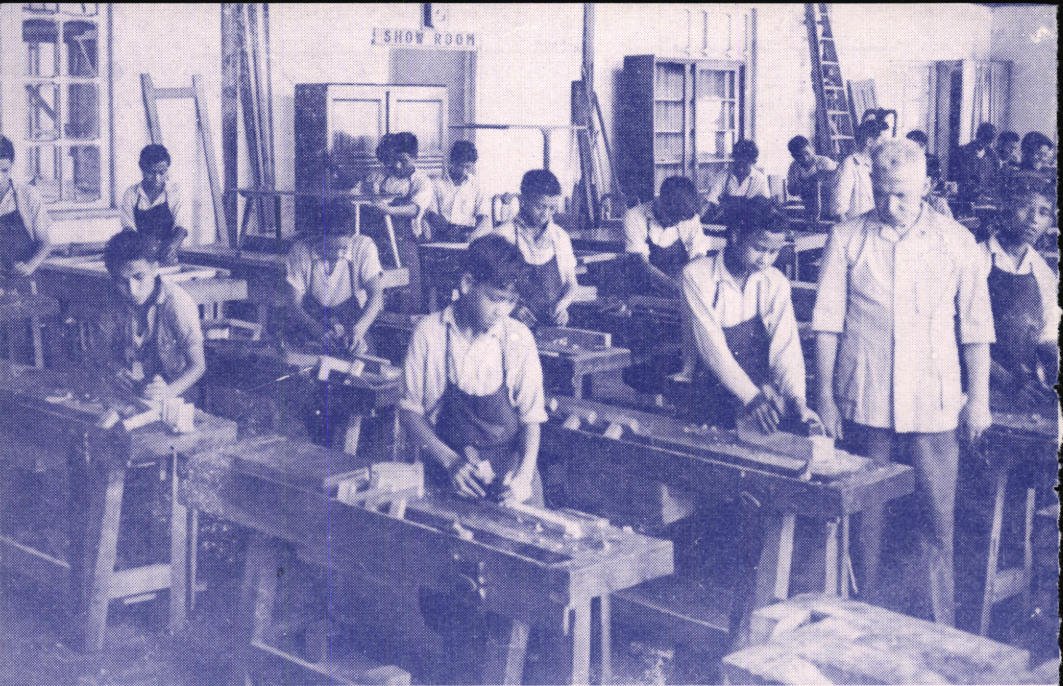


Rev. Brother
ERNEST FERRARIS

S.D.B.

DIED 30.12.1993

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DON BOSCO TECHNICAL SCHOOL
SHILLONG – 793 003

December 21, 1994

Dear Confreres,

The passing away of Brother Ferraris evokes in us varied emotions. We feel grateful to God who has given him so many decades of life as a person and as a religious missionary. We certainly would have been happy to have him reach 100 years of age. But God willed it to be this way. Just a year ago, on 21st December, he completed 95 years of life, though he narrated to some that due to some miscalculation, his recorded date of birth is actually two years later than his real date of birth.

Ernest Ferraris was born on 21st December, 1898, in a village called Piozzo in Piedmont, North Italy, in the diocese of Mondovi. His parents were Giovanni Ferraris and Giovanna Martillosi. As a young boy he was a regular altar boy. When at the age of 11 years he moved to Turin, he started serving mass in the Church of St. Francis of Assisi where Don Bosco had said his first mass. Now and then he would go to Valdocco to join in the activities conducted in the oratory of the Salesians.

An elder brother of Ernest had already joined the seminary in Turin. Another brother and he worked as mechanics apprentices at two places in the city. At Valdocco, Ernest and his brother would meet Don Favia, the Director of the oratory who had been appointed there by Don Bosco himself. The Oratory itself was daily bustling with various games and activities, having an attendance of up to a thousand boys. The boys were assisted by many clerics who came from Valsalice. The boys would call them "catechists". At the oratory itself there were many Salesian Brothers with two priests. The Lenten season would see the Salesians busy teaching catechism to the boys every evening from 8 P.M.

till 10 P.M. During the day the young boys were scattered all over the city employed in various workshops and already earning a living for themselves.

The fascination for salesian life had begun to get into the heart of Ernest. It was his brother who came up with the invitation: "Ernest, come on, let us join the Salesians." With this goal in mind, the two youngsters began to go to the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians regularly for confession and communion. Having prayed and sought counsel, the two brothers approached Fr. Angelo Amadei who was now Director of the Oratory and Editor of the Salesian Bulletin. Ernest's brother wanted to become a priest. Ernest himself saw his future mission as a Salesian brother who would serve others through his trade. So the elder of the two, who was now 18 years old joined the Penango seminary for late vocations. Ernest, the younger one, 15 years of age, was sent to San Benigno Canavese, about 25 kilometers from Turin. That was a house where Don Bosco had some of his famous dreams.

When young Ernest went to Father Amadei with his desire to become a Salesian brother and to continue his trade, the good Director sought to get him some place for continuing his technical training. Since there were no vacancies in the mechanics section, Ernest was advised to join the cabinet-making section instead.

The boy was so bent on becoming a Salesian brother that the change of trade was no deterrent. He went to his employer in the city and announced : "Sir, I will not be able to come to work with you any more." "Why?" the man asked. "Because I am going to join the Salesians." was the prompt reply. The employer was taken aback. He thought the boy was not satisfied with the stipend meted out to him. "Why?" I'll increase your pay. But please, don't go." "Thank you, Sir, but I have made up my mind. I go," was the determined conclusive reply of the boy. And so Ernest left his job and joined the Salesian training school. That was in 1913.

Ernest's training at San Benigno lasted till 1917. He worked 10 hours a day and with the work he earned sufficient money to make a living and to have something to spare as well.

In 1917 he was due to go to the novitiate. But the First World War was already raging and the young novice had to interrupt everything and leave the Novice Master, Father Dominic Canepa, and join the war.

His brother, meanwhile, having intended to aspire for the priesthood expressed his desire to go to the South American Missions. The First World War prevented his leaving. The Government would not allow anyone old enough to bear arms, to leave the country. The young man was made lieutenant in the armed forces. He worked in the hospital at first. Later he was sent to the battle field and died in a bomb blast. He was a student of philosophy then.

Ernest, meanwhile was spared the front line in the war. He was stuck in the army for three years. When he was discharged he reentered the novitiate On 30th November 1920. A year later, on 8th December, 1921 he made his first profession. As a young salesian, Brother Ernest went back to San Benigno, Canavese for more advanced courses in cabinet making.

While at San Benigno, he was sent a message by Fr. Ricaldone, the one in charge of the missions then. Ernest was asked by the messenger if he was willing to go to work as a missionary in Australia, a country that was under the protection of Mary Help of Christians. "Certainly, I would be glad to go." Ernest told the priest who came to meet him on behalf of Fr. Ricaldone. He hoped to go soon after completing his training at the institute. A few days later, Fr. Ricaldone himself summoned Brother Ernest. Fr. Peter Ricaldone, who would later become Rector Major, looked at the young salesian with fatherly affection:

"So, Ferraris,"

"Father, I'm supposed to go to Australia, isn't it?"

"No, Ferraris. Not to Australia, but to Assam. The boys of Assam are longing for you. That, too, is a mission dedicated to Mary Help of Christians."

"But, Father, I would like to complete my course in cabinet-making before going."

"Ferraris, could you make this sacrifice and go to Assam even before completing the course?"

The dialogue was already over. The Father had heard the mind of the Son, but the call was insistent. "Go now!" So Brother Ernest uttered his "fiat": "I'll surely go, Father."

In March 1923, Brother Ernest Ferraris arrived in Shillong. The Salesians had come there just over a year before. The new brother was the first salesian cabinet maker in the then region of Assam. He was entrusted with the task of re-starting the carpentry section of the trade school which had been started by the Salvatorian missionaries. The big hill in what is now Don Bosco's School was soon levelled wherever possible to provide space for a big workshop. Then came the all important task of learning the language from young boys themselves. Brother Ferraris was to spend twelve years of his youthful salesian life building up the Don Bosco Carpentry.

In 1935 he was transferred to Krishnagar as Craft Master in the Cabinet making section. It was not an easy change for him. The climate presented a radical change. He recollected how Krishnagar used to be called the "white man's tomb". The energetic brother became weaker and weaker. He was hospitalised in Calcutta and was told by the doctor that if he wanted to survive, he would have to leave the plains. Mgr. Morrow, the bishop of Krishnagar had to make the sacrifice of allowing Brother Ferraris to go. Thus from 1944 to 1949 Br. Ferraris was found in the salesian house of Sonada where he was sent to rest. In 1949 he was sent to Isernia in Italy to help Monsignor Lucato. His missionary zeal probably would not leave him in peace. After six years there he returned to Don Bosco's Technical

School, Shillong where he worked from 1954 to 1963, bringing the Carpentry to a well appreciated standard. In 1965, when he returned from Italy after his home leave, he was appointed to Cherrapunjee where he eventually set up a long tradition of non-formal training in carpentry.

About Cherrapunjee Br. Ferraris had this to say: "I am really happy to be with my apprentices down there in Cherrapunjee. They obey. there is scope for training them. I am doing with them the same work that Don Bosco did with the ragamuffins of Turin. Mine is a non-formal training school. Those boys, most of them 18 and above, come from the neighbouring villages and stay somewhere in the town on their own. I have no boarding for them. As they learn the trade with me, I also pay them for the work they do. I am often reminded of the work that Don Bosco did from 1852 to 1853. Here there is one difference. Don Bosco had no workshop of his own. He had to go around finding out shops where he could send his boys to be apprentices."

Brother Ferraris is fondly remembered by his almost 1000 past pupils. He was a constant example of hard work. The Cherrapunjee pouring rain could not keep him away from his work. He would move from place to place covering his head with what the Khasi call "Ka knup". When others had left the work room, he was still there for hours more. He was a perfectionist and was not happy with any slipshod manner of work. He was interested in the future welfare of his trainees. He used to advise them to save up money in order to have a more secure future. He himself would save up what he could in order to get tools for his workers. His training was so professional that the certificates he awarded his boys served them in getting good jobs elsewhere. If Brother Ferraris was quick to show his temper at work, he was as quick in cooling down and would more than just make up with the one he might have offended. He might have been cheated by some of his trainees but that did not stop him from doing good to others.

Brother's interest in the boys extended beyond the workshop. He was concerned about the spiritual life of his

trainees. St. Joseph's feast was a yearly occasion for gathering them around in joy to celebrate the Christian patron of work. There have been a number of trainees who became Catholics through their contact with Br. Ferraris. Many of his youngsters were able to get married as good Christians due to the influence exerted by their Salesian guide. Daily work was accompanied by regular prayer. On Sundays, Brother Ferraris would be on the look out to see if all his trainees came for Mass. Any one who was missed would be visited by Brother. He formed honest citizens and good Christians.

In 1990 he celebrated 25 years of service to the youth of Cherrapunjee. That same year he took sick and was hospitalised. Upon being discharged, on 24th August, 1990 he was asked to join the community of Don Bosco Shillong. His dream, however, was to go back to Cherrapunjee and continue his work there. On 26th October, 1991, the Salesians of the Province gathered round Brother to celebrate 70 years of fidelity to Don Bosco in the Congregation. It was an occasion of happy reminiscences and of gratitude. Things began to look bright for the nonagenarian Salesian but On 3rd May, 1992, he had a fall in his room and broke his hip bone. The doctors were faced with two possibilities: to let him recover slowly - it might take 6 months - or operate on him, in spite of his old age. Having taken stock of all the odds and the risks involved, it was decided to go for surgery. On 23rd May, he was operated on and had his hip bone joined with a stainless steel plate and pins. The operation was successful. His strong physique stood him in good stead. Soon the veteran missionary was again out of hospital, though he had to remain in bed for a long time yet. During his convalescence he was surrounded with special care and love by the confreres and those appointed to nurse him: in particular, Miss Mukta and Philip.

Brother Ferraris was destined not to go back to Cherrapunjee. But that did not stop him worrying about the future of his young boys. He was never at rest. He would spend all his waking hours designing and refitting

some machine or other for use in the carpentry. He was rather obsessed with the prime importance of this trade that he sometimes seemed to be totally oblivious of the importance of other trades. He was so dedicated to his trade.

Although Brother Ferraris seemed set to reach a hundred years, he took sick in early October 1993 with very serious lung congestion. When he was discharged, we all hoped that he would eventually pick up his active life again. We were not to see this fulfilled. Brother was never his usual self again. There were times when he seemed to be sinking but he showed that he was a determined survivor.

On 21st December he celebrated his 95th birth day. He certainly looked satisfied for the many years of life God had given him. After that, he began to grow weaker. On Christmas day the confreres gathered around his bed for a special Christmas mass with the mass sung in Gregorian chant. If he was aware of what was around he did not show it. On 26th December, he was unable to eat anything. Hence on the next day he was taken to hospital. Fr. Guidotto, his spiritual father, anointed him in the presence of the Salesians of Don Bosco Shillong. Brother Ferraris showed that he was totally aware of what we were celebrating for him. He kept nodding to the words that Fr. Guidotto spoke to him before we celebrated the sacrament. After that he gradually lost consciousness untill at a little after 3.00 a.m. on 30th December, he quietly committed his soul to the Lord. Brother Benny (Alex) Plathottatil was at his bed side at that moment.

Mr. L. Rapphap, one of his oldest past pupils alive recalls, "Br. Ferraris was not only a skilled and able teacher, but also a tough task master who often burst into a feverish rage when students neglected or took their work lightly."

"Though tough and demanding, Br. Ferraris was also most understanding and was always ready to help his students in times of need. The crowning glory of the long

years of hard work of this great Salesian will certainly be the hundreds of boys whom he not only taught, but, most vital of all, helped to ensure that they stand on their own feet." These words of Mr. Rapphap are most fitting today when society begins to wonder what the future holds out for the thousands of young students who come out of various institutions year after year.

Those who knew him in his last years will recall the regularity with which he fulfilled all his religious duties. His old age and his various bouts of illness did not make him forget his fidelity to his primary duty as a man of God. Brother Ferraris was a man of discipline. In sickness or in health, in youth or in old age, he knew what he had to do and he was fully conscious of his responsibility to fulfil every task entrusted to him to the best of his ability. He leaves us a rich legacy: a dedicated love for the young especially the poorer among them.

May this courageous Salesian continue to inspire many to follow in his footsteps. May he intercede with God for us that the educative mission he loved so well may continue to flourish and build a bright and a hope-filled future for our youth.

Fr. DOMINIC JALA, S.D.B.
Rector

For the Necrology:

Born : 21.12.1898
Professed : 08.12.1921
Died : 30.12.1993

GG 1238



