



REV. FR. ANTHONY HICKMAN, S. D. B.

1912—1983

**Don Bosco Bhavan,
Mannuthy,
Trichur
Kerala - India
30-1-1984**

Dear Confreres,

"Rejoice and be glad for your reward will be great in heaven". (Mt. 5,12). These words accurately portray the life and the ministry of Rev. Fr. Anthony Hickman, S. D. B., who was called by the merciful Lord to his eternal reward in heaven on 9th June, 1983 at the age of 71.

Fr. Hickman had been in the hospital for a few days prior to his untimely death. Though he was discharged from the hospital, yet he looked weak and suffered frequently intense pain in the chest. At 7.00 p.m., on Thursday 9th June, he complained of severe pain. A doctor was summoned immediately to his bed side. The doctor was alarmed at the seriousness of father's condition. He telephoned to the hospital asking the cardiologist to be ready with all the necessary equipments. Father had suffered another massive heart attack. By 8.00 p.m. he was admitted in the hospital and put under the oxygen tent. His condition deteriorated further. His breathing became heavy and laborious. The doctors advised the priests accompanying him to administer the last rites. A little later he calmed down. The sacraments were administered. He did not regain consciousness and by 11.00 p. m. he passed away peacefully.

On the following day, Friday, 10th June 1983 the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, his funeral took place in the community cemetery at Don Bosco Bhavan, Mannuthy. The representatives of the Salesian communities of the province as well as from the province of Madras together with his brothers and relatives paid their last respects to the departed missionary. Dr. Joseph Kundukulam, Bishop of Trichur, presided over the concelebrated mass and funeral rites. Rev. Fr. Provincial and the members of the provincial council were also present. The aspirants read a touching farewell address to Fr. Hickman, their friend. On the feast of the Sacred Heart, the province of Bangalore offered to God its first fruit in the person of Fr. Anthony Hickman.

In the following few pages we see glimpses of the truly dedicated life of this Salesian priest and missionary. This short biographical sketch is made possible due to the co-operation of the many confreres who knew and lived with Fr. Hickman. I am very grateful to these for their valuable

contribution and for the use of their letters and experiences about this wonderful Salesian.

Early life

Anthony Hickman was born on 13th June, 1912. Eight days later his loving parents Frank Joseph Hickman and Mary Gertrude took the plummy little babe to the Holy Cross Church, Tangassery in the ancient diocese of Quilon, Kerala, in South India. He learned his first lessons in catechism from his beloved parents who took great pride in their energetic son. Tony was fortunate to have his early education at St. Bede's High School, San Thome, Madras which the Salesians later took over from the Archdiocese of Madras-Mylapore. It was on 12th December 1920 at Mylapore that he received the sacrament of confirmation and the Holy Spirit flooded the life of little Tony with His seven-fold gifts and graces.

One of the elderly ladies, at present a parishioner of Our Lady of Lourdes' Shrine, Perambur, Madras, remembers teaching Tony catechism at St. Bede's. "He was a very jovial and mischievous young lad." As a young boy, he used to serve mass in the church. At the altar he used to trip the priests by stamping on their flowing vestments. In fact, not a few eyebrows were raised in disbelief at his decision to become a priest. But Rev. Fr. Tomatis, S. D. B., Rector of St. Bede's, followed up this fun-loving boy with keen interest. Fr. Joseph Sandanam who was his Salesian assistant during this period at St. Bede's recalls Tony as "a studious, pious young boy good at singing."

The little boy learned the tough way of life not so much due to his temperament as to the early military training he had in the regiment called "The Madras Guards", to which he belonged, when he left St. Bede's High School after his studies.

An Aspirant to Salesian Life.

The promise of a successful career in the world could not erase the fond memories of the loving kindness he had experienced from the Salesians. His love for Don Bosco won the day. Finally he decided to follow the Don Bosco way of life, to become a Salesian priest.

As a young man at the age of 22, he presented himself as an aspirant at the Salesian House, Tirupattur, the cradle of Salesian presence in South India. The first Salesian aspirant from Kerala - a host of others are still following his good example - Tony reached Tirupattur on 24th March 1934 - a significant day for all Salesians.

Wearing shorts and carrying his luggage, the stout young man was led to the Rector, Rev. Fr. Joseph Carreno, a great Salesian of the pioneering days of Tirupattur. The kindly priest looked at the eager youngman, welcomed him with a question, "Tony, are you ready for anything?" "Yes, Father" replied the newcomer. "If I say, 'Go and cook the dinner', will you do it?" "Yes," said young Tony with a mischievous smile, "but will you be ready to eat it?" Everyone laughed and welcomed him wholeheartedly.

The Young Salesian

After a year of pre-novitiate aspirantate period, he was recommended by his superiors to enter the novitiate at Tirupattur itself on 11th October 1935. Two months later he received his religious habit from Msgr. J. Mora, S. D. B., on 8th December 1935 - the feast of the Immaculate Conception. It was another dream come true. As a novice, he eagerly imbibed the Salesian and religious values which stood him in good stead all his life. He studied Don Bosco in depth and tried to reproduce him in his life.

December 8th, 1936 was a great day for Tony. On the feast of Mary Immaculate, Tony Hickman knelt before the altar of God and made his commitment to God in the Salesian Congregation. He was now a Salesian, a son of Don Bosco.

As a cleric, along with his study of philosophy, he was an apostle in the Sunday Oratory at Anandapetty near Tirupattur. His zeal knew no bounds. When no priest was available he conducted the funeral services in the village and consoled the bereaved families. On Sundays he would conduct the entire benediction service, but with the crucifix, giving his village congregation a 'lig blessing at the end.

Soon after his philosophical studies were completed, this enthusiastic, young Salesian began his years of practical training. He willingly accepted his obedience as a Salesian assistant and teacher at the Orphanage at Vellore, North Arcot District of Tamil Nadu. His Rector and Superior during this period had only words of admiration and praise for him. He was a very dedicated Salesian assistant. He was very kind and considerate to the poor boys. Everyone enjoyed his company. He was a very simple and unassuming religious and made himself happy and content with the little they had in those difficult days. Any hard plank or a carpenter's bench served him as his bed, sleeping peacefully under any tree unmindful of pigs, cats and dogs, snakes and other venomous reptiles. Work and prayer served as his motto. He would join the orphans and work enthusiastically demolishing compound walls, carrying mud and levelling playgrounds. His optimism cheered everyone around him.

Final Commitment

At the end of the successful period of practical training, cleric Anthony Hickman began his preparation to make his perpetual profession. The words of Jesus "Those who put their hands to the plough and look back are not fit for the kingdom of God," rang out in his mind. He had already made his option years earlier. There was no looking back. After an intensive preparation which was concluded with a spiritual retreat, he made a total gift of himself to God for ever in the Salesian congregation on 1st December 1942 at Tirupattur.

On the Way to Priesthood

In the following four years he devoted himself to the study of theology at Sacred Heart, Tirupattur which served as a house of studies for all from the aspirantate to the priesthood. During this period he spent his time at learning various languages. He was good at English, Latin, Italian, and Tamil and had a working knowledge in Malayalam and Telugu which proved to be of great help to him in his later life and ministry as a priest in the confessional.

He was always cheerful and ready to serve in any capacity. In fact, he was often entrusted along with his studies with the care of the kitchen, the marketing, the welfare of the cooks and domestics. His presence among these good people was always an active presence, feeling for them, cooking with them and helping them. At the end of the midsummer stay on the hills at Yercaud and later at Wellington, Nilgiris, he himself would take over the kitchen for the day and send the cook and his helpers for a picnic.

As the years rolled by he approached nearer to the altar of the Lord. From time to time he received the various ministries or the minor orders as they were called in those years. On 2nd December 1945 he was ordained a deacon by Msgr. Louis Mathias at Tirupattur. Two months of intense preparation preceded the great day of his dream. His life long ambition to become another Christ was fulfilled when Msgr. Roberts, the Archbishop of Bombay, laid his hands on his head on 30th January 1946 on the eve of the feast of Don Bosco, at Bombay. There was great rejoicing and celebration. He was now a priest of God for ever.

The Missionary Pastor

The young priest full of zeal devoted himself to the missionary tasks assigned to him. In his early priestly life he worked untiringly in the various missions of North Arcot District. A special mention is to be made of his long years of work in the missions of Arni and Udiyandiram. He spent himself for

the poor of the locality. The simple people still remember him with gratitude and love. He never left a single mission station without having a mass at least once a month. He was a good missionary who could put up with all kinds of inconveniences in his apostolic work. The parish had several sub-stations without proper accommodations. He would not spare himself when it was a question of doing good to the faithful. He was content with the minimum necessities even when the essential amenities were lacking. He regularly visited the faithful. He was extremely kind which won for him the hearts of his flock who were really attached to him. For him, their troubles and difficulties were like his own. Such was his love for them. He would never offend anyone. Though kind and understanding, he was firm when he had to be so. A fellow priest now testifies to his zeal. He would never let anyone die without the sacraments and comforted the dying at their bed side. Thus Fr. Hickman spent himself to the end for the welfare of the people entrusted to his care.

The Salesian Characteristics

Fr. Anthony Hickman was a model Salesian possessing typically Salesian qualities. He presented himself as the embodiment of the Salesian characteristic virtues which endeared him to all people especially his confreres.

In his Salesian priestly apostolate he held various responsible positions in the various houses and institutions and parishes of Madras and Bangalore provinces. Today he speaks to us through his exemplary Salesian life.

i Preferential love for the poor

Fr. Hickman always entertained a preferential love for the poor and the needy. He kept in mind the exhortation of Don Bosco: It is not sufficient to love those under our care; they must know that they are loved. All, especially the poor and the sick, knew that he loved them. During his oratory days as a young cleric, he succeeded in getting a medicine chest of Dr. De Chane's medicines. After reading that they could possibly effect a cure (if used correctly), but would do no harm, he proceeded to dispose these medicines. The poor villagers would queue up for his powders and tablets. He soon got the name of being a successful practitioner. Later, as a priest, with the same medicines that would do no harm, he helped, consoled, and 'cured' very many poor villagers. Faith in God and in God's minister worked wonders like Don Bosco's 'bread tablets'.

In 1955 while he was the Director of the Oratory at Broadway, Madras, he often went to Perambur where he gradually formed a Tamil Community

from the scattered and neglected flock, and served as the Assistant Parish priest there.

During the years he worked as the Rector of Our Lady of Refuge, Broadway, Madras, his heart was always with the poor and the needy. While he was the parish priest (1972-1977) at Our Lady of Lourdes Shrine, Perambur, Madras, he was always for the poor – even allowing himself to be accused of neglecting the richer sections of the parish. He did look after all, but his excessive concern for the poorer sections of his parish coming from the Tamil speaking community gave rise to this complaint.

He was not attached to material goods and whatever came to him by way of gifts or otherwise was given away freely to the first poor and needy person who approached him. He went very much out of the way to aid those in need of admissions in schools and institutions. He continued to render such invaluable services to the poor even after he suffered a massive heart attack in April 1973. After his death the fact that so many poor people offered masses in suffrage for his soul testifies to the great love they had for him, years after he had left Perambur.

ii Concern for the young.

In keeping with the life and example of our Father and Founder Don Bosco, Fr. Hickman too endeared himself to the young. Mention is already made of his dedicated service to the young as a young cleric and later as a pastor in his apostolate. He believed in the goodness of the young and placed great hope in them. He followed their progress with eagerness. On his frequent visits to the aspirantates he would whisper a friendly piece of advice to the superiors: "Always hope in a boy. The good seed will bear fruit in its own time."

He was at home with the aspirants and young confreres both at Don Bosco, Cochin, and later at Don Bosco, Mannuthy. He loved their innocent pranks. He was without guile. It was delightful to see him laugh heartily with these youngsters, recounting to them anecdotes from his missionary and early Salesian life.

iii Spirit of Optimism and Joy

Everyone of us remembers Fr. Hickman for his spirit of joy and optimism. All who write about him underline this characteristic trait of his affable personality.

There was joy wherever he went. He would crack jokes, and tell stories to make others happy. More than that, he would willingly lend himself to be

the butt of others' jokes and make the community cheerful. It is narrated that during one of the Salesian get-togethers at Tirupattur Fr. Francis Schlooz made Fr. Hickman stand in the centre of the gathering and told the entire community which included both Salesians and aspirants, "Look at Fr. Hickman. If that scamp can become a Salesian, everybody can." Naturally, all had a good laugh. At another time during the celebration of the feast of Fr. Joseph Carreno, Provincial, Fr. Hickman appeared as a drummer and entertained everyone.

He was very jovial but at times naughty too ... While doing practical training at Veilore, he would tease his companion Bro. Martin, a Spaniard, who was new to the country and not familiar with the local language. Bro. Hickman once set the alarm at 2.00 a.m. and put it under the pillow of Bro. Martin. When the alarm went off, he could not stop it and he ran through the dormitory waking up all the boys. At other times he would come out with jokes that would keep the community laughing. One evening he promised to give the community a dinner with a delicious plate of rabbits. When everyone was enjoying the dish thoroughly, he entered the dining room leading a procession carrying the head of a cat...

During the declining years of his life, in Cochin and Mannuthy, he could not talk much due to his heart ailment but his presence in the community was a source of genuine Salesian joy. There was laughter and mirth wherever Fr. Hickman was, even though he spoke only little. Young confreres always felt at home in his company. When he was away from the community even for a short period, his absence was felt by all.

iv Salesian Hospitality

Hospitality is one of the heritages given to us by St. John Bosco. Hospitality is charity in practice. Fr. Hickman was a good friend who loved his confreres who visited him. He always treated them royally so much so many longed to pay him a visit. Several confreres testify to the fact that he treated people with great generosity. People were always welcomed with a smile. He would treat them with great magnanimity.

A group of sisters from Kerala remembers him for his generous hospitality. They paid a visit to the shrine at Parambur while he was the parish priest there and were treated with great kindness and generosity which made a good impression on those sisters. Many had similar experiences of his prodigal hospitality on various occasions.

v Simplicity of life and personal poverty

One of the signs of a great man is the simplicity of his life style. The greater the person, the simpler he is. The true greatness of Fr. Hickman

can be easily gauged by the simplicity of his life and work. In his eagerness to be of service to others, he neglected his own needs. We have seen already how he put up with inconveniences and hardships in his missionary and priestly life. His own personal belongings were of the barest minimum. He had trained himself from the very beginning to manage with little. Throughout his later years when he had access to greater funds he never thought of himself. He had no tape recorders, type writers, cameras or other modern gadgets. He was accustomed to a very Spartan way of life. Rev. Fr. Vice-Provincial in the funeral oration eulogised his simplicity of life and extolled his example of personal poverty. Fr. Hickman used to come to the Salesian House at Tirupattur to make his annual spiritual retreat. He would arrive on his motor-cycle and for his luggage he had his breviary, a towel and a tooth-brush with an extra set of clothes. He never complained when the room allotted to him was not comfortable or convenient. During the early days at Don Bosco Tirupattur he slept in the teachers' room as though he were in a five-star hotel.

On examining his room after his death we were edified to find that he possessed nothing of value. The costliest item among his personal belongings was his old wrist watch he had been wearing before his death. A few old books and clothes were only his earthly possessions. What a great example to us all !

vi Serenity in Suffering

Throughout his life, suffering was his constant companion. He endured great pains and sufferings due to his heart ailment. He had been suffering since 1973 after his massive heart attack. He used to get spasms of intense pain from time to time. During the onslaught of such severe physical pain and suffering he would frequently whisper: "Don't worry; I will be all right." If someone were to suggest to him to consult a doctor, he would reassure him saying that it was just a passing pain. During the last few months at Mannuthy he was thrice hospitalised. He edified the doctors and nurses in the hospital by his spirit of serene suffering and his characteristic joviality.

A week before his death one of the superiors met him at Mannuthy. He was not keeping too well and had pain though he had just returned from the hospital. He spoke nothing about his discomfort. On enquiring about his health he said, "I will go off without anybody noticing me and without anybody knowing about it." One of his constant preoccupations was not to give any trouble or inconvenience to others. In this he did succeed. He had the

ability of hiding his sufferings especially physical, under the cover of a cheerful exterior.

vii Love for Our Lady and Don Bosco.

As a good Salesian he cultivated a great devotion to the Mother of God. In his priestly ministry he constantly inculcated this devotion to his faithful. His devotion to Mary was filial. He loved to recite the holy rosary and said it with devotion in any place and at any time.

He had a tremendous love for Don Bosco and everything that is Salesian. His particular concern was that he should be faithful to Don Bosco till the end of his life and he would be genuinely happy to see youngsters growing up in the love for Don Bosco. He was indeed a great Salesian; simple, cheerful, hard-working, devoted to Don Bosco and faithful to him in small as well as big things. Fr. Edward Corcoran who knew and greatly admired Fr. Hickman sums up his life in the following words: "His great aim in life was cheerfully to live poor, with the poor, leading the poor and the humble to God through our Blessed Lady, with Don Bosco's spirit."

Conclusion:

Don Bosco used to portray the death of a Salesian as an act of a great triumph for the congregation. The Salesians of the province of Bangalore and the Salesian community of Don Bosco Bhavan, Mannuthy view the death of Fr. Anthony Hickman as a victory. It was the privilege of Fr. Hickman, the first aspirant from Kerala to be also the first fruit of the young province of Bangalore. He offered himself as a perfect victim to the patron of the province— the most Sacred Heart of Jesus on His feast day. Rev. Fr. Thomas Thayil, Provincial, eulogised this triumphant act of Fr. Hickman to the Sacred Heart as he bid adieu to the departed confrere during the farewell speech the funeral day. He depicted Fr. Hickman as the first willing victim of the province so that the province may grow and flourish and continue the mission of Jesus Christ here on earth.

In his death too Fr. Hickman is eloquent. He seems to encourage us all to further the mission God has entrusted to every Salesian, to every community and to every province. His spirit of joy and optimism seems to ring out in our hearts the words of St. Mathew's gospel, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven" (Mt. 5,12).

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Rector.

