Salesian provincial of Guwahati, spoke of the fatherly heart of Bishop Marengo who always had a "listening ear". True to his motto "To Seek Souls," Bishop Marengo was a brave soldier of Christ from his early years as a missionary in the North East. With his passing away the history of the missions in North East India is closing an important foundational chapter.

Taking an overview of the various services Bishop Marengo carried out during the past 75 years in the missions of North East India, Fr. Jala underscored the pioneering spirit

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1. The Bishops present were Archbishop Joseph Mittathany of Imphal, Archbishop Tarcisius Resto Phanrang of Shillong, Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil of Guwahati, Bishop George Mamalassery of Tura, Bishop Joseph Aind of Dibrugarh, Bishop John Thomas of Diphu, Bishop Jose Mukala of Kohima, and Bishop Lumen Monteiro of Agartala.

of Bishop Marengo, his love for people, the many languages he learnt and above all the language of "love" he spoke with everyone he met. The Father-Founder of three dioceses - Dibrugarh, Tezpur and Tura - Bishop Marengo "never retired" from service, Fr. Jala observed. His life echoes the motto "Give Me Souls, Take Away the Rest" of Don Bosco.

His rich store of humour helped him to take life in its stride. A man of prayer and a holy person, he kept clear the supernatural perspective of everything that happened to him. His death, therefore, affirmed Fr. Jala, is not so much a loss, but a "gift". His life is best written in our own lives.

Fr. Jala then thanked all those who cared for Bishop Marengo in the last stage of his precious life here on earth.

The condolence messages during the service highlighted the sterling qualities of Bishop Marengo as a missionary priest and Bishop, and above all, as a loving father and a self-sacrificing Shepherd. Archbishop Joseph Mittathany described him as a holy man, a zealous missionary, a friend of the poor and the sick. Bishop Marengo fostered ecclesiastical and religious vocations and was one whom all priests loved, the Archbishop reminded. He also pointed out that anywhere one went in North East India, the people would recall affectionate memories of Bishop Marengo. Everywhere the refrain would be: "Yes, Bishop Marengo has been here!" Archbishop Tarcisius Resto Phanrang recalled his experience of Fr. Marengo when he was his Rector in Sonada in the early 1940s, and remembered how Fr. Marengo made him feel at home by speaking to him in Khasi. He loved the poor so much that they cried when Fr. Marengo left Sonada to return to Assam.

Bishop George Mamalassery felt certain that Bishop Marengo would continue to remain in our hearts. He saw him

as a man of God and essentially as an apostle of Christ and as one totally committed to the mission of the Church. His willingness to continue serving the diocese even after his retirement was a proof of it, he said. With his dynamic dedication he began from scratch and built up three dioceses. When he came to Garo Hills, continued Bishop George, there were only 4 parish centres. When he handed over the diocese to Bishop George there were 11 of them. Faith in God, love for the people, compassion for the poor, kindness, patience and humility were the distinguishing marks of Bishop Marengo, a holy person, according to Bishop George.

Fr. Arthur Marak underlined Bishop Marengo's life of service. He was unassuming. He was not too much pre-occupied with putting on his episcopal insignia.

Sr. Elizabeth Pakumala, Mother General of the MSMHC, speaking on behalf of the Religious Sisters of North East India, recalled Bishop Marengo's zeal for souls, hard work, capacity for learning languages, love for the sick and the needy, his fatherly love and concern for those in need, and above all, the example of a holy life. She also mentioned briefly Bishop Marengo's contribution to the growth of the MSMHC and thanked him for all what he did for them.

Bishop Joseph Aind of Dibrugarh quoting what Fr. Dal Zovo had recorded in 1964 about Bishop Marengo, said his achievements are many, but his virtues are still more! On his part Bishop Aind emphasized in moving terms Bishop Marengo's loving service in Dibrugarh, his availability and generosity, his kindness towards the poor, his spirit of hard work, his mastery of languages, and above all, his humility.[2]

2. Commenting on the enthusiastic welcome the people of Dibrugarh diocese used to give to Bishop Marengo, remarked Bishop Aind, that Marengo himself would say, that it was not because the Bishop had done something great, but because of their [people's] great faith.

Fr. Sebastian Pouvath, representing Tezpur diocese, spoke of Bishop Marengo as one who never made any distinction between the rich and the poor, between one category and another. In his heart there was place for everyone. He emphasized Bishop Marengo's love for the poor and the sick. To meet him was soothing and to be touched by him was healing. His prayer was powerful. He was like Jesus from whom healing power went out. The only time Fr. Sebastian found him crying was when on 31 July 1969 the foreign missionaries had to leave Tezpur because of the Government's "quit order". Such was Bishop Marengo's love for his missionaries, the mission work and his flock. Fr. Sebastian recalled the touching moment when Fr. Paul Taverna, Fr. Fausto Pancolini and Fr. Marino Pedito had to leave Tezpur by jeep. As the jeep crossed the Bishop's House gate, Bishop Marengo turned to Fr. Sebastian and pointing to the big Bishop's House building, said with a heavy heart: "My dear Fr. Sebastian, only we two are left in this huge Bishop's House". And Bishop cried.

Rev. Gilbert Marak, on behalf of the Baptist Church in Garo Hills, highlighted Bishop Marengo as:

an ideal man,
ideal Christian and
ideal priest.

"Bishop Marengo sacrificed himself for the good of the people. He was ecumenical in his outlook. He promoted the cause of a common ecumenical Bible translation. He loved all people," concluded Rev. Gilbert, "let us too follow his ideal life and great example and walk the way to heaven he has shown us".

Alluding to his past relationship with Bishop Marengo, Rev. Gilbert Marak added, that his own Baptist comrades used to accuse him as "a good friend of the Catholics."

The condolence message sent by the Garo Baptist Convention gathered in its Chapel in Tura, signed by Rev. Martin R. Sangma and read by Fr. Andrew R. Marak, the Vicar General of Tura, expressed its great sadness at the demise of Bishop Marengo and focused on the Bishop's love for the poor and the needy. "He clothed the naked," said the message, and fed the hungry". "Let all Garo Hills", exhorted the message, "remember his achievements and follow his example".

Mr. John D. Shira, the president of the Catholic Laity Association, thanked God for the gift of Bishop Marengo. Bishop Marengo, he said, sowed the seed of faith. It is now sprouting and growing forming vibrant Christian communities. On behalf of the Catholics of Garo Hills he promised, that they would help to strengthen the good that Bishop had accomplished. Addressing Bishop directly, Mr. John bade him adieu!

Fr. John Mathew, the Rector of Bosco Mount, Rongkhon, reviewed the last six years Bishop Marengo spent in Bosco Mount and x-rayed him as one who:

had the heart of a father,
a great lover of the missions,
had a heart that was always "young",
longed to be with his flock and
was ever ready to spend long hours in the confessional.

Bishop Marengo, Fr. John Mathew said, never forgot his motto: To Seek Souls. Every time he returned from a visit to the villages, he came back with fresh energy.

A man of prayer, the Bosco Mount community at Rongkhon can vouch, he was on his knees in the Chapel from 5.30 to 7.30 in the morning. During the day he used to make frequent visits to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. He used to

kneel all through Adoration Services. The Rosary never left his hand. He was always interceding before God for the needs of the house and for other missionary intentions.

"A man of great compassion," continued Fr. John Mathew,

> "he shared with the poor what he had. He suffered much when others praised him for what he accomplished. His humility was such that he kissed the hand of those who came to wish him or to thank him. In his love for the young he reminded us of Don Bosco. The youngsters of Bosco Mount in their turn were only glad to keep Bishop Marengo ever happy and cheerful. A man of humour, everyone felt at home in his company and no one would, generally, leave his presence without a hearty laughter or a smile".

The news of the death of Bishop Marengo brought in condolence messages from near and far. They are also reflections on the person of the Bishop Marengo. Here are a few.

Citing the words of the Apostle Paul: "I have fought the good fight to the end; I have run the race to the finish ..." (2 Tim 4:7-8), Fr. Dominic Jala writes, "None of us here can more truly and worthily re-echo St. Paul's words than Bishop Orestes Marengo.[3] He calls the years Bishop Marengo spent in India and especially in the North East as "grace-filled ones". It was "the Spirit that led him throughout the hills and valleys of our region". Comparing Bishop Marengo's missionary work to that of St. Paul, Fr. Jala applies to him the words of Paul: "By the grace of God which was given to me, I laid the foundations like a trained master-builder, and someone else is building on them" (1 Cor 3:10).[4]

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3. Circular 32 (Guwahati: Salesian Provincial, 16 August 1998).
4. Ibid.

Fr. Joaquim D'Souza SDB, the Regional Councillor for Australia and Asia, in his condolence message on behalf of the Rector Major of the Salesians of Don Bosco describes Bishop Marengo as "a great pastor", and records that his tireless work, intrepid missionary spirit and zeal for the spread of the Kingdom of God" will always be remembered.[5] Fr. John Larrea's association with Bishop Marengo goes back to the latter part of the 1950s. He was the pioneer of mission work among the Lothas of Nagaland. He was also with Bishop when he began his work among the Garos. At the time of his death, he was in Madrid. On hearing of Bishop's death, he faxed:

> "There must have been a mighty welcome for him on reaching heaven. My years by his side will for ever remain an unforgettable experience". He added: "The Congregation and the Church in North East India have gained a powerful intercessor [in heaven]".[6]

Fr. Joseph Zubizarreta who enjoyed the rare distinction of being called by Bishop Marengo "the Father of the Boros of the Goalpara District"[7] in a condolence message sent from New Rochelle, New York, speaks of Bishop Marengo as a "gigantic missionary figure". He also recalls the years he spent among his dear Boros and Adivasis during which Bishop Marengo's "guidance and extraordinary pastoral zeal" were a great help for him. For Fr. Zubizarreta Bishop Marengo was "the heroic personification of the Salesian *'Da mihi animas'* and the fulfillment of the words of St. Paul: "For me living means just one thing: Christ! While death will bring me a fabulous gain (Phil 1:21)".[8] Bishop Robert Kerketta of Tezpur who happened to be away in Rossiglione, Italy, in his condolence

5. SHTCD-MF, 59.
6. Ibid.
7. SHTCD-MM, I, 25.
8. Ibid.

message, describes Bishop Marengo as "a great, dedicated and valiant missionary".[9] Fr. Francis Alencherry, the provincial of the Salesians of Calcutta, writes: "In Bishop Marengo we have lost a valiant missionary and a true pioneer. His spirit will live on with us for generations to come, because his missionary zeal brought about such far-reaching results. Salesian India is very fortunate to have had a man like him in its ranks."[10] Fr. Tony D'Souza, the provincial of the Salesians of Mumbai, and the confreres of Mumbai Province in their message present Bishop Marengo as the "beloved Shepherd to the large flock in North East India," and prays that through his intercession many more vocations "with the same zeal and enthusiasm as that of Bishop Marengo" may flourish in the North East.

A certain Mrs. Susanna Mikir, now living in Mawlai, Shillong, on hearing about the death of Bishop Marengo wrote a letter in Khasi to be placed in the coffin of the Bishop. Mrs. Susanna remembers with gratitude all the sacrifices Fr. Marengo underwent in the 1950s to visit the villages in Karbi Anglong. She was a poor woman. For six years she rendered her dedicated service helping Fr. Marengo whenever he visited her area. He too helped her, being poor. Among others she wrote:

> "Dearest Mgr., my tears are simply flowing. I know I won't be able to meet you anymore. I will offer a Holy Mass and pray for the repose of your soul".

Since Mrs. Susanna could not make the long trip to Tura, she gave the letter to Sr. Josephine Gaod FMA who placed the original letter in Khasi in the coffin of Bishop Marengo.

The same Sr. Josephine narrated to the author what happened to Mrs. Theresa G.Momin of Ganjingpara, Mendipathar, Garo Hills. After the funeral of Bishop Marengo,

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.

Sr. Josephine went visiting her friends in Tura. In one of the houses she met a certain Mr. Francis Dachstar. Sr. Josephine was told by him that on the night of 30 July, his wife (Mrs. Theresa G. Momin) had a dream. She saw Bishop Marengo all in white going up into the sky blessing on both sides as he went up and disappeared. The following morning she was so perturbed, that she asked her husband (Mr. Francis Dachstar) to go to Tura to find out what had happened to Bishop Marengo. Here it must be remembered that there was no chance of the news of the death of Bishop Marengo at 2.10 p.m. of 30 July reaching Ganjingpara when Mrs. Theresa G. Momin asked her husband to go to Tura.

On reaching Tura it was a great shock for Mr. Francis to know that Bishop Marengo had passed away on 30 July afternoon.

The author makes no comment on the veracity of the above-mentioned dream. One should take it only for what it is, and not more. It is narrated here, since it bears the name of Bishop Marengo.

The words of Paul to Timothy can very well be applied to Bishop Marengo:

"I have fought the good fight,
I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith". (2 Tim 4:7)
He now enjoys the reward of God's faithful servant.
He was a distinguished son of Don Bosco and
the most beloved missionary Bishop of North East India.

He will be remembered as the Shepherd who spent his life for his sheep trekking the hills and valleys of the North East. He did it faithfully not just for one or two years only, but for full seventy-five years.

His life of love and service is unparalleled in the history of the Church's Mission in North East India.

# XII. AN EXCEPTIONAL RECORD

That Bishop Marengo was quite a phenomenon was recognised by most people already during his lifetime. The eagerness and willingness to speak about Bishop Marengo is indicative of the impact the gentle Bishop had on all those who knew him. Before going on to reflect on the rich mission legacy that he has left behind, it is time to get to know Bishop Marengo as the world knew him. This section is limited to a collection of impressions and opinions and reports about Bishop Marengo the author received from various people through correspondence or from existing works.

Fr. Egidio Vigano', the Rector Major of the Salesians of Don Bosco, writing to Bishop Marengo on 3 January 1992 when the latter was staying in St. Dominic Savio Mission in Garobadha, says:

> "In the panorama of the Congregation which engages our attention every day, the figure of Mgr. Marengo occupies a place of great significance. We are indeed very grateful to you [Bishop Orestes Marengo] for the witness you offer and for which you have given your life, and continue to give every day".[1]

The same Fr. Vigano' writes on another occasion.

"Mgr. Marengo is:

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1. Letter of the Rector Major, Fr. E. Vigano' to Mgr. Marengo, dated Rome, 3 January 1992. SHTCD-MF, 59.

> one of those Salesians who has really translated into reality the dreams of Don Bosco. We are grateful to the Lord that He has made use of 'our' Bishop Marengo as a docile and efficacious instrument for the expansion of the Kingdom of God".[2]

Recalling the words of Antony Card. Padiyara, Fr. O.V. Abraham says that whenever the Cardinal hears about the Salesians,

> he at once thinks of Bishop Marengo.[3]

"It is nearly 50 years that I am a Salesian," reveals the same Fr. Abraham, and says:

> "In all my life I've never heard anyone speak ill of Bishop Marengo. His simplicity of life, large-heart, love for the poor, his marvellous missionary zeal and concern and care for the missionaries have always impressed me".

Fr. J. Thelekkatt, former Salesian Provincial of Guwahati, India, speaking on the occasion of the Platinum Jubilee of Religious Profession of Bishop Marengo on 17 August, 1995 at Savio Juniorate, Shillong, summed up what Bishop Marengo has always been:

> "A 'missionary' to the core".

While others may go after fame, glory and appreciation, Bishop Marengo - as a Brother, Priest or Bishop - knew where his heart should be. Addressing the audience on the same occasion, Fr. Thelekkatt asked:

> "Who can claim to be more Indian than Bishop Marengo?

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2. Id., letter dated 24 July 1989.
3. Unless otherwise stated this and all other references in this section are found in SHTCD-MF, 59.

Who of us can speak as many languages as he?

Who of us has traversed the length and breadth

of the North East as Bishop Marengo?"

He considers Bishop Marengo as:

"a very precious gift of the Lord to the Province of Guwahati and to the North East. His presence anywhere is a forceful reminder of daring and dedicated missionary spirit, the foundation of the province".

Fr. Peter Bianchi, who along with Fr. A. Ravalico was Bishop Marengo's companion of missionary tours in Manipur in the first few years of the diocese of Dibrugarh, considers Bishop Marengo:

"... the greatest missionary Bishop of North East India.

"His apostolic zeal was so boundless that he did not spare himself any trouble. His goal was clear. He wanted the Gospel to reach every heart. His long and strenuous touring on foot, eating what the people could offer, learning their language, sitting for long hours in the confessional, helping the poor, giving his time and attention to everybody especially the poor and the sick, and offering them whatever financial help he could and taking particular care of the education of children of far away villages are characteristics of Bishop Marengo".

"When people offered him any presents," says Fr. P. Bianchi, "it was not because he was a VIP who must be honoured, but because they felt that he was a father to them, a true image of the love of God for them".

Fr. Bianchi joined him on many a missionary journey over the hills and valleys of Manipur. The image he has of Bishop Marengo is one of piety and self-sacrifice:

"Going from one village to another he used to invite him to make the usual half-hour of meditation prescribed for religious. Walking along, he would read out the first point, then the second, and finally the third point for making a good meditation. After long hours of trekking up and down the rugged paths of Manipur's mountainous region, Bishop Marengo would sit down to hear the confessions of his flock for several hours at a stretch. At night his bed was a bed of straw in a shed open to the chill. Drawn by his example of endurance, self- sacrifice and piety, Fr. Bianchi admits, one could not but be influenced for the better".

Archbishop Joseph Mittathany of Imphal, India, considers Bishop Marengo:

> "...the greatest contributor to the growth of the Church in North East India".

"Bishop Marengo is a man of faith and prayer," says Bishop George Mamalassery of Tura, India, "He was able to accomplish so much for the Church due to his great faith in God and trust in Our Blessed Mother Mary sustained by prolonged prayer. This spirit of faith and prayer gave him the necessary strength and grace to carry on working for God and men", continues Bishop George.

Bishop John Thomas of Diphu, India, does not hesitate to affirm that:

> "Bishop Marengo was the only Bishop loved by all the priests and people alike in North East India ..."

His [Bishop John Thomas'] greatest joy was the presence of Bishop Marengo at his episcopal ordination in Diphu on 9 September, 1994.

Fr. M. Casarotti, former provincial of the Salesians of Guwahati, writing to Bishop Marengo on 19 March 1967

invited him to preach the retreat for the Rectors and heads of institutions in the province. Among other things he wrote:

"No one better than your Excellency knows their difficulties and needs. No one is so loved by all than your Excellency. I mean this very sincerely as I have just finished visiting all the houses of the province".[4]

Sr. Elizabeth Pakumala, the Mother General of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians (MSMHC), was impressed by Bishop Marengo's

> "... unmatched simplicity, generosity, deep spiritual life and great missionary zeal".

Bishop Marengo had always inspired her. For her he was:

"... the stalwart of India's North Eastern Missions".

In the same vein, continues Fr. Cherian Moolamattam of Tezpur, India. Bishop Marengo was:

"... the greatest missionary, so far, of the North East. All were attracted by him". Using a graphic example, Fr. Cherian says that there are some people seeing whom even dogs stop barking. They perceive an inner goodness. So it was with Bishop Marengo:

"Even animals like dogs and cats were his friends for he exuded goodness," says Fr. Cherian. "He was genuinely sincere. All could feel it".

Fr. Busolin, a long time missionary in the North East, calls him:

"A saintly person".

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4. Letter of Fr. M. Casarotti to Bishop Marengo dated 19 March 1967. See, SDB Archives, Guwahati (Translation from Italian).

The same is expressed by Fr. S. Karotemprel, member International Theological Commission. For him Bishop Marengo was, indeed,

"A man of God and a genuine missionary".

"Bishop Marengo's availability for evangelization was incredible, and amazingly exceptional," says Fr. Augustine Panamkatt of Tezpur, India.

"Always affable and smiling," continues Fr. Panamkatt,

"Bishop Marengo, was ever ready to listen, to encourage.
He was a father. Anybody could meet him.
He was one from whom we could expect the correct advice,
for he was a man of prayer.
He overlooked the faults of others.
He saw goodness where others could not find".

"To have met Bishop Marengo," declares Fr. Panamkatt, "was like having met a man of God.

He gave anyone who met him, a 'face-lift'.
"His memory will be a benediction for us to be cherished."

According to Fr. M. Palatty, Bishop Marengo was

"... an emissary of God for the North East Indian Missions,
a living history of the thriving Churches of the North East".

Citing the words of Pope John XXIII, Fr. Palatty writes that for Bishop Marengo:

"The Gospel meant simplicity, purity of heart and humility, even welcoming insults and rejoicing in suffering, forgiving offences, showing charity to his enemies... [Bishop Marengo] is ever living in the hearts of the people".

"Bishop Marengo had only one idea," says Fr. L. Jellici, missionary in the Himalayan foothills, "namely, to bring as

many people as possible closer to God. He had the remarkable gift of understanding people according to their culture. While others might get away with some diplomatic 'white lies' when cornered," continues Fr. Jellici, "Fr. Marengo would only be sincere. And God would come to his help".

Fr. L. Jellici also informs us that, "in Assam the tea garden managers longed for Bishop Marengo's visit". They looked forward to his stories, jokes and exhilarating company.

Fr. George Kannathara says much when he says, "Bishop Marengo was a man of 'high integrity'".

For Fr. Joseph Edakudan, Bishop Marengo "was one who overlooked the faults of others. He never spoke evil of others, but rather, excused their mistakes".

Bishop Marengo came across to Fr. Edakudan as "a very humble person, always helpful to people even to the extent of not minding if some took advantage of his generosity and kindness. He never put on airs. He was accessible to all. He would enjoy jokes and was ever ready to come out with many more from his stock of them".

Above all, what impressed Fr. Edakudan in Bishop Marengo, was the way he kept himself cool, serene and calm when, after decades of relentless service for his people, someone told him that he had done nothing for them!

It was 1 January 1972, the vestition day of the novices in Sunnyside, Upper Shillong. Fr. Jose Varickasseril was one of the novices to be vested. He still has vivid memories of the visit of Bishop Marengo on the occasion and recalls part of the Bishop's homily:

"Just as a fence provides protection, the Rules of Religious Life protect the religious from evil. If there is a little hole in the fence, there is every chance of it

becoming bigger and bigger with animals trying to enter it. Finally the hole will be big enough to allow the animals to come in, if one is not careful from the beginning." Fr. Varickasseril understood the lesson, and confesses it to be the most precious piece of advice he remembers from his novitiate year! Fr.Varickasseril speaks of Bishop Marengo as "a holy person, who spoke volumes even with a few words."

"Bishop Marengo was able to see goodness in everyone. For him there were no such people as 'bad people'," says Fr. Mathew Elangipuram.

One day, explains Fr. Elangipuram, he went with Bishop Marengo to Dalu from Tura. On the way the jeep broke down. Soon they were surrounded by a few Nepali children. Bishop Marengo was immediately at home with them speaking in Nepali. His capacity to relate apostolically was amazing.

Concluding a short write-up on what he knew of Bishop Marengo, the late Fr. Patrick J. Sheehy wrote:

"Bishop Marengo was one of the most noble-hearted and truly Jesus-like missionaries of our Congregation".

It is important for us priests, says Fr. George Kallingal, to find someone who can listen and encourage. In Bishop Marengo one could find such a one.

"He loved everyone irrespective of diocese or congregation. When he was a bit down," reveals Fr. George, "he would just go and meet him. Looking at him was enough for him. Bishop Marengo was one who loved the people and did everything to serve them.

Fr. Thomas Mannooramparampil admits that Bishop Marengo is the most appreciated Bishop he has come across so far. His acts of charity are genuine. Both the good and the

not-so-good get a warm welcome from him. For Fr. Thomas too, Bishop Marengo is a man of prayer and vast experience.

"Bishop Marengo," recalls Mrs. Rose Mary Sungoh of Nongrah, "was exceptionally good to us poor people".

"Though a Bishop, he was always a father and a friend to all. His fatherliness and approachability were something special," says Sr. Philip Plathottam MSMHC. She had the privilege of accompanying Bishop Marengo from village to village during missionary tours. She herself was encouraged to learn languages seeing the happiness of the people when they heard Bishop Marengo speak their own language.

Sr. Philip continues:

> "I have seen Bishop Marengo
> walking from one village to another without minding the heat,
> braving hunger and thirst, and offering the inconveniences for
> the salvation of souls. He never counted the cost, when it was a question of doing good to people, especially the poor".

Fr. A. Buccieri remembering how Bishop Marengo would stand in line with the people and come for his confession says that he has never seen anyone as humble as Bishop Marengo.

Fr. A. Pianazzi, missionary in India, especially as pioneer in Garo Hills, for many years and a former member of the General Council of the Salesians of Don Bosco, observes that:

"While many others may be humble in words, Bishop Marengo was humble in deed. It was his conviction that he was not at all worthy to be nominated Bishop, and that he would be an utter failure. This made him request his superiors, both ecclesiastical and religious for several months, to nomi-

nate someone else. As a young priest working in Guwahati and shortly after he was made acting Rector of Don Bosco, Guwahati, in the wake of Fr. V. Scuderi becoming the new provincial, Fr. Marengo received a rather strong reprimand from the former for not arranging something for a procession. The young Marengo humbly admitted:

"I am sorry. It was because I do not have your ability".

Fr. C. L. Thomas who knew Bishop Marengo closely has this to say:

> "There are many people who are modest about their work and achievements. But Bishop Marengo was not only modest, but truly humble. His whole body reacted when someone praised him or spoke of his achievements, and one could feel that he suffered much when such things were said about him".

Even though he could speak with ease quite of number of languages, he always underplayed his ability, and did not want anybody to mention it. Whenever someone mentioned it, he called it a 'myth'".

On the occasion of the diamond jubilee of his priestly ordination Fr. Mathew Narimattam wrote to Bishop Marengo congratulating him. His reply was quick. Among other things, he wrote:

"Dear Fr. Narimattam, I do not deserve the words you wrote. Don't you know that, as I am growing older, I am accountable to God for more sins"?

His humility,

writes Fr. Mathew Narimattam,

made him wade through water without causing ripples;

it made him pass through lush vegetation without

stirring the leaves.

The very water he went through
radiated the face of Christ,
and the leaves eternally face the sun
for getting a fuller life.

Fr. Mathew Narimattam continues:

that up to now he has not found a single missionary in the North East who would reach anywhere near Bishop Marengo for,

"his missionary zeal. When he was in the villages, he would never worry about other things. He was all for his flock. It was a joy for him to listen to the people for hours."

In a letter to Fr. Narimattam dated 1 March 1991, Bishop Marengo wrote:

"I would be very happy if you too could once go and meet those neophytes and speak to them [the Rabhas, Hajongs, Koches and Boros - all of whom speak Assamese]." "In the meantime," he continued, "kindly pray that our bright hopes among these people may materialize..."

Fr. A. Ravalico wrote the following in the Salesian Bulletin on behalf of the diocese of Dibrugarh. It is both a spiritual portrait of Bishop Marengo and an appeal for help:

"So good and so humble is he that he cannot ask and talk much about his many, many needs. That is Bishop Orestes Marengo of Dibrugarh, India. All other Salesian Bishops from India have come to America to beg and collect help for their missions.

Bishop Marengo has neither come to America nor gone to any other place. We call on all readers of Salesian Missions to show saintly Bishop Marengo that we love him and are

interested in his mission by sending in - be it small if it must - an offering. The Bishop's outstanding goodness, zeal and humility deserve our attention and our generosity."

Fr. Henry Frassy, who joined the Golaghat mission in 1952 when Bishop Marengo was just beginning his missionary work as Bishop in Dibrugarh, gives us an inspiring missionary portrait of the Bishop:

"His frequent visits to the mission and brotherly company always encouraged me to work more zealously for the Christians. He accompanied me on my tours for several days as a brother without ever asking for any special attention, happily enduring all the troubles the journeys offered. How he used to explain in fluent Hindi the life of Don Bosco with the help of filmine strips! I was operating the machines, and he was doing the talking. After the Mass, both of us spent the whole day visiting and blessing the houses of the Christians. He had a good word for all especially the old, the sick and the deprived".

For Fr. Antony M. Alessi of Don Bosco Publications, Turin, Italy, Bishop Marengo was:

> "... one of the exceptional missionaries of the highest grade".

Replying to a letter of Bishop Marengo, Fr. Egidio Vigano', the Rector Major of the Salesians of Don Bosco, wrote to him from Rome on 3 January, 1992:

> Thank you for your letter.
> It brings a welcome breeze of missionary fervour
> into the Generalate.

Recalling Fr. Marengo's pioneering missionary tours in Nowgong area with headquarters at Tezpur, Fr. Dal Broi says that:

"Fr. Marengo was almost always out on apostolic tours.
His zeal was boundless.
He did his best to imitate the apostle of the Khasis.
Like Fr. Vendrame, Fr. Marengo was of the idea
that personal contact with the people
is the best way to a fruitful apostolate.

Sr. Annie Enchanatil FMA, a nurse, and who looked after Bishop for some years in Garobadha writes:

> "I personally consider Bishop Marengo a real jewel of a missionary and a valiant Shepherd of the Church. An outstanding Salesian of Don Bosco, he brought vitality, to the Church and contributed to its growth. His purity of life, dedication, simplicity, joy, optimism and Christ-like love will continue to inspire the Church, the Salesian family and all those who know him".

Fr. Sylvanus Sngi Lyngdoh, an ardent missionary and professor of Scripture for over 35 years, was an aspirant in Sonada in 1942 when Fr. Marengo was the Rector. Fr. Sngi attests that Fr. Marengo's conferences had always a missionary touch. He used to bring out quite often the example of Fr. C. Vendrame, the apostle of the Khasi Hills. Commenting on Fr. Marengo's goodness, Fr. Sngi observes that Fr. Marengo's presence in the house made up for all the sufferings the students had to undergo during the War years. Fr. Marengo's dealings with the boys were sincere and genuine. Each one felt that he was personally loved. Fr. Marengo's example of hard work fired the boys' imagination and made them more creative to meet the difficulties they came across.

His enthusiasm and missionary spirit were contagious. His love for the aspirants coupled with his phenomenal memory enabled him to call each one by name. For Fr. Sngi, Bishop Marengo was a man "totally committed to the Good News".

Asked about what he thought of the 4 years he spent with him in Sonada, Fr. Sngi speaks of what impressed him most in Fr. Marengo:

A sense of total dedication to his work. Since several confreres were removed to the concentration camps, Fr. Marengo had a big load of work. But he never complained or shirked his responsibility. He used to rise very early in the morning to put in a good bit of work before the community got up. Most of his correspondence with the benefactors was done early morning or late in the night. Fr. Sngi affirms that Fr. Marengo's example of hard work fired his imagination.

Fr. Marengo's missionary spirit, says Fr. Sngi, was exceptional. He used to tell the aspirants that they were studying not in an ordinary school, but in a school meant to produce good missionaries: the primary work, he told them, was to know Jesus and to love him and to get ready to work for Him. Hence the catechism classes or the other subjects he taught were lessons in missionary life.

Fr. Marengo was always cheerful. Fr. Sngi never saw him moody or sad. Always humorous, his enthusiasm infected the aspirants. Fr. Marengo was ever ready to do anything that was useful for the boys. Fr. Sngi remembers in particular how one day Fr. Marengo himself went into the kitchen and prepared milk and got some bread for Fr. Sngi who was having a toothache. Fr. Sngi confesses that he was both impressed and, at the same time, very "humiliated" by Fr. Marengo's kindness.

From 1945 to 1964 Fr. Sngi did not have much contact with Bishop Marengo. When Fr. Sngi entered into his "writing" career, Bishop Marengo continued to show his concern by financing partly the printing of 3 of his biblical commentaries, thus showing both his generosity and love for the spread of the Good News.

him saying they too had done the same thing. Bishop Marengo replied:

"Even if I have to leave the country, I will not do it. I shall not be dishonest!"

Fr. Pouvath attests that Bishop Marengo would immediately correct any mistake by any of his priests, but he would soon forget about it. He never kept any grudge. He was very kind and understanding when someone happened to commit a mistake. But he would never tolerate dishonesty.

**Cheerfulness and Sense of Humour**

Generally speaking, the above-mentioned qualities go together. And that was true also in the case of Bishop Marengo.

To be in Bishop Marengo's company meant to be happy and cheerful. He had a good store of jokes.

"I have never found," wrote Sr. Annie Enchanatil FMA, "a happy Bishop like Bishop Marengo."

As a young priest in Dhekiajuli, Fr. Mathew Narimattam had just learnt to drive. Bishop Marengo was kind enough and courageous at the same time to be driven by Fr. Narimattam. While negotiating a rather sharp curve, he asked Bishop Marengo how he liked his driving. He replied without ado: "If you reach me back home safe, I shall give you a licence!"

Once Fr. Ugo Turco was supposed to go and fetch Bishop Marengo and Fr. Narimattam who both had completed their tour of some of the villages of Dhekiajuli parish. The village where they expected the jeep to come was about 14 kms from the parish centre. It was getting dark and the jeep had not yet arrived. So Bishop Marengo, Fr. Narimattam and the people who accompanied them started walking towards Dhekiajuli. Fr. Narimattam was surprised and annoyed that Fr. Turco had

forgotten to send the jeep. Bishop Marengo, on the other hand, was unperturbed. He was not worried at all. He started telling stories and cracking jokes as they walked along. Fr. Narimattam forgot his tiredness.

Once, Fr. John Kalapura, former Salesian Provincial, wrote to Bishop Marengo wishing him for his name-feast "Orestes". Thanking him he wrote back: "I do not remember my name-feast day. I have two name sakes - "Emil" and "Orestes". But I do not give them much work, though I try to make up for it on All Souls Day!

One day someone asked Bishop Marengo if he ever had to swim across the Brahmaputra.

"Yes", he replied,

"as a young priest I once swam across the Brahmaputra river during the dry months!"

When someone else asked his opinion on Bishops and Priests smoking, Bishop Marengo shot back:

"It is better to smoke here on earth than to smoke in heaven!"

"At every community gathering," wrote Fr. C. L. Thomas,

"Bishop Marengo used to participate whole-heartedly in the singing and merriment. His item, which was almost always from his limited repertoire of songs used to receive the best applause from the boys who loved to see his enthusiasm and zest even at his very advanced age".

"I have worked with Bishop Marengo for about six years," wrote Sr. Philip, "but I have never heard him saying anything about the faults of others. He always spoke well of others. He encouraged others and helped them in their apostolic works. He was one who always appreciated others".

In this context it may be mentioned that one of the outstanding traits of his character was his trust in people. He believed in the integrity and honesty of people.

"Even when apparently people were not well-intentioned",

Fr. C.L. Thomas wrote,

"Bishop Marengo continued to place trust and confidence in them." On one occasion a person to whom a substantial sum of money was given for the construction of a chapel in his village took an amount for his personal use. On being told of this, Bishop Marengo felt very sad. He just could not bear someone doubting the integrity of another!

**Spirit of Sacrifice and Endurance**

Fr. P. Bianchi who accompanied Bishop Marengo on several mission tours recalls how he would make no complaint even when the road was rough and endless. After a whole day's walk Bishop Marengo was tired, but not worried. Once Fr. Bianchi was very hungry and found it unbearable to proceed. When they halted he told Bishop Marengo about it.

"I know what I should do next time when I come touring with you", he told Bishop Marengo. In fact, before they started off for the next tour, Fr. Bianchi had some packets of rice and curry and coffee in a flask.

"There are several instances," writes Fr. Bianchi,

"in which Bishop Marengo parted with clothes that were needed for him, only to help someone else in greater need".

**Sense of Gratitude**

Bishop Marengo's appreciation for any kindness done to him was remarkable. He would acknowledge with thanks every letter written to him. To be grateful was second nature

to him. In September 1997 I happened to visit his dear ones in Italy. When I returned, I went to meet Bishop Marengo in Rongkhon. I gave him a bottle of wine from his home. I can never forget the way Bishop thanked me again and again for visiting his native village.

He was grateful even for the least service done to him.

In contrast to it, he was extremely sensitive to any sign of ingratitude. Years ago in a meeting he was told point blank by someone:

"What have you done for us?"

It was too much for the Bishop who had given the best and the longest part of his ministry working among them. The whole incident made him sick. For about a week he could not eat well or sleep in peace!

**Always a Kind Thought for Non-Catholic Brethren**

All through his life as priest or Bishop, Bishop Marengo cultivated positive attitudes towards non-Catholic brethren. He avoided entering into arguments with them. He tried to understand them. He also appreciated whatever they did to spread the Good News.

Sometime in 1957 Bishop Marengo and Fr. Ravalico during a long tour came to Liva Changning village, a stronghold of the Baptists among the Mayols in Manipur. Fr. Ravalico was willing to screen a film in the open for the villagers to see. But since the Baptist Pastor Toma had forbidden to show it in the open field, two Catholic friends asked Bishop Marengo and Fr. Ravalico to show the film in their house. As the film was being shown to a small group, some four or five people broke into the house, smashed the projector and ran away. While destroying the projector, they also hurt the hand of Fr. Ravalico.

Immediately some of the Catholics went to Pallel and informed the police about it. When the "sub-inspector" reached the site of the incident, he advised Bishop Marengo for a compromise. Bishop Marengo surprised him by saying that there was no question of a compromise, since he had no intention of filing a case.

However, Bishop Marengo made it clear that they should not have been assaulted, since the film was shown in a private house, and that too at the invitation of the people of the house.

The people of Liva Changning admired the goodness of Bishop Marengo and of Fr. Ravalico. The Baptist pastor who thought that he had scored a victory by engineering the attack, was later on "condemned" by his own people. Not only that, a good number of Baptists of Liva Changning came over to the Catholic Faith.

To show that he had nothing against the Baptists, a daughter of the very same pastor was recommended for admission to St. Mary's College, Shillong.[6] That was the magnanimity of Bishop Marengo towards his Protestant friends.

The high point of this friendly relationship, we may say, was the tribute paid to him by Rev. Gilbert Marak on behalf of the Baptist Church in Garo Hills and by the Garo Baptist Convention at the funeral services of Bishop Marengo. All had a place in his heart.

**Promotion of Local Vocations and Lay Leaders**

Bishop Marengo was a strong adherent of the basic missionary principle "every effort should be made to train local leaders right from the start of the Church".

6. SHTCD-MM, I, 75A.

The youngsters he brought with him or asked his priests to bring along to the boarding schools from among the Tangkhuls, the Kuki-Chins, the Lothas, and from the villages and tea gardens of Assam, and later on from Garo Hills remain ever grateful to him for the education they received with his help. They became catechists, leaders of communities and people occupying places of honest living in different walks of life.

The incident of his being questioned at the railway station in Naharkatiya when he was accompanying two young tribal boys to Dibrugarh and the way he handled that case show Bishop Marengo's concern to train local leaders for the Church and for society. The catechist training school at Golaghat organized by Fr. J. Larrea and the same in Tura had the blessing and support of Bishop Marengo. He was ready to spend as much as possible to train local leaders who are now the pride of the Church in North East India.

Among Church personnel the role of indigenous vocations to priesthood and religious life is of primary importance. Bishop Marengo encouraged local vocations. The list of priests and sisters whom he has inspired and for whose choice of vocation he was instrumental would be too long here. He was the first to start the diocesan minor seminary in the North East to care for vocations to the priesthood.

**Start with What One has: Do not wait for Ideal Conditions**

An Ideal Situation does not exist. To wait for it would not be the ideal. Therefore, start with what you have is the best method in any enterprise. It is also true of missionary life.

If Bishop Marengo had waited for ideal conditions to visit the villages or to begin a new community or to start an institution, he would not have established three dioceses in North East India.

He travelled by whatever means he could. He went on foot, on elephant's back, by trolleys of railway lines, by train, by bus, by jeep. But the means he preferred most was certainly to reach a place, if possible, on foot, because it gave him opportunities to meet people and exchange a good word or two.

When we realize that in building up three dioceses, he always began from scratch, our admiration for him increases. The addresses of his benefactors and whatever money he could, he left to his successors in Dibrugarh, Tezpur and Tura. The dioceses of Dibrugarh, Tezpur, Tura, Shillong, and Imphal benefitted from his hard work. He trusted in God. So he could begin at any point anywhere. And God blessed him all through.

**Love People's Cultures and Respect their Diversity**

If "respect for the diversity of people" is a missionary principle, Bishop Marengo excelled in it. He felt himself at home in all the various tribes and tongues we have mentioned in the course of this narrative. That was possible, because for him each tribe, each people was unique. He corrected people whenever it was necessary, but he respected them. He had a positive approach to persons, things and events:

> always affirming, always highlighting that which built up rather than what pulled down.

Even in pointing out defects and deficiencies, he was careful to be compassionate and considerate.

His knowledge of customs, traditions and languages was amazing. As we had occasion to point out, he would never visit a village for the second time without knowing something more about the people and their language.

At this point it would be useful to remember that "evangelization" is the best guarantee for the preservation of people's cultures. In the Good News of Jesus Christ what-

ever is good in a culture will be for ever promoted and securely nourished. Bishop Marengo lived it out not just in one culture only, but in several cultures at the same time.

As Bishop of Dibrugarh he moved constantly from the Adivasis to the Angamis and to the Lothas; from them he went to the Maos, from the Maos to the Marams, from the Marams to the Tangkhuls, from the Tangkhuls to the many branches of the Kuki-Chin family of tribes. He respected each one's cultural heritage. Gradually whatever was "true and noble, right and pure, lovely and admirable, excellent and praiseworthy" (Phil 4:8) in people's cultures became part and parcel of the Good News.

With the respect which the Catholic Church has for the cultures of people, one can feel assured that his culture will always be at home in the Catholic Church. This promotion of people's cultures is not a 'political' gimmick to create vote banks, but a theological necessity arising from the mystery of the Incarnation. All this can be put in simple words: Bishop Marengo was at his best and felt very much at home when he was among his flock who, drawing on their cultural riches, expressed their love for the Church in a variety of ways.

**Mission in Reverse**

"Mission in Reverse" is another valid missionary principle. It consists in the missionary's ability to learn from his flock. It is not enough to go and teach; it is equally important to realize that the people, however poor and ignorant they may be, have their own wisdom from which a perceptive missionary can always learn. Bishop Marengo kept his ears attentive and his eyes open to learn from his people. Above all, he kept his heart open to listen, and to understand with love.

"Mission in Reverse" calls for humility and rich interior life. The example of his visit to the leper in Mythong (Manipur) whom Bishop Marengo baptized and who taught him 'more' than what he had given him is a shining example in this respect.

**Encourage Anyone doing Good**

"Encourage anyone doing good"[7] is yet another gem of missionary wisdom. Bishop Marengo was the last one to make his authority felt. Instead, he was a father to all, a loving friend to everyone without distinction. One of his 'weaknesses', if we may say so, was his inability to make distinctions - to love some more and others less! Here lies also his greatest strength. All those who came in contact with him experienced his love and concern:

the religious and the diocesans,
the rich and the poor,
the learned and the ignorant,
the weak and the powerful experienced how good and loving Bishop Marengo was.

His only desire was to do good and to help others to do the same. He was no 'diplomat'! He was just genuine and sincere. When he encouraged someone, there was no string attached to it.

**In Matters Religious, People accept only a Man of God**

"In matters religious, people accept only a man of God". A missionary is not accepted only for his/her degrees or titles or qualifications. Every missionary is sent by Jesus Christ. It is him that he/she proclaims. People are the first to find out what exactly is the missionary trying to convey. Is it himself

7. I am grateful to Archbishop T. Menamparampil for the wording of this thought.

or herself, or is it the Good News of Jesus Christ that is being conveyed? People accept the missionary for what he / she is worth.

Right from the first years of his mission tours in Manipur, the people of Tangkhul area felt that Bishop Marengo was a 'praying Bishop'. That said everything. Bishop Marengo lived solely for God, and not for worldly honours. In fact, he ran away from the "honour" of Bishopric. God then surprised him with three bishoprics!

**Filial Devotion to the Mother God**

Bishop Marengo's devotion to our Blessed Mother was filial. Though he was well-advanced in years during his stay in Rongkhon, as long as he could, he used to make one or two trips a day to the grotto of Our Lady close to the house. To reach it he had to go along a steep road a few hundred metres long. Even when his legs were too weak to carry him, he insisted on going to visit Our Lady with the help of someone. It goes without saying that the Rosary was his constant companion.

No missionary can be truly going about proclaiming Jesus Christ and not loving Jesus' Mother. It is not only unnatural, but also contradictory to the Good News.

Fr. Dal Broi recalls a little incident which happened when Fr. Marengo was in Tezpur. One day Fr. Marengo and the parish priest had a visitor, a Catholic gentleman who had gone astray, a hardened sinner. The man was treated with great kindness. During the conversation, the *Angelus bell* rang, and Fr. Marengo stood up and kindly invited those present to recite the prayer so dear to the Catholics.

The two priests were dumfounded when the gentleman refused to join and left the priests without even wishing them. Fr. Marengo then turned to the parish priest and said:

"Poor man! He has no regard for Our Lady. I am afraid of his eternal salvation".

**Sense of Obedience**

Don Bosco used to say that a Salesian or a missionary without obedience is like a sack without a bottom. He would hold nothing.

Right from his early years young Orestes was the darling of his mother especially because of his simplicity and readiness to obey. It is attested also by Nuccio, his nephew.

Commenting on Fr. Paul Albera's decision to send missionaries to Assam at the request of the Pope at a time when the Salesian Congregation could hardly afford it for lack of personnel, Bishop Marengo, as we have noted elsewhere, observed:

"Today looking back over the years I am convinced that the sacrifice the Salesian Congregation made in accepting the responsibility of this mission field [in North East India] in homage to the Holy Father's wish has been the secret behind the wonderful apostolic achievements".[8]

The struggle he underwent in accepting the nomination to be Bishop of Dibrugarh has to be seen in the light of his desire to obey and his feeling of unworthiness.

Bishop Marengo's obedience was unconditional and without any hidden agenda. He trusted fully in the God he obeyed. Like Paul he knew in whom he was placing his trust. He was obedient to his Religious Superiors, to his Bishop – once he resigned and stayed on at the service of the diocese – and to his parish priest.

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8. SHTCD-MM, I, 3.

"His principal advice to seminarians," writes Bishop John Thomas of Diphu, "was that they should be docile to their superiors".

**Habit of Reading**

At this point to focus on the "habit of reading" may sound trivial. And yet, if we compare "reading" (food for mind and heart) to "eating" (food for the body), we may reach the sad realization that the habit of reading wholesome literature among missionaries is lessening. As a result, they become weak both spiritually and mentally.

Here too Bishop Marengo can inspire us.

He knew how to make good use of his time. It was not a rare thing to see him pacing up and down early morning or whenever he had a few minutes to himself with notes in his hands or with some books. He would read or learn a new language or revise his sermons.

"He could spend hours reading holy books," observes Sr. Annie Enchanatil FMA, "he would never say 'I have nothing to do' or 'I am old' or 'I am good for nothing'. He knew how to spend his time in his old age."

In the words of Archbishop J. Mittathany, Bishop Marengo was "a voracious reader" always seen with a book in his hand in jeep, car or bus. According to Fr. G. Plathottam and Fr. U.V. Joseph one of the greatest sorrows of Bishop Marengo was his inability to ready due to poor eyesight in the last few years of his life. In Bosco Mount, Rongkhon, he used to ask the boys to read to him something even late in the night when he found it difficult to fall asleep. Recalling the years spent in Sonada, Fr. Sylvanus Sngi Lyngdoh says that Fr. Marengo was an 'avid reader.'

Reading kept his mind fresh and up-to-date till the end. To listen to him was a pleasure because of his encyclopedic knowledge.

**The Legacy of Time-Tested Missionary Methods**

At this point, a summing up of the ways in which Bishop Marengo and missionaries like him went about proclaiming the Good News and establishing Catholic communities in the North East may be in order.

**Continuous strengthening of the missionary's faith**

Pope John Paul II reveals to us the secret of strengthening one's faith. "Faith is strengthened," he says, "when it is given to others"(RM 2). When we admire the missionary output of Bishop Marengo, we should not forget, that he had a strong faith to go through any difficulties, because he never ceased from sharing it with others. The more he shared his faith, the more it was strengthened. Missionaries whose faith is weak could fortify it by making use of opportunities to share it with others. That is the nature of the gift of faith.

**Enthusiasm is contagious**

Bishop Marengo had the privilege of working with the first Salesian missionaries in North East India. A good number of them were giants of missionary spirit. Filled with missionary zeal and the spirit of "Dare and Hope," they were driven forward by an enthusiasm that made them creative and enabled them to overcome all obstacles. They possessed a certain idealism which provided them with a vision. "Where there is no vision," we read in the book of Proverbs, "people perish" (Prov 29:18).

If mission work languishes and lacks creativity, it is because enthusiasm is at a low-ebb, and the clarity of vision is poor.

**No substitute for hard work**

Having gone through the missionary account of Bishop Marengo we cannot but be convinced of the enormous amount of hard work he put in. He toured the villages non-stop. He burnt midnight oil to raise funds. He avoided unnecessary expenditures. He led a disciplined and sacrificing life. If he had not done his homework all through the 75 years he lived in India, it is impossible to explain how he could have mastered so many languages. Bishop Marengo was no arm-chair missionary. He worked hard. He earned his bread.

**Priority to responsive areas**

It is true that the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of evangelization. That is no reason why the missionary should not combine information with intuition and co-operate better with the Holy Spirit. If the missionary remains open to the inspiration of the Spirit, He will lead him/her to those peoples who are more responsive to the Good News.

Vibrant communities that have come up among the Adivasis, the Tangkhuls, the Lothas, the Angamis, the Kuki-Chin group of tribes, the Boros, Garos, the Rabahas, the Tiwas, the Karbis, the Santals, etc. are the Spirit's gift and the result of an "enlightened" approach of the missionaries.

Bishop Marengo gave the first and the best of attention to peoples who were open and were ready to receive the Good News.

**Moment of decision for Christ : Moment of welcome**

A tribal who comes for baptism is not making a decision from out of the blue. He has seen other members of his tribe living the Christian life; he has discussed it at clan, village

and tribe levels at different occasions before he comes to the priest or the catechist or the Sister expressing his desire for baptism. It would be a mistake - generally speaking - to doubt his intention. It is up to the leader of his community to help him learn more about Christ and his Gospel, and to follow him up to deepen his experience of Christian life.

Moreover, a tribal dislikes to remain in a vacuum, especially in a religious vacuum. If it is not filled with Christ, someone else might fill it.

It is important to understand the tribal mind and welcome him to the Church. This is how Catholic communities have grown in the North East. Christian faith is deepened by living together, praying together and working together.

Bishop Marengo understood the tribal mind. He is a shining example for us.

**Importance of numerical growth**

An integral concept of growth would imply growth in faith, in love, in knowledge, in influence, growth as a body and growth in number. After the example of Bishop Marengo and others like him, missionaries in the North East are more down-to-earth and practical. They believe that quality and quantity should go hand in hand. With number of conversions come also other aspects of growth, provided the new converts are followed up, the missionary works hard, and visits the communities as often as he can. He should also make provision for growth in other aspects: education, health care, development, etc.

This is how Bishop Marengo functioned.

Here it may be noted that just as children grow up in a family and become strong in different aspects of life as years go by, so too in the family of the Church, her children grow

up together. As members of the same tribe live together, they become strong in faith, in knowledge, in love and in influence. Ordinarily speaking, in no family do the parents wait for the first child to become well established in life before having another child.

We may also note that backsliding and abandoning the faith is rather rare among the tribals of the North East. It happens only when they are neglected. Fr. Orestes Paviotti, a long time missionary and experienced professor of missiology in North East India, has this to remark:

"Visit the people in their homes, and they will return that visit in Church".[9] This takes us to a very important aspect of Bishop Marengo's missionary life, namely, village visiting.

**Mission tours or village visiting**

The reader will have noticed that Bishop Marengo's most preferred mission method was:

> to visit people in their villages, in their homes,
> to instruct them, to administer the sacraments,
> and to share their life making himself at home with them.

Bishop Marengo toured continuously. So too did Fr. C. Vendrame, Fr. L. Piasecki, Fr. A. Ravalico, Fr. A. Alessi, Fr. A. Pianazzi and others of the "Salesian Apostolic Period" in North East India. If the Church has grown over the years, it is because the missionaries went to the people and shared their life, broke the Word and nourished them with the Sacraments. I believe, there are no magic solutions for Church growth. If the facilities which modern means of communication provide us do not increase and deepen "warm, personal contact" with

9. From the author's interview with Fr. Sylvanus Sngi Lyngdoh, Shillong, 23 March 1998.

the people, the same facilities will sooner or later become obstacles to proclamation.

**Growth : A moral necessity**

At the beginning of this volume we had said, "that which does not grow is dead". The early Church understood it well. Hence, she did everything possible to bring the Good News to more and more people, and to incorporate them into the community of believers. This is what Bishop Marengo and all the other missionaries with a clear goal have done and are doing. Everything must be channelled for growth of Catholic communities.

In this connection Fr. Jose Varickasseril cites an interview of Meinold Kraus with Karl Rahner which I am happy to report here by way of conclusion.

M. Krauss:

"Professor Rahner, you once said that it can be more important to bring one of tomorrow's persons closer to the Church's Good News than to preserve two of yesterday in the faith. What does that mean concretely?"

K. Rahner:

"That means for the Church a good offensive is the best defense.... If the Church is only anxious about taking care of the small flock that she has today or tomorrow, if she does not have the courage to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ and his Gospel to those who have not yet accepted it, then she will shrivel up in time. She will also lose those whom she has today".[10]

10. Cited from Rahner K., *An Autobiographical Interview with Meinold Krauss* in J. Varickasseril, "Strengthening the Churches in the Acts" (Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Pontifical Urban University, Rome, 1994, 185).

## A Final Word

Bishop Marengo's life, the reader will agree, has been a loud proclamation of the irreplaceable need of missionary evangelization. He did everything possible to take care of the flock and to share the Faith with those who did not have it. He was convinced that sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ was the "best service" (RM 58), he could render to the people he came in contact with. For him it was the "greatest and holiest duty" (RM 63) he could think of.

# READY REFERENCE CHRONICLE

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| 1860 Nov 6 | Birth of Lorenzo Marengo, the father of Orestes Marengo, at Diano d'Alba. |
| 1872 Sep 18 | Birth of Agostina Montaldo, the mother of Bishop Orestes Marengo. |
| 1888 Feb 4 | Agostina Montaldo aged 16 is present at the funeral of Don Bosco as the mortal remains of the Saint was taken from Valdocco to Valsalice. |
| 1906 Aug 29 | Birth of Orestes at 'Le Cecche', a hamlet 6 kms South East of the town of Diano d'Alba in the province of Cuneo in Piedmont, Italy. The child is baptized on the same day. |
| 1910 Apr 6 | The death of Blessed Michael Rua, the first successor of Don Bosco. |
| 1913 Oct 27 | Orestes is confirmed in his parish church of Diano d'Alba by Mgr. Joseph Francis, Bishop of Alba. |
| 1918 | Visit of John Card. Cagliero to Diano d' Alba. |
| 1919 Oct 1 | At the age of 13 young Orestes goes to Valdocco, Turin, to study. |
| 1919 - 1923 | He studies at Valdocco. He comes to know personally Fr. Paul Albera, Bl. Philip Rinaldi and Fr. Peter Ricaldone. |
| 1921 Jul 31 | The Holy See entrusts the Assam Mission to the Salesians of Don Bosco. |
| 1921 Oct 22 | The passing away of Salesian Bishop John Marenco at Valdocco. Young Orestes is present at |

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| | the funeral. After the funeral one of the teachers jokingly tells Orestes that he would one day receive the pectoral cross of Bishop John Marenco. |
| 1921 Oct 23 | Orestes was a third year student of Latin at Valdocco, when the first group of missionaries to Assam was given their send off. |
| 1921 Oct 29 | The death of Fr. Paul Albera, the second successor of Don Bosco. |
| 1922 Jan 13 | The first group of Salesians reach Shillong. |
| 1922 Apr 24 | The election of Fr. Philip Rinaldi, the third successor of Don Bosco. |
| 1922 Oct 30 | Arrival of Fr. L. Piasecki (along with Fr. H. Raygasse, Fr. R. Tormo and Fr. J. Mazzetti) in Shillong, a giant of a missionary, whose influence on young Orestes leaves a permanent missionary mark. |
| 1923 Jul 18 | Orestes writes a letter to the Rector of the Salesian House at Valdocco expressing his desire to go to the missions in Ecuador. |
| 1923 Jul 19 | The Provincial Council meeting at Valsalice admits the aspirant, Marengo Emilio Orestes to the novitiate at Foglizzo. |
| 1923 Oct 21 | Orestes joins the novitiate at Foglizzo and receives the cassock from the hands of Fr. Philip Rinaldi. |
| 1923 Dec 2 | Orestes and his companions, the first group of novices from Italy under the leadership of Fr. S. Ferrando, leave Venice for India. |
| 1923 Dec 18 | The first group of Salesian novices from Italy reaches Bombay. |
| 1923 Dec 22 | The first group of Salesian novices from Italy reaches Shillong. |
| 1924 Jan 20 | The first group of Salesian novices begins novitiate in Our Lady's House, Shillong. Fr. Deponti |

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| | is the Master of Novices for the first ten months. Fr. S. Ferrando succeeds him. |
| 1924 Dec 23 | Arrival of Fr. Constantine Vendrame in Shillong. An extraordinary figure of a missionary whose missionary zeal would leave a lasting influence on Orestes. |
| 1925 Jan 13 | The House Council of Shillong presided over by Mgr. L. Mathias admits Cleric Emilio Orestes Marengo to triennial vows. |
| 1925 Jan 21 | The novitiate year of Orestes and his companions ends. Triennial vows (province of India, Assam) of Emilio Orestes Maria Marengo. Soon after the profession Bro. Marengo and his companions spend a few weeks in Laitkynsew under the leadership of Mgr. L. Mathias. This is their first direct contact with the villagers. |
| 1926 | As a 2nd year philosophy student Bro. Marengo is asked to write a true story about the missions for the Salesian Bulletin. He writes on the Garos, and thus comes to know about them for the first time. |
| 1926 | Replaces Bro. Cinato in Don Bosco Guwahati. Comes in contact with the Adivasis. Makes his first visit to Tezpur. |
| 1926 May 24 | Opening of Our Lady's Orphanage, Guwahati, by Mgr. L. Mathias. It starts with 25 boys. |
| 1926 Sep 24 | A small carpentry section starts at Our Lady's Orphanage, Guwahati, with 14 boys. |
| 1926 Nov 27 | The death of the first boy in Our Lady's Orphanage, Guwahati. |
| 1926 Nov 29 | Three Brothers: Prando, Marengo and Toigo come to Guwahati from Shillong to spend their holidays. |
| 1927 | Bro. Marengo's two years of practical training in Don Bosco Guwahati begins. |

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| 1927 May 6 | Bro. Marengo accompanies Fr. Uguet to some Garo Catholic communities of Goalpara district. |
| 1927 May 15 | Fr. M. Uguet and Bro. Marengo return from a visit to Catholics in Goalpara district. |
| 1927 Sep 20 | Writes application to the Rector of Don Bosco Guwahati for admission to perpetual vows. |
| 1927 Oct 27 | Guwahati House Council considers request of Bro. Marengo for admission to perpetual profession. |
| 1928 Jan 21 | Makes perpetual profession in Shillong. The full name given is Emilio Oreste Maria Marengo. |
| 1928 | Makes acquaintance with Fr. V. Scuderi who along with Fr. S. Ferrando has great influence on the missionary and religious formation of Bro. Marengo. |
| 1928 Mar | Fr. Piasecki sends Bro. Marengo with Fr. M. Uguet to visit the Garo communities at the foot of Garo Hills of Damra area. |
| 1929 Feb | Bro. Marengo begins theological studies in Shillong. He is also teacher and assistant in Don Bosco Shillong during the first year. |
| 1929 Jun 2 | Don Bosco is declared Blessed by Pius XI. |
| 1929 Dec 5 | The death of Bl. Philip Rinaldi, the third successor of Don Bosco. |
| 1930 | As second year theology student Bro. Marengo is also teacher and assistant to philosophy students in Our Lady's House, Shillong.<br>Visits North Lakhimpur from Dibrugarh during holidays. |
| 1931 | As third year student of theology Bro. Marengo is also teacher and assistant in St. Anthony's School with Bro. J. Bacchiarello as Headmaster. He also helps Fr. Vendrame in the parish. The experience he gained with Fr. Vendrame will always be cherished by Marengo. |

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| 1931 Dec 31 | Sub-diaconate at Calcutta from Archbishop F. Perier SJ. |
| 1932 Feb 14 | Marengo and his companions submit their application for diaconate. |
| 1932 Feb 24 | Marengo and his companions are ordained deacons by Archbishop F. Perier SJ in the shrine of Our Lady of Bandel. |
| 1932 Mar 25 | Deacon Marengo makes his application to priesthood to the Rector of the House at Shillong. |
| 1932 Apr 2 | Priestly ordination in the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer, Shillong, from Archbishop F. Perier SJ. First appointment to Don Bosco Guwahati. |
| 1932 Apr 3 | Sunday: First Mass in the village of Sohryngkham, about 10 kms from Shillong. |
| 1932 April | From Guwahati Fr. Marengo is sent to Tezpur by Fr. V. Scuderi. He accompanies Fr. A. Ravalico who is sick to Guwahati. |
| 1933 Jan | Fr. Marengo visits Tezpur with a group of Adivasi boys from Don Bosco boarding Guwahati for the feast of Blessed John Bosco. |
| 1933 Jun 6 | Fr. A. Pianazzi and Fr. A. Rocca occupy a rented house in Tura. |
| 1933 | Mgr. L. Mathias buys the 'Chummery', the (Planters' Club) at Tezpur. It serves as the residence for the missionaries. |
| 1934 Jul 24 | Fr. Marengo is part of the Salesian community of Dibrugarh when Fr. Piasecki is away in Poland. During this period he visits Sadiya twice. In Dibrugarh his companion is Fr. Marmol. When Fr. Marmol goes to Bandel, Fr. Marengo is left alone. |
| 1934 Jul | Fr. Marengo comes back to Guwahati from Dibrugarh. Fr. V. Scuderi becomes the Provincial of the Salesians of North India, and Apostolic |

Administrator of Krishnagar. Fr. Marengo is appointed Rector of Don Bosco Guwahati and in charge of the Mission.

1934 Nov 10 Episcopal Ordination of Bishop L. Mathias and Bishop S. Ferrando in Shillong.

1934 Nov 20 Fr. Marengo writing from Guwahati to the provincial, says that he is 'as fit as a fish'. For the third time he visits the Menoka area.

1934 Dec 12 Death of Mgr. Mederlet, Archbishop of Madras, an event that will affect greatly the Assam Mission.

1935 Feb 9 Don Bosco Guwahati celebrates the feast of St. John Bosco for the first time.

1935 Fr. Marengo accompanies Fr. V. Scuderi to Tura.

1935 Jan 17 Fr. Marengo writes from Guwahati to the provincial saying that he will leave for Goalpara the following day and that the boys are down with chicken pox in Guwahati.

1935 Mar 3 Fr. Marengo writing to the provincial from Guwahati says that the new school year begins the following day and that the confreres will start talking 'English' more seriously. As a sign of it he writes the letter in English. He also explains the great poverty existing in the house. For lack of money he is not able to go to Calcutta to buy provisions.

1935 Mar 18 Bishop L. Mathias is nominated Archbishop of Madras.

1935 Jun 12 Mr. Jerome Panna, the father of future Fr. Cornelius Panna, is baptized by Fr. Marengo in Ranipur village.

1935 Jun 29 Fr. A. Comba and Fr. E. Gutierrez examine Fr. Marengo in the quinquennial examinations.

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| 1935 Aug 16 | Fr. Marengo writing to the provincial expresses his great love and attachment to the Salesian congregation. He prays for the grace to work and die in it. |
| 1935 Oct | Fr. Marengo accompanies Fr. V. Scuderi, the provincial, to Tura. |
| 1935 Dec | Fr. A. Alessi is transferred from Tezpur and comes to Don Bosco Guwahati as Rector. From now on, Fr. Marengo is more free to tour the villages. He is put in charge also of the Boro villages. |
| 1936 Apr 10 | Good Friday: the devastating fire destroys in just 20 minutes the whole of Our Lady's House and the Cathedral in Shillong. Fr. Marengo comes to know about it in Doomni during a mission tour. |
| 1936 May 27 | Foundation stone is laid for Sacred Heart Church, Dibrugarh, the future Cathedral. |
| 1936 Jun 12 | Fr. A. Alessi writing to the provincial informs that Fr. Marengo is not keeping well. |
| 1936 Aug 18 | Fr. M. Uguet testifies that Fr. Marengo is examined for the 5th year in theological matters. He found him suitable. |
| 1936 Nov 24 | 24 novices with Fr. O. Marengo as Master of Novices begin novitiate in Bandel. |
| 1937 Feb 17 | Visit of Fr. Antony Candela, member of the Superior Chapter of the Salesians of Don Bosco, to the Assam Mission. |
| 1937 Feb 25 | Fr. A. Alessi's letter to the provincial lauds the interest Fr. Marengo takes in the missions. |
| 1937 Sep 14 | Fr. A. Alessi's letter to the provincial compliments the interest Fr. Marengo takes in the Boro apostolate. |
| 1937 Dec 8 | First professions of the novices of Fr. O. Marengo at Bandel |

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| | On the same day Fr. O. Marengo is present at the inauguration of Don Bosco Liluah by Archbishop F. Perier SJ in the presence also of Fr. A. Candela of the Superior Chapter of the Salesians of Don Bosco. |
| 1938 Apr 28 | Twenty-eight Salesians (students and staff) under the leadership of Fr. Edward Gutierrez, Rector reach Mawlai from Bandel. |
| 1938 May 14 | Fr. Marengo and the novices arrive at Kurseong on their way to Sonada to begin the novitiate there. |
| 1938 May 27 | Classes start for the first time in Mawlai. |
| 1940 Apr 26 | Fr. Marengo is appointed Rector of Salesian College, Sonada. |
| 1942 Dec 2 | The Italian Confreres except Fr. Marengo are taken to the concentration camp at Deoli. |
| 1943 Oct 3 | Death of Marengo Lorenzo, the father of Bishop O. Marengo, at Albaretto Torre, Italy. |
| 1946 Mar 14 | Fr. Marengo along with Fr. A. Pianazzi and Fr. A. Colussi are in Assam. Later on they go to Yol Camp in North East Punjab to meet the Italian war prisoners. |
| 1946 Jan 30 | Fr. Marengo and the two companions reach Yol camp. |
| 1946 Feb 15 | Fr. Marengo writes to Fr. Provincial from Yol Camp informing that Fr. A. Pianazzi is sick. |
| 1946 | Aspirants Robert Kerketta and Elias Kerketta from Tezpur arrive in Sonada. Fr. Marengo is Rector. |
| 1946 Dec 25 | Farewell academy in Sonada for Fr. Marengo who has been in Sonada two years as Master of Novices and seven years as Master of Novices and Rector. |
| 1946 Dec 26 | Fr. Marengo leaves Sonada to return to Assam. With him are 8 aspirants travelling to Shillong. |

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| | After spending a month in Shillong, he goes to Tezpur which will be his base. From there he visits the villages of Nowgong area. |
| 1947 Aug 6 | Fr. Marengo comes from Nowgong and pays a visit to Golaghat. |
| 1947 Aug 10 | At Lumding he baptizes the second child of Mr. D. L. Gomes from Goa and gives him the name Edmund, the future Fr. Edmund Gomes SDB. |
| 1948 May 26 | Fr. Marengo makes his first visit to Karbi Anglong. |
| 1948 Oct 25 | Fr. Marengo is called from Tezpur to Guwahati by the provincial to be sent to Manipur. |
| 1948 Nov 1 | Along with Fr. Attilio Colussi, Fr. Marengo leaves Guwahati to visit the Maharaja of Manipur at Imphal. |
| 1948 Nov 4 | Audience with the Maharaja of Manipur at Imphal. |
| 1948 Nov 5 | Fr. A. Colussi and Fr. O. Marengo visit Ukhrul. They spend the night at Ukhrul. |
| 1948 Nov 6 | Fr. A. Colussi and Fr. O. Marengo celebrate in Ukhrul the first ever Holy Mass among the Tangkhul Nagas. |
| 1948 Dec 31 | The Sisters of Christ Jesus along with Mgr. E. Bars reach Kohima to serve in the Naga Hospital. |
| 1949 Jan 9 | Fr. Marengo sets out for a missionary tour in the Mikir Hills (Karbi Anglong). |
| 1949 | Fr. Marengo accompanies Fr. Colzani to Damra where the latter has built a residence for the missionaries. |
| 1949 Sep-Oct | Visit of Fr. Albino Fedrigotti, member of the Superior Chapter of the Salesians of Don Bosco, to the Assam Missions. |
| 1949 Oct 27 | Fr. Marengo leaves for a tour of Nowgong. |

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| 1950 Feb 23 | Fr. Marengo returns after a tour of one month among the Karbis. There are two Karbi boys in the Tezpur boarding. |
| 1950 Aug 15 | Fr. Marengo celebrates the feast of Our Lady at Dokmoka among the large Catholic community of Oraons. In the evening of the same day Fr. Marengo and the Dokmoka community feel the dreadful earthquake of 1950 in Assam. |
| 1950 Aug 28 | Fr. Marengo returns from the tour of Nowgong and Karbi Anglong areas. He narrates his experience of the earthquake to the confreres at Tezpur. Mission of N. Lakhimpur is nearly cut off due to floods following the earthquake. |
| 1951 Apr 7 | The first group of 3 Lotha Nagas walk 45 kms to Wokha and later visit Fr. Bollini in Golaghat. |
| 1951 Apr 12 | The first group of 3 Lotha Nagas visit Fr. Bollini in Golaghat again. Most probably Fr. Marengo too was present on that occasion in Golaghat. |
| 1951 Jun 25 | Fr. Marengo pays a visit to Golaghat. |
| 1951 Jul | Fr. Marengo comes to Golaghat to preach a retreat for the MSMHC. On his way back to Tezpur he hears the 'rumour' that he is nominated Bishop of Dibrugarh. |
| 1951 Jul 23 | The official communication of the erection of the new diocese of Dibrugarh and the nomination of Fr. Marengo as the first Bishop of Dibrugarh. |
| 1951 Dec 7 | Fr. Marengo reaches Turin for the Episcopal Ordination. He then goes home to meet his aged mother. He is meeting her after 28 years. |
| 1951 Dec 27 | Episcopal ordination of Bishop O. Marengo at the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco, Turin. |
| 1952 Jan 31 | Bishop Marengo is present in Valdocco for the feast of St. John Bosco. |

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| 1952 Feb 10 | Fr. H. Marocchino pays a visit to Hundung. |
| 1952 May 16 | Bishop Marengo returns to Dibrugarh for the solemn installation. |
| 1952 May 18 | Solemn installation of Bishop Marengo in Dibrugarh. |
| 1952 May 30 | Bro. Raphael Bara writing from Guwahati to Bishop Marengo expresses his great happiness to see him as Bishop and says that he would have gone away, if Fr. Marengo was not his spiritual guide. |
| 1952 Dec | Fr. Ravalico's first visit to Ukhrul to be present at a wedding of one of the past pupils of Don Bosco Guwahati. He also makes a tour of the Pallel area. |
| 1953 | Bishop Marengo goes to Vellore for the Episcopal Ordination of Bishop Mariaselvam. |
| 1953 Jul 14 | Death of Agostina Montaldo, the mother of Bishop O. Marengo, at Diano d'Alba. |
| 1953 Nov | Bishop Marengo and Fr. Ravalico visit Lakhuti. |
| 1953 Dec 8 | Baptism of Miss Lakshmi Devi, the future Mother Rose Mary Thapa MSMHC, at Dibrugarh. |
| 1953 Dec 27 | Bishop Marengo reaches Imphal for a month's tour. |
| 1954 Jan 2 | Fr. Ravalico returns to Dibrugarh with a group of 30 children from the different tribes of Manipur to be put in the various boarding schools. |
| 1954 Aug | Fr. J. Larrea begins the publication of 'Ntsa' (Truth) to explain the Catholic faith to the Lothas. |
| 1954 Nov 2 | Bishop Marengo and Fr. Larrea return after a three weeks tour of the Lotha area. |
| 1954 Nov | Bishop Marengo tours the villages in the Chin Hills. |
| 1954 Dec 26 | Bishop Marengo sets out for a month long tour of the Tangkhul area. On his return to Dibrugarh he makes a tour of North Lakhimpur area. |

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| 1955 | An important year for the Lotha Naga community: Fr. Larrea gets ready a catechism in Lotha, comes away from Dibrugarh to stay in Golaghat to be closer to the Lotha community, he organizes instruction for different groups of catechists. |
| 1955 Jan 22 | Sisters of Christ Jesus (MCJ) leave from Kohima after serving in the Naga Hospital for six years. |
| 1955 Jan 26 | The visit of Fr. R. Ziggiotti, the Rector Major of the Salesians of Don Bosco to Dibrugarh. |
| 1955 Mar | Bishop Marengo is back again in Manipur for a long tour. On his return to Dibrugarh he visits the villages of Doom Dooma and Naharkatiya area. |
| 1955 Apr 12 | Bishop Marengo and Fr. P. Bianchi begin a long tour of the Tangkhul area. During the same period or so Fr. J. Larrea visits the Lotha area. Bishop and Fr. Bianchi cover nearly 225 kms on foot. |
| 1955 Aug 31 | Fr. P. Bianchi sets out on a long tour of the Tangkhul villages. He trains catechists at Hundung. |
| 1955 Oct | Bishop Marengo leaves for a ten day tour of Lotha area. Fr. J. Larrea from Golaghat accompanies him. |
| 1955 Nov 7 | Bishop Marengo visits Tezpur coming from Shillong. It is the first time that he visits Tezpur after he became Bishop. |
| 1955 Nov 13 | Fr. P. Bianchi begins a 40 day tour of the Chin Hills district. Bishop Marengo joins him in this tour after a few days from the start. They bring 2 Thadou boys for the boarding school in Dibrugarh. |
| 1955 Dec 27 | Bishop Marengo and Fr. P. Bianchi leave for a month's tour of the Tangkhul area. Returning from there, Bishop makes a long tour of Golaghat, N. Lakhimpur and Naharkatiya areas. |
| 1956 Jan | Baptism of the first two Mayols of Manipur in Naharkatiya. |

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| 1956 Jan 9 | Fr. Larrea brings to Dibrugarh 45 Lothas from Merapani for training. |
| 1956 | Bishop baptizes a leper at Mythong among the Mayols of Manipur. He speaks of having learnt much from that leper. |
| 1956 Feb 11 | Fr. Ravalico arranges for the purchase of Nirmalabas, Imphal. |
| 1956 Mar 5 | Fr. Ravalico and Fr. P. Bianchi set out from Dibrugarh for Manipur by jeep with the blessing of Bishop Marengo. |
| 1956 Mar 6 | Fr. A. Ravalico and Fr. P. Bianchi arrive at Imphal at 8.00 p.m. to stay permanently there to organize mission work in Manipur. |
| 1956 Apr 7 | Fr. Ravalico makes his first visit to Dibruagarh from Imphal after reaching there on May 6th 1956. He brings along with him a group of boys to study in Dibrugarh. |
| 1956 May 9 | Blessing and inauguration of Nirmalabas, Imphal. |
| 1956 May | Fr. A. Ravalico and Fr. P. Bianchi make a first visit to Maram Khullen. |
| 1956 May | Bishop Marengo leaves for a tour of two weeks of Golaghat and goes also to Manipur. |
| 1956 Jun 26 | Fr. Mathew Elanjipuram, Fr. M.P. Alexander and Fr. Cherian Moolamattam reach Shillong. After about a week all three go to Damra. Fr. Alexander remains in Damra. The other two proceed to Tezpur Mission. From there Fr. Mathew reaches Tura along with Mgr. Bars on 1 February 1957. |
| 1956 Aug | Bishop Marengo spends the whole of August in Manipur. He is present at the training course for catechists at Imphal. Bro. Pancolini goes to Imphal to help Fr. Ravalico with the propaganda work. |

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| 1956 Nov 4 | Bishop Marengo and Fr. Ravalico begin their long tour of South West part of Manipur. |
| 1956 Nov 27 | Fr. P. Bianchi makes his first visit to Punanamai-Mao. |
| 1957 Jan | Tour of Manipur. |
| 1957 Jan 30 | Fr. C. Vendrame, the apostle of the Khasi Hills, passes away in Dibrugarh. His influence on Bishop Marengo is considerable. |
| 1957 Feb 7 | The Mother provincial of the FMAs makes her first visit to Imphal following the request of Fr. A. Ravalico to open a school at Imphal. |
| 1957 Apr 7 | Silver Jubilee of priestly ordination of Bishop Marengo celebrated in Dibrugarh. |
| 1957 May | Bishop tours mission centres in Assam. |
| 1957 Sep | The whole of September Bishop Marengo is busy touring the Doom Dooma area. Towards the end of the month he visits the Angami flock in Nagaland. |
| 1957 Sep 11 | Fr. L. Piasecki, the 'lion' of the Brahmaputra valley dies at Digboi. |
| 1957 Oct 5 | Bishop Marengo blesses the first chapel in Kohima village. |
| 1957 Oct | Bishop Marengo makes his first visit to the Zeliangrong area of Manipur. Fr. J. Felix accompanies him. |
| 1957 Dec 3 | Fr. Joseph Felix reaches Hundung. |
| 1957 Dec | Bishop Marengo makes a long tour of the Chin Hills. He returns to Dibrugarh only by 4 February 1958. Bishop brought 23 children from Chin Hills to study in Dibrugarh. |
| 1958 Feb | Tour of Manipur |
| 1958 Feb 10 | The FMAs reach Imphal and stay at Nirmalabas. |

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| 1958 May | Bishop Marengo visits the Doom Dooma and Golaghat areas. The visit lasts almost the whole month. |
| 1958 Mar 9 | Opening of Don Bosco Youth Centre at Chingmeirong, Imphal. |
| 1958 Jun 25 | Fr. Joseph Kachiramattam (Fr. Mattam), the first diocesan priest to join Dibrugarh diocese arrives in Dibrugarh. |
| 1958 Jul 26 | Bishop Marengo, accompanying Fr. Mattam to Manipur, reaches Mao from Dibrugarh. |
| 1958 Oct | Bishop Marengo and Fr. Larrea still await permit to visit the Lotha area. |
| 1958 Dec | Along with Fr. Larrea Bishop Marengo tours the Lotha area. |
| 1959 Jan | Bishop Marengo receives permit to visit Lotha area again. |
| 1959 Feb | Bishop Marengo tours the Golaghat, North Lakhimpur and Naharkatiya districts. |
| 1959 Feb 15 | Blessing and laying of the foundation stone of the new Don Bosco School building in Dibrugarh. |
| 1959 Mar | During this month Bishop Marengo tours the villages of Golaghat, Naharkhatiya, Doom Dooma and North Lakhimpur areas. |
| 1959 Apr | Middle of the month Bishop Marengo sets out to visit Hundung, Churachandpur and Punanamei. |
| 1959 Jun 16 | Fr. Mathew Planthottam, the second diocesan priest to join Dibrugarh diocese, reaches Imphal. |
| 1959 Feb | Tour of Golaghat, North Lakhimpur and Naharkatiya areas. |
| 1959 Mar | Tour of Golaghat, N.Lakhimpur and Doom Dooma areas. |

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| 1959 Apr | Long tour of Manipur. Visits communities in Hundung, Churachandpur and Punanamei areas. |
| 1959 Jul | Visits Kohima with Fr. F. Bollini. |
| 1959 Sep | First week is spent visiting North Lakhimpur. |
| 1959 Nov | From the middle of November to the end of December Bishop visits Manipur. |
| 1960 Jan | Fr. J. Larrea's first visit to Lungsa village and the celebration of the first Mass there. |
| 1960 Mar | Bishop Marengo visits the villages of Doom Dooma and Naharaktiya area. |
| 1960 May 18 | Bishop Marengo leaves Dibrugarh with Bro. F. Pancolini for Cochin en route to Italy. |
| 1960 May 2 | Bishop Marengo and Bro. Pancolini leave by ship from Cochin for Italy. This is Bishop's first ad limina visit. |
| 1960 Jul 9 | Audience with Pope John XXIII in Rome. |
| 1960 Dec 22 | Bishop returns from Italy after an absence of six and a half months. |
| 1961 Jan-Mar | Visits to mission centres in Doom Dooma, Digboi, Naharkatiya, Golaghat. He is given an enthusiastic welcome by all - Catholics and non-Catholics alike. |
| 1961 May | The whole month is spent in Manipur. He leaves Dibrugarh on 27 April and returns only on 5 June 1961. |
| 1961 May 24 | Bishop Marengo blesses the Nirmalarani Church at Chingmeirong, Imphal, Manipur. |
| 1961 Oct | Bishop Marengo visits Golaghat mission and then proceeds to visit the Lotha area during the first two weeks of November. |
| 1961 Nov 20 | Visit of Inter-Nuncio Msgr. Robert J. Knox to Dibrugarh diocese. |

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| 1962 Jan 10 | The first group of seminarians start their minor seminary classes in Dibrugarh. |
| 1962 Feb | After waiting for nearly three months Bishop Marengo is allowed to visit Manipur again. |
| 1962 Mar | Bishop Marengo returns from Manipur. Goes to visit N. Lakhimpur area. |
| 1962 Jul | Fr. P.C. Mani brings up the first group of boys from Kerala for the Minor Seminary in Dibrugarh. They were recruited by Fr. Mathew Uzhunnalil. |
| 1962 Aug 15 | Farewell to Bishop Marengo. He is leaving for Rome to attend the Second Vatican Council. |
| 1962 Nov | Chinese aggression in the North East. Bishop Marengo returns from the Second Vatican Council because of tense situation in the area due to the Chinese attack. |
| 1963 Jan 7 | Bishop Marengo comes to Shillong to meet the Inter-Nuncio, Mgr. R. Knox. |
| 1963 Jan 12 | Bishop Marengo returns to Dibrugarh by bus from Shillong with Fr. Zanghellini who is just back from Italy. Bishop had gone to Shillong to meet the Inter-Nuncio Mgr. R. Knox in the aftermath of the Chinese attack. |
| 1963 May | Bishop Marengo visits Kohima along with Fr. J. Felix for the official opening of Kohima centre. |
| 1963 May-Jun | Bishop Marengo effects the return of a group of Naga students from a Hindu Ashram in Conoor with the mediation of Fr. Sngi Lyngdoh. |
| 1963 Jul 26 | Extraordinary faculties given to all the ordinaries of Assam in case of communist rule in North East India in the wake of Chinese attack. |
| 1963 Nov 3 | Bishop Marengo returns from Rome. |
| 1963 Dec 22 | Dibrugarh celebrates 40 years of Bishop Marengo's presence in India. |

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| 1964 Jan 2 | Bishop Marengo receives a letter from Archibishop L. Mathias appraising him that he is nominated Apostolic Administrator of the new diocese of Tezpur. |
| 1964 Jan 18 | Bishop Marengo spends his last day in Manipur. |
| 1964 | Exodus of refugees from East Pakistan. It creates emergency situation in the area. |
| 1964 Mar 19 | Blessing and laying of the foundation stone of St. Joseph's Minor Seminary, Dibrugarh. |
| 1964 May 10 | Erection of the diocese of Tezpur. |
| 1964 May 23 | Fr. Paul Taverna from Naharkatiya comes to Tezpur replacing Fr. G. Venturoli. |
| 1964 Jul 20 | Bishop Marengo receives the official communication through Bishop S. Ferrando that he is transferred to Tezpur as its First Bishop. |
| 1964 Aug | By August Bishop Marengo comes to know who his successor in Dibrugarh is. |
| 1964 Aug 12 | Fr. Daniel comes to Dibrugarh with a group of boys from Manipur for Bishop Marengo's send off to Tezpur. |
| 1964 Aug 16 | Send off for Bishop Marengo at Dibrugarh. |
| 1964 Aug 22 | Reception and installation of Bishop Marengo at Tezpur. |
| 1964 Aug 24 | The arrival of Bishop Hubert D'Rosario in Dibrugarh. Bishop Marengo presents him to the people. |
| 1964 Aug 27 | Bishop Marengo leaves for Tezpur. End of the same month Bro. M. Cahoj joins him in Tezpur. |
| 1964 Sep 2 | Bishop Marengo and Bro. M. Cahoj leave Tezpur for Calcutta en route Rome. |
| 1964 Nov 6 | Bro. F. Pancolini arrives from Dibrugarh to help Bishop Marengo. He will be in charge of the propaganda office. |

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| 1964 Dec 13 | Bishop Marengo preaches a touching sermon in English and in Hindi at the Pontifical Mass on the day of welcome given to Bishop Hubert D'Rosario at Dibrugarh. |
| 1964-1965 | Fr. Paul Taverna builds the Bishop's House in the place of the old 'Chummery' in Tezpur. |
| 1965 Feb | Bishop Marengo is busy visiting the mission centres. |
| 1965 Jun 6 | Bishop leaves for Dhekiajuli for his retreat. |
| 1965 Aug 11 | Bishop Marengo leaves for Madras for the funeral of Archbishop L. Mathias ( + 3-8-65 at Legnano, Italy). |
| 1965 Sep 1 | Bishop Marengo and Bro. F. Pancolini leave Calcutta en route to Italy. |
| 1966 Mar 24 | Bishop Marengo and Bro. Pancolini return from Europe after an absence of nearly 7 months. |
| 1966 Jun 11 | Bishop Marengo leaves for Salana for his spiritual retreat. |
| 1966 Oct 24 | Visit of Fr. B. Tohill, Salesian Mission Superior, to Tezpur. |
| 1967 Apr 7 | Bishop Marengo leaves for a tour of Tangla area. But he returns to Tezpur because most of the confreres were confined to bed due to food poisoning. In addition, the 'quit order' is served on Bro. M. Cahoj by the government to leave North East immediately. |
| 1967 May 27 | Bishop leaves for a tour of N. Lakhimpur area. |
| 1967 Jun 10 | Bishop leaves for his retreat in Dhekiajuli. |
| 1967 Jun 18 | CIDs come to Bishop's House Tezpur to get information about conversion work. |
| 1967 Aug 6 | The alarming news of the expulsion of missionaries. It interrupts the retreat of the Fathers in Tezpur on 12 August. |

1967 Aug 23 Some papers report that the Government has served 'quit order' on Bishop Marengo. The order was served on other non-Indian missionaries working in Tezpur area and not on Bishop Marengo.

1967 Aug 28 Bishop Hubert and Fr. M. Casarotti, the provincial, pay a visit to Bishop Marengo after Bishop Hubert's visit to New Delhi to ask the government to reconsider the quit order. The result of the visit to New Delhi seems to be negative.

1967 Sep Protest meetings in different places in the North East and all over India against the government's quit order served on the missionaries.

1967 Sep 11 His Eminence Valerian Cardinal Gracius holds the extraordinary meeting of the CBCI Standing Committee to discuss the government's quit order on the missionaries in North East India.

1967 Sep 21 Fr. M. Casarotti, the provincial, visits Tezpur. He informs that residential permit may be extended for some of the foreign missionaries.

1967 Sep 23 From a telephone call from Guwahati it is learned that the residential permit of Bishop Marengo and Fr. Paul Taverna would be extended by one year.

1967 Sep 25 Bishop Marengo leaves for a visit of North Lakhimpur area.

1967 Nov 11 Fr. Joseph Marengo, elder brother of Bishop Marengo, is received by Bishop at Calcutta. Some days later Fr. Joseph Marengo comes to visit Tezpur.

1967 Dec 17 The passing away of Fr. A. Ravalico at Welsh Mission Hospital, Shillong. Bishop Marengo comes the following day to Savio Juniorate to pray before the mortal remains of his companion of priestly ordination and the one who worked indefatigably for establishing the Missions in Manipur.

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| 1968 Jan 28 | Fr. Bertuzzi, the mission procurator of the Salesians of Don Bosco, visits Tezpur. |
| 1968 Apr 2 | CIDs come to Bishop's House Tezpur to enquire about Fr. G. Colussi's activities at Tangla. |
| 1968 May 8 | Bro. Michael Cahoj receives quit order to leave India within a month and a half. All over the diocese rallies and other demonstrations of protest take place. |
| 1968 May 28 | Bishop Marengo makes his spiritual retreat at N. Lakhimpur. |
| 1968 Jun 12 | Quit order served on Fr. Paul Taverna to leave Assam before 30 June. However, in Shillong the permit is extended up to 31 December. No further delay possible. |
| 1968 Sep 28 | Bishop Marengo preaches retreat to boarders at Tangla. |
| 1968 Oct 10 | Msgr. Caprio, the Pro-Nuncio, visits nearly all the Mission centres in Tezpur diocese. |
| 1968 Dec 3 | All regret that Fr. Paul Taverna's extension of stay in India cannot be renewed beyond 31-12-1968. The month of December goes down in history as the month of 'quit orders'. |
| 1969 Jan 25 | Bishop Marengo resigns from the See of Tezpur. But remains on to look after the propaganda on behalf of Bishop J. Mittathany. |
| 1969 Feb | Busy month for Bishop Marengo: touring and attending sobhas in Tangla, Dhekiajuli, Rangapara, Dholaibil, Salana and Tetenbari. |
| 1969 Apr 26 | Bishop Marengo leaves for Udalguri to preach a retreat for Boro communities. |
| 1969 Jun 3 | Fr. Peditto leaves Tezpur because of quit order. |
| 1969 Jun 4 | Quit order served on Fr. G. Venturoli. |

1969 Jun End Applications duly prepared to request Indian citizenship for Bishop Marengo, Fr. Paul Taverna, Bro. Pancolini, Fr. Ugo Turco and Fr. George Venturoli are submitted to the District commissioner of Darrang.

1969 Jul 31 Fr. Paul Taverna and Bro. Pancolini leave Tezpur because of quit order and the impossibility of obtaining further extension of residential permit.

1969 Aug 2 Fr. Cerato comes to Tezpur to leave for Bombay after a week, due to quit order.

1969 Aug 14 Fr. G. Venturoli leaves for Europe due to quit order.

1969 Aug 23 Fr. Joseph Mittathany receives letter of nomination as Bishop of Tezpur.

1969 Sep 27 Episcopal ordination of Bishop Joseph Mittathany, the Second Bishop of Tezpur.

1970 Apr 17 The tragic death of Fr. J. Costa at Mendal.

1970 May 25 Bishop-elect Fr. Robert Kerketta meets Bishop Marengo at Tezpur.

1970 May 30 Announcement of Fr. Robert Kerketta as Bishop of Dibrugarh.

1970 Aug 5 Bishop Marengo takes part in the funeral service of Sr. Presentation HC ( + 4-8-1970) at the Cathedral Church, Tezpur. Her mortal remains are taken to Borgang for burial. Bishop returns to Tezpur by 2.00 a.m. on the following day.

1970 Oct 18 Bishop Marengo is present at Dibrugarh as co-consecrator at the Episcopal ordination of Bishop Robert Kerketta.

1972 May 22 Bishop J. Mittathany and Fr. Sebastian Pouvath leave for N. Delhi to meet the Pro-Nuncio. They return on 24 May to Tezpur.

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| 1972 Jun 22 | Bishop J. Mittathany, 7 Priests, 3 Sisters and 4 catechists accompany Bishop Marengo from Tezpur to Shillong as he takes leave of Tezpur. |
| 1972 Jul 21 | Archbishop Hubert, Fr. M. Bianchi and Bishop Marengo leave Shillong for Tura. |
| 1972 Jul 22 | At the age of 66 Bishop Marengo becomes the Episcopal Vicar of Archbishop Hubert for Garo Hills. |
| 1972 Nov | Golden Jubilee of Salesian presence in India. Bishop Marengo is in Shillong for the celebrations. |
| 1973 Apr 7 | Creation of the diocese of Tura and Bishop Marengo is made Apostolic Administrator sede vacante. |
| 1975 end | Receives news that Fr. Joseph Marengo, brother of Bishop Marengo, is seriously ill in Italy. On reaching Turin Bishop learns that his brother has already passed away. |
| 1976 Feb | Bishop Marengo is back from Italy. |
| 1976 | Bishop Marengo is stranded on the road as he was coming to Thakimagiri to take part in the children's training camp. Fr. K.A. Thomas, is sent by Fr. A. Valluran to go and fetch Bishop. Fr. K.A. Thomas takes Bishop Marengo by motor cycle to Rajabala and from Rajabala they proceed to Thakimagiri. Just before reaching Thakimagri the motor cycle skidded and Bishop and Fr. Thomas fall to the ground. Lucky no one gets hurt. The time is nearly 2.00 a.m. |
| 1977 Feb 27 | Bishop Marengo ordains the first Garo priest, Fr. Crispinus Rangsa, at Tura. |
| 1977 Sep 4 | Mendal mission is reopened by Bishop Marengo and Fr. A. Valluran is installed as its parish priest. |
| 1977 Nov 4-5 | Silver Jubilee celebrations of Silchar Diocese at Silchar. The Pro-nuncio Mgr. Luciano Storero meets Bishop Marengo. They discuss changes in Tura. |

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| 1978 Jan 2 | Bishop Marengo tenders his resignation from the Apostolic Administration of Tura. |
| 1978 Nov | Bishop Marengo presides over the Eucharistic procession in Shillong in the absence of Archbishop Hubert D'Rosario away in Europe. |
| 1978 end | Bishop-elect Fr. George Mamalassery meets Bishop Marengo. |
| 1979 Feb 8 | Bishop Marengo's resignation from Tura is accepted. Bishop George Mamalassery is appointed as the first Bishop of Tura. Soon after, Bishop Marengo comes to stay at Don Bosco Mendal, and at the same time, help Bishop George Mamalassery with the propaganda work. |
| 1979 Mar 18 | Episcopal ordination of Bishop Mamalassery. |
| 1979 Oct | Visit to Assam and Meghalaya of Fr. E. Vigano' Rector Major of the Salesians of Don Bosco. |
| 1979 Nov | Visit of Mgr. Luciano Storero to Shillong. Bishop Marengo accompanies him to some of mission centres in Tura diocese. |
| 1980 Apr 2 | Bishop Joseph Mittathany is transferred from Tezpur to Imphal. Diocese of Tezpur remains vacant till Bishop Robert Kerketta takes charge. In the meantime Fr. Mathew Kottaram is Vicar Capitular. |
| 1981 Jan 31 | Installation of Bishop Robert Kerketta from Dibrugarh as Bishop of Tezpur. |
| 1981 Nov 29 | Bishop Marengo is present at Dibrugarh for the Episcopal ordination Bishop Thomas Menamparampil. |
| 1982 Jan 26 | Fr. Paul Panachickal takes charge of Mendal mission centre from Fr. Antony Valluran. Bishop Marengo remains with Fr. Paul in Mendal from 26 January 1982 to 15 May 1984. |

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| 1982 May 6 | Golden Jubilee Celebrations of priesthood of Bishop Marengo and of Fr. J. Bacchiarello, his companion, as well as the Golden Jubilee of religious profession of Fr. Louis Kerketta at Savio Juniorate, Shillong. |
| 1982 Oct 2 | Bishop Marengo is present at the funeral Mass of Fr. E. Albizuri (+30-9-1982) in Shillong. |
| 1982 Nov 22 | Death of Fr. V. Scuderi in Catania, Italy. Bishop Marengo feels the departure deeply because of his close association with Fr. Scuderi in the first years of his missionary life. |
| 1983 Apr 17 | Bishop Marengo officiates at the funeral of Fr. Ignatius Rubio (+15-4-1983) in Shillong. |
| 1984 May 15 | Fr. Paul Panachickal is transferred to Garobadha. Bishop Marengo goes to Garobadha to help in the mission there. |
| 1984 Aug 16 | Bishop Marengo is present for the blessing and laying of the foundation stone of Bosco Mount, Rongkhon. |
| 1986 Oct 17 | Blessing of Bosco Mount. Present at the function is also Bishop George Mamalassery of Tura. |
| 1987 Oct 29 | Bishop Marengo is in Shillong for the funeral of Fr. Joseph Arminana (+28-10-1987). |
| 1989 Jun 12 | Bishop Marengo is ill. Has hernia. |
| 1989 Nov | Bishop Marengo is present at Shillong during the first three weeks for the CBCI meeting. |
| 1990 Jan 29 | Bishop Marengo returns to Garobadha from Gabil (Mendal parish) after a convention. |
| 1990 Aug | Bishop is down with Malaria in Bishop's House Tura. |
| 1990 Sep 23 | Bishop Marengo takes part in the Episcopal ordination of Bishop Tarcisius Resto Phanrang, Auxiliary Bishop of Mgr. Hubert D'Rosario. |

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| 1990 Nov | Centenary celebrations of the Catholic Church in North East India. |
| 1990 Dec | Bishop Marengo undergoes two operations at Guwahati. |
| 1991 Jan 31 | Bishop Marengo returns to Tura from Guwahati. |
| 1991 Feb 28 | Bishop Marengo comes back to Garobadha after medical treatment. |
| 1991 Sep 2 | Comes back to Garobadha after an absence of about two months during which he was treated for phlebitis. Most of the time he was confined to his bed in Bishop's House Tura. |
| 1992 Mar 11 | Goes to stay in Bosco Mount, Rongkhon. |
| 1992 Mar 30 | Erection of the diocese of Guwahati. |
| 1992 Aug 9 | Bishop Marengo becomes very ill. He becomes unconscious and is taken to hospital at Guwahati. Dr. Hazarika treats him, and he recovers. |
| 1992 Aug 16 | Inauguration of the diocese of Guwahati. |
| 1992 Dec 7 | Diamond Jubilee of priesthood of Bishop Marengo celebrated at Bosco Mount, Tura. |
| 1993 Jan 7 | Goes to Guwahati for hernia operation. He stays there till 11 February to take rest before returning to Rongkhon. |
| 1993 Oct15-18 | Symposium on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of MSMHC at Hatigaon, Guwahati. Bishop Marengo is present. |
| 1994 Apr 4 | Visits Barpeta, Bengtol, Siliguri and Sonada. He is visiting Sonada after 40 years. |
| 1994 May 2 | Bishop Marengo is hospitalized in Guwahati for herpes. He returns from the hospital to Bosco Mount on 30 May. |
| 1994 Jul 21 | In the evening of 21 July Bishop Marengo's temperature shoots up to 104 fht. He is carried to |

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| | the car almost unconscious. Fr. Buccieri administers the sacrament of the sick while Bishop Marengo is in the car. He is taken to the hospital. After a day in the hospital, his condition normalizes. He is discharged on 24 July and returns to Bosco Mount. |
| 1994 Aug 29 | 89th Birthday celebrated at Bosco Mount, Tura. Many Fathers and Sisters from all over Garo Hills are present for the occasion. |
| 1994 Sep 1 | Goes to Shillong for the funeral of Archbishop Hubert D'Rosario. |
| 1994 Sep 29 | Bishop Marengo is admitted to Catholic Hospital, Tura, for pneumonia, diabetes, phlebitis. He remains in the hospital for a week. |
| 1994 Nov 11 | Bishop Marengo is at Shillong with Bro. Eligius (Elik) and Sr. Rose Kurian MSMHC for the annual Eucharistic procession, and for the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the diocese of Shillong, and the 25th anniversary of the Archdiocese. |
| 1995 Feb 9 | Bishop Marengo goes to Guwahati where he is checked-up by Dr. Mohanta and Dr. Borkakoti. His complaint was weak legs, inability to stand up for any length of time. |
| 1995 Jun 27 | Bishop Marengo goes to Guwahati from Bosco Mount, Tura, for a check-up. He is there for a week undergoing various tests. He returns to Ronghkon on 5th July. |
| 1995 Aug 17 | Bishop Marengo is present at Savio Juniorate, Shillong, for the celebration of the Platinum Jubilee of his Religious Profession. |
| 1995 Aug 29 | Bishop Marengo is present at Bosco Mount, Tura, for the Platinum Jubilee celebrations of his Religious Profession and the 90th Birthday celebrations. |

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| 1995 Sep 30 | Bishop Joseph Mittathany and Bishop George Mamalassery visit Bishop Marengo in Don Bosco, Guwahati, where he is ill. |
| 1995 Oct 7 | Bishop Marengo returns to Tura after 10 days in Don Bosco, Guwahati. |
| 1995 Nov 9 | Bishop is present at the funeral of Fr. Noel Joseph Kenny at Shillong. |
| 1995 Nov 10-11 | Bishop Marengo is present for the Missionary Day at Shillong. |
| 1995 | During the year visited Muktidata Ashram twice. |
| 1995 Dec 10 | Bishop Marengo is present at the perpetual professions of sixteen MSMHC at Hatigaon, Guwahati. |
| 1996 May 20 | Bishop Marengo gives the Good Night talk to the Sacred Heart Theological College community, Shillong. |
| 1996 May 23 | Bishop Marengo pays a visit to Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong together with Bro. Eligius. |
| 1996 Jul 19 | Bishop Marengo, Fr. Frassy and Bro. Eligius pay a visit to Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong. |
| 1996 Aug 29 | 91st Birthday of Bishop Marengo is solemnized at Tura. |
| 1996 Oct 1 | Tragic accident and death of Bro. Thomas Moore, superior of Montfort School, Tura. On hearing the sad news Bishop Marengo is very much affected. He weeps a lot during the funeral service. |
| 1997 Jan 6 | Bishop Marengo goes from Rongkhon to Hatigaon for a week at the invitation of Mother Pakumala to help in compiling the necessary background information on Bishop Ferrando for the introduction of his cause of beatification. |

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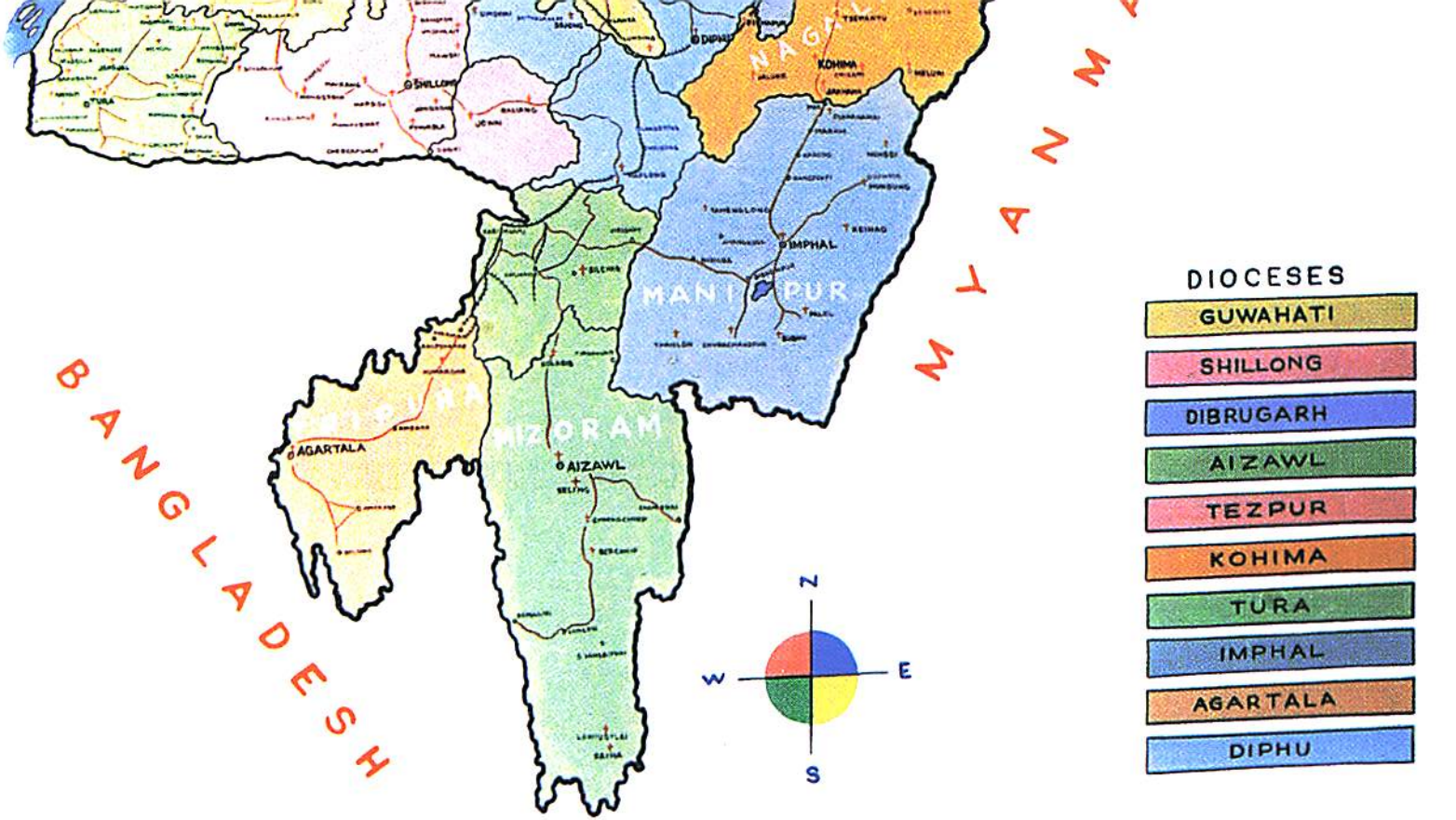
| 1997 Jan 11 | Baptizes Ram Kumar Gurung, the nephew of Mother Rose Mary Thapa MSMHC, at Hatigaon, Guwahati. |
| 1997 Jan 13 | Bishop Marengo is present at MSMHC Generalate at Hatigaon for the wedding of Ram Kumar Gurung Mark. |
| 1997 Jan 22 | Bishop Marengo is deeply affected by the death of Fr. H. Frassy. He was his novice in Sonada. |
| 1997 Jan End | Bishop Marengo is taken to the doctor for a check up in Tura. |
| 1997 Feb 5 | Bishop Marengo goes to Genjal (30 kms from Tura) for the opening of the school. |
| 1997 Jun 27 | Bro. Eligius comes with Bishop Marengo to Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong, to visit Fr. George Kottuppallil who is sick with terminal cancer. |
| 1997 Nov 11 | Bishop Marengo, Bro. Eligius and Fr. Milon leave Rongkhon by car for Mendipathar. Their car meets with a minor accident some 3 kms before Genjal. |
| 1998 Jan 12 | Bishop Marengo is admitted in Catholic Hospital, Tura. He gets well after a few days. |
| 1998 Feb 10 | Is admitted in Holy Cross Hospital, Tura, for acute gastritis. He gets well after three weeks. |
| 1998 May 9 | Was admitted again in Holy Cross Hospital, Tura. Is discharged after a few days. |
| 1998 May 21 | Is admitted again ... and remains in the Hospital for 70 days till he breathed his last. |
| 1998 Jul 30 | Bishop Marengo dies in Tura. |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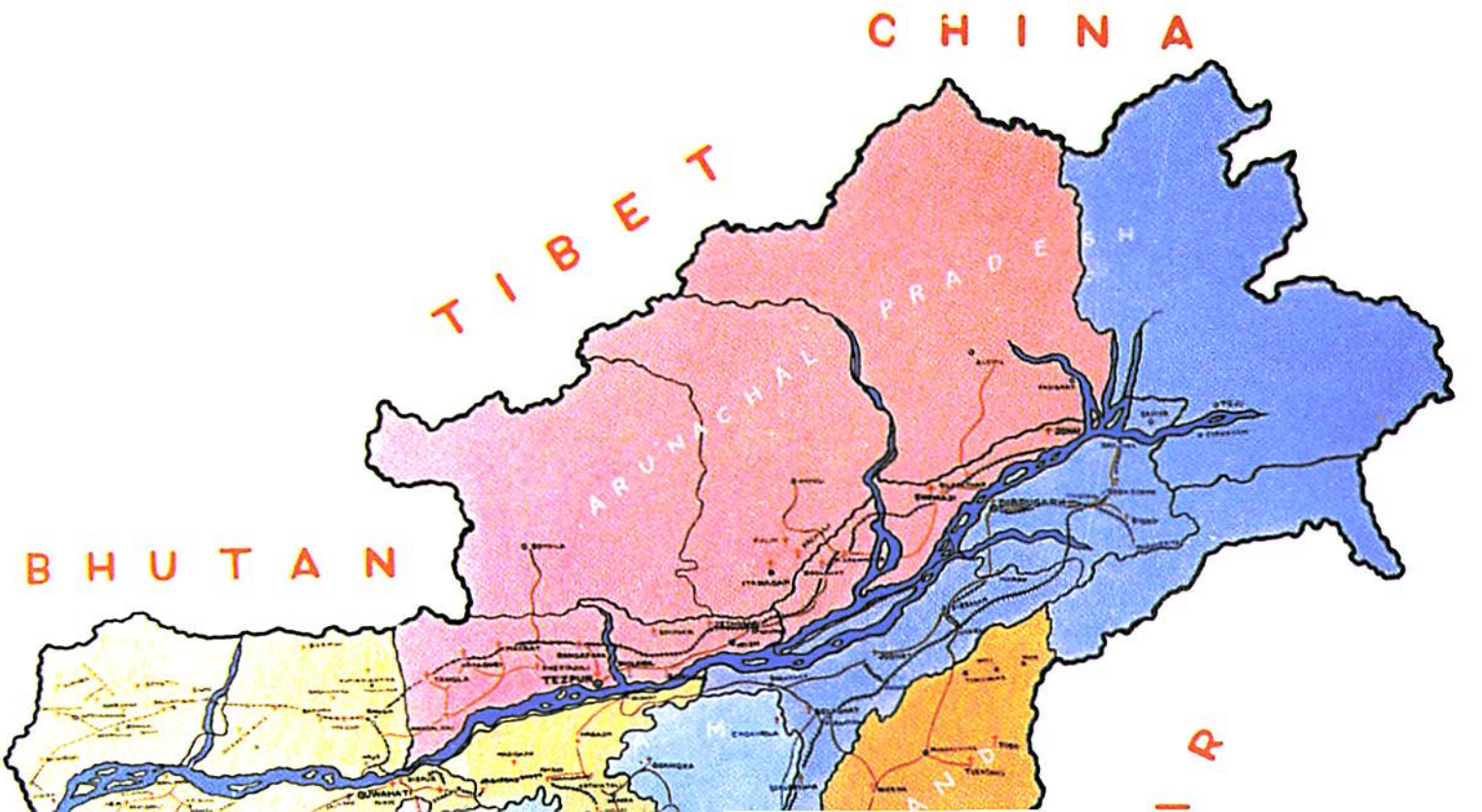
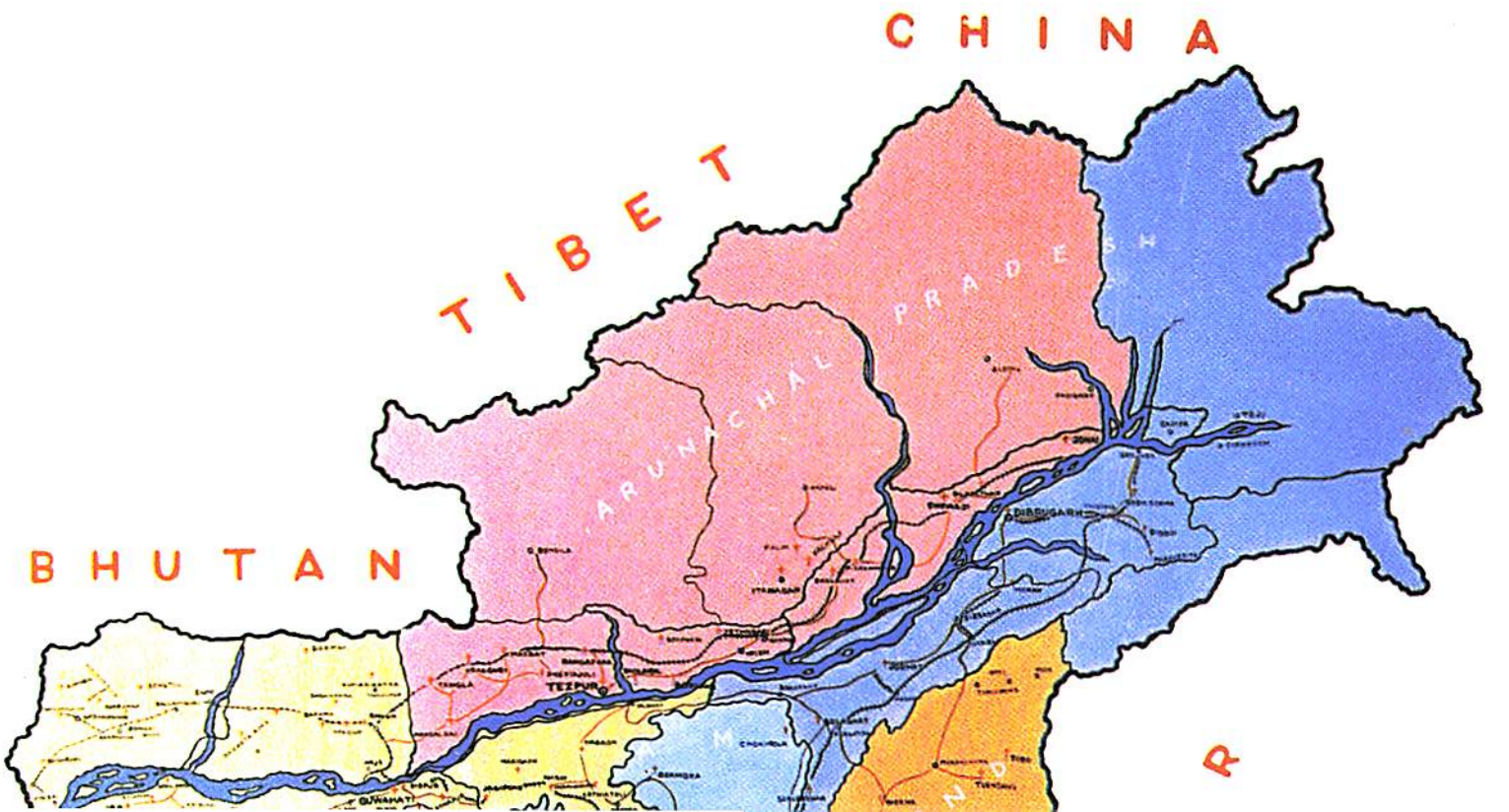
# ECCLESIASTICAL MAP OF NORTH EAST INDIA



# ECCLESIASTICAL MAP OF NORTH EAST INDIA



By Thomas Menamparampil

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