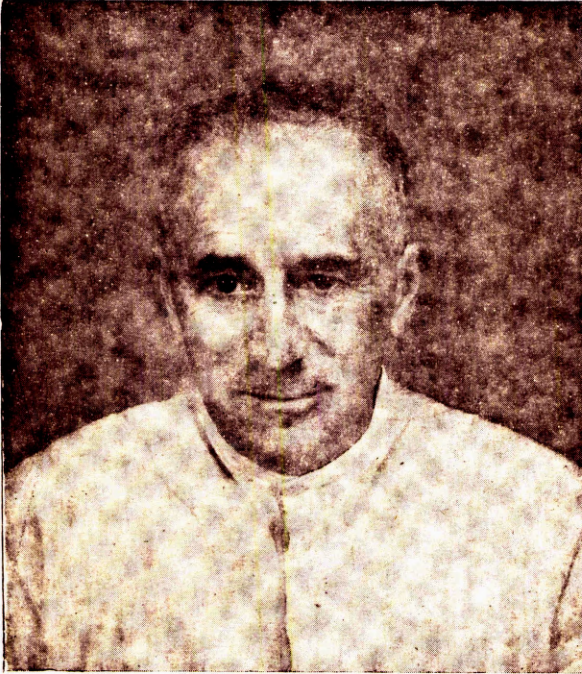




Rev. Fr. Joseph Foglia, s.d.b.

My dear Confreres,

On the 25th September, 1970, one of Assam's valiant missionaries, Rev. Fr. Joseph Foglia, was buried in Goa near the great apostle of India, St. Francis Xavier. The news of his death, which occurred three days earlier, came as a shock to all of us. Even those of us who knew that he wasn't over-well never thought that the end was so near or that it would come so suddenly. How true are the words of our Blessed Lord : " You know not the day nor the hour."

About the middle of September, Fr. Foglia went to Bombay, at the kind invitation of Fr. Maschio, for a little much-needed rest. It was not the Fr. Foglia they knew that the confreres welcomed at Matunga. He was visibly tired,

seemed preoccupied, spoke little and ate practically nothing. It was thought that the diversion of a visit to Goa would do him good ; and there he was sent in the company of Fr. Cerato. On the 18th September, he visited the tomb of St. Francis Xavier. On the following morning, after meditation, he was on his way to celebrate Holy Mass when he collapsed on the steps of the Chapel, hurting his chest and sustaining a deep cut over his left eye. He was rushed to the Medical College, where his wound was stitched, and his blood-pressure and heart found to be perfect. He recovered consciousness about 9 a.m., and, on the advice of the doctors, was removed to Don Bosco's, Panjim, for rest and quiet. On Tuesday, the 22nd September, about 5 p.m., Fr. Foglia expressed the desire of going up to the terrace to have a look at the whole compound. On the terrace he had what is presumed was a mild heart attack. He was taken back to his room, where he felt somewhat better. After some time, he went to the bathroom, where he collapsed again. The end came two minutes later. All efforts to have the body brought to Shillong for internment having proved unsuccessful, Fr. Foglia's remains were laid to rest in Goa. "It is significant," said Fr. Alessi at his funeral, "that a great missionary like him should die and be buried near the great apostle of India, St. Francis Xavier."

It was in December, 1923, that Fr. Foglia came to India as a cleric in the practical training. Together with him came the first group of Salesian novices to be formed in Assam. The leader of that memorable little expedition was His Grace, Archbishop Stephen Ferrando, then a young priest.

Fr. Foglia's first assignment in Assam was assistant of the novices. In that capacity he displayed those qualities that later distinguished him as a priest and won him the affection and confidence of the souls he cared for : charity that shrunk from hurting anybody deliberately, meekness and patient forbearance.

Missionary enthusiasm shone in Fr. Foglia even in those early days. He was never so happy as when, of a Sunday morning, together with the novices, he could accompany one of the priests (often Fr. Ferrando or Fr. Bars) for Holy Mass in one of the villages around Shillong. There those young Salesians would sing with the neophytes, pray with them and for them, and teach them by their shining example to serve the Lord in gladness. When Mass was over, the children of the village would be entertained with games and songs and hymns. Smiles were the magnet that drew them, and kindness the language they all understood.

When it was an evening excursion, it was usually in the company of Fr. Vendrame, who had slides to project (spring-boards for catechetical instruction) or a short film to show with the help of his ancient projector with a hand-

driven dynamo. Those were great attractions in those early days in the suburbs of Shillong. But breaks had to be filled in with songs and hymns and sometimes with gramophone records; and this was the contribution of Fr. Foglia and the novices to the apostolic evening. All returned home tired but happy, with that happiness that only a sense of fulfilment can give.

After completing his theological studies in Our Lady's House, the house of formation in those early days of the novices, the philosophers and the theologians, Fr. Foglia was ordained together with his life-long friend, Fr. Igino Ricaldone, by the Most Rev. Ferdinand Perier, S.J., Archbishop of Calcutta, whom the Salesians rightly looked upon as a very good friend and benefactor.

As a young priest, Fr. Foglia had ample scope for the exercise of his boundless charity, for he was appointed Rector of the Don Bosco Technical School in Shillong, which was in those days the Orphanage that it was called. Love for poor boys is a Salesian charism, and it shone in the young Rector, who gained the hearts and won the confidence of all. The house was poor in material things, but rich in Salesian spirit and Salesian joy. The poor boys of the School, recruited from the villages of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, were famous in the city for their band and for their skill in gymnastics, to say nothing of their efficiency as artisans. It speaks well for those days when we say that some of the most affectionate of the Past Pupils were inmates of the School during Fr. Foglia's regime.

Towards the end of 1934, Fr. Stephen Ferrando, Rector of Our Lady's House and Master of Novices, was elected Bishop of Krishnagar. Fr. E. Gutierrez, Catechist till then, took his place as Rector, and Fr. Foglia was appointed Novice Master, a tribute to the genuine spirit of Don Bosco with which he was animated. He filled that post of responsibility for nearly two years. Those who were novices under him all remember his cheerfulness, his piety and his unfailing kindness. None can recall his ever having been hard or harsh. His corrections were always accompanied by a word of encouragement that served to tone up the good-will and strengthen the resolution of those concerned.

Towards the end of 1936, Fr. Foglia went to Saharanpur to preach a mission or retreat. While he was there, Fr. E. Sanna, the Rector, died, and Fr. Foglia received instructions to remain on in his place. That implied looking after a small boarding school of about thirty boys, poor Chamars all of them, and being Parish Priest of hundreds of Catholics in the large railway colony and the civil lines. Fr. Foglia threw himself into the work with that zeal for souls that was ever his urge. He did the rounds of the parish on a cycle, advising,

instructing, consoling and encouraging ; and if he knocked more often at certain doors, they were those of the poor and the afflicted. The parishioners felt that they had found in him a true father, ever ready to answer their calls, even in the hottest hours of the day, under the scorching Saharanpur sun. He smiled at the remonstrations of some of his parishioners, but the fact is that he did fall ill. His parishioners seized the opportunity to return some of his kindness. A Catholic doctor cared for him free of charge, while others of his flock saw to it that he lacked nothing. He recovered to a certain extent, but by the end of his third year at Saharanpur was so exhausted that he had to leave. He had several weeks in the Presidency Hospital of Calcutta before he was something of his old self again.

Fr. Foglia resumed his Salesian activities as Prefect of the Don Bosco Technical School, Shillong, where Fr. Igino Ricaldone was Rector. These two superiors, perfectly united among themselves, helped to create a wonderful family spirit, that the confreres of those days still remember and often speak about. Fr. Foglia also showed how the role of Prefect can be perfectly reconciled with friendliness and fatherliness.

With his health fairly well restored, Fr. Foglia got an opportunity to give full expression to his missionary zeal, for he was put in charge of the mission of Cherrapunji. He was blessed with a good pair of legs, and he made the fullest use of them. He spent all the time he could visiting the various villages of his mission, and, as at Saharanpur, he succeeded in winning the affection and the confidence of his flock. With his unfailing kindness, his cheerfulness, his deep piety and spirit of sacrifice, he made his way into hearts. It was with a great sense of loss that they learnt of his transfer, after a few years in their midst, to the Cathedral Parish of Shillong.

Here, too, it was chiefly a good father, ever ready to share their joys and their sorrows, that his people found in him during the eighteen or nineteen years that he looked after them. The door of his office was open to all, and there were almost always some waiting on the verandah for their turn to knock upon it. If the walls of his office could speak – and, for that matter, the walls of all the homes he visited – what eloquent testimony they would render to his large-heartedness, to his ready sympathy for all in trouble, to his words of encouragement based on principles of faith, and to his helpfulness. It is little wonder that, when he was transferred to St. Joseph's Parish, Mawkhar, his parishioners missed him immensely, especially the more elderly among them, those with the heavier burden of worry and care.

During his four years or so at Mawkhar, Fr. Foglia operated in another field, but not in another way. It is little wonder that in the meetings they held after his death the people of Mawkhar could not say enough about his charity, his patience, his readiness to comfort and advise, his eagerness to help the poor and needy, his being all things to all men. When some of his parishioners pointed out that he seemed tired and weak for the journey to Bombay, his reply was that if he went there he hoped to bring back some bundles of old clothes for the poor.

Fr. Foglia has left behind him the sweet odour of a man of prayer, the be-all and end-all of whose life was God. He had a father's heart for all his spiritual children, the heart of a good shepherd for the strays and wounded among his flock. The thought of converting a soul would make him forget all his personal inconveniences and hardships. The tone of his health fell considerably, but never the tone of his dedicated work for souls. Anything seemed good enough for him in the way of food, clothing or lodging. All through his God-filled life he sought to avoid the glare of the footlights. His patience, the fruit of humility and meekness, was always in evidence when he had to deal with difficult characters or face unpleasant situations. His deportment was ever perfectly priestly and Salesian. Loving them himself, he always sought to promote devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to Mary Help of Christians. He loved Don Bosco, knew his spirit, and ever lived in accordance with it. He was, in a word, a Salesian and a Missionary of whom Don Bosco could be genuinely proud.

Archbishop Ferrando's note to Fr. Tonello, then in Italy, might form a fitting conclusion to this already long obituary letter. He wrote on the 25th September: "I don't know whether you have heard the sad news of Fr. Foglia's death. He died in Goa. I received a telegram from Fr. Casarotti. How much I suffer! How much you, too, should weep – the tears of a friend, a brother, a missionary. Forty-seven years of fidelity! He was a priest and an apostle. I loved him so!"

My dear Confreres, Fr. Foglia has gone from us, but the memory of him will certainly live on in the minds and hearts of all who knew and loved him. May the shining example he set be an inspiration to all of us, and may he help us all with his prayers before the throne of God.

Yours devotedly in Don Bosco,

Fr. M. Casarotti.

Provincial.

Ave Maria

23 settembre 1970

Carissimi Confratelli,

Vi comunico la triste notizia della morte del nostro dolcissimo DON GIUSEPPE FOGLIA, avvenuta ieri a Goa, nel nostro Istituto DON BOSCO, verso le 5.30 p.m.

-Don Foglia venne a Bombay per una breve vacanza. Qui espresse il desiderio di andare anche a Goa. Don Luigi Cerato lo accompagnò per essergli sempre accanto.

-Sabato mattina, dopo la meditazione, andò alla vecchia cappella per ascoltare Confessioni: la avvenne proprio sui gradini. Fu raccolto unconsciouso, e portato all'ospedale.

-Fecce subito buon progresso: si rimise bene; ed era sempre assistito dai nostri.

-Ritorno a casa lunedì'. Martedì sera camminava con Don Cerato sulla terrazza. Disse di non sentirsi bene. Fu adagiato sulla sedia, e fu portato in camera. E la morì poco dopo. Si pensa che la fine improvvisa sia dovuta alla sua grande debolezza, ed alla scossa avuta con la sua caduta di sabato scorso.

-Don Cerato verra' stassera da Goa: lui darà altri particolari, che fare' poi sapere.

Pregiamo per questo grande apostolo delle nostre Missioni Assamesi.

In unione di preghiera e di dolore, sempre devmo,

Don Aurelio