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**Br. Joseph
Kallumkel (1930- 2007)**

23rd October 2007

My Dear and loving Confreres / Sisters,

"All who are guided by the Spirit of God are children of God; for what you received was not the spirit of slavery to bring you back into fear; you received the Spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry out, 'Abba, Father! (Jn 12: 14f)

I have just returned from Bandel Basilica of our Blessed Mother after bidding the final adieu to "our beloved and very loving, saintly Br. Joseph Kallumkel." That is how our Regional Superior Fr. Joaquim D'Souza described him in his SMS condolence message to me on receiving the news of the death of Br. Joseph. Br. Joseph left this world for his heavenly abode yesterday morning at about 10.35 A.M. in the B.P. Poddar hospital. He had been admitted there at the beginning of this month to continue the Immunotherapy for Cancer, which he had started at the end of September under the supervision of Dr. Chanchal Goswamy.

The Last Days of Br. Joseph

And if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, provided that we share his suffering, so as to share his glory. In my estimation, all that we suffer in the present time is nothing in comparison with the glory which is destined to be disclosed for us (Rom 8: 17-18)

Br. Joseph shared very much in the suffering of Christ. His health condition had been anything but good during the last few years. He was often in great pain which varied in intensity according to the season and climate. He had a number of complications that kept him indisposed most of the time. In spite of all this he was extremely serene and cheerful, looking for the glory that is to be revealed.

He was diagnosed for Prostrate Cancer about five years ago. At that time the late Dr. Bimalendu Mukerjee operated on him and put him on a course of medicines which eliminated that cancer. Then in the month of August this year Br. Joseph complained one day that he was passing blood in the urine. We took him immediately for a check up. The Ultrasonography that was done on the 10th of August revealed the presence of a tumour in the right kidney. He was operated on the 13th of August after having received the Sacrament of the Sick. The operation was successful. He came back to the community after a few days. It is good to note that when the Ultrasonography was done about a year ago there had been no trace of anything except a small cist in the kidney.

We had to wait for his recovery from the operation before moving on to consult the cancer specialist Dr. C. Goswamy. With his team of doctors it was decided to first ascertain the

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extent to which the Cancer had spread. The biopsy confirmed the malignancy of the tumour, and further tests showed that there were traces of cancer in the bones, the liver and also in the left kidney. Hence immunotherapy was considered as the best possible option, given his age and condition.

Br. Joseph started this treatment at the end of September at the Apollo Hospital, Kolkata. After the first course of treatment he was shifted to the B.P. Poddar hospital for better nursing care and because it was the hospital to which Dr. Goswamy was attached. While going through the next round of treatment it was noticed that his one and only kidney was showing signs of malfunctioning. The treatment had to be supported with frequent dialysis.

Br. Joseph was anointed again on the 7th October owing to his changed condition. The treatment continued peacefully. I went to meet him with other confreres on the 14th of October before going for the annual retreat at Bandel. He was very cheerful and entertained us with his simple jokes and pleasantries. However he seemed a little disturbed with the effects of the dialysis that was done on 13th October. His body had turned cold and so he was a little worried. When the confreres had gone to see him on the 15th morning he appeared to be well and his old cheerful self. This however did not last long. That evening, at the time of visiting hours, a call was received from the hospital stating that Br. Joseph had had a severe heart attack. It happened while he was getting readied for dialysis - all through he had been anxious about this moment! His prayer would have been that of Jesus: *Father, save me from this hour (Cf. Jn12: 27)*.

On reaching the hospital the confreres found Br. Joseph in the ICU and in a coma. In spite of the life supporting drugs, repeated dialysis, help of the ventilator, etc., the various body systems and vital organs began to deteriorate gradually in the days that followed. His death came a week after being in the I.C.U., at exactly 10.35 a.m. on 22nd October while we were on our way to see him and meet the Doctors. May his Soul rest in peace! As St. Paul says in the letter to the Romans, Br. Joseph has indeed been set free and is waiting in hope for the fulfilment of his coming: *"The whole creation, until this time, has been groaning in labour pains. And not only that: we too, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we are groaning inside ourselves, waiting with eagerness for our bodies to be set free. (Rom 8: 22f)*

His early life

Br. Joseph Kallumkel started his life's journey on the 5th of July 1930 at Paika, Kerala. He was born into the family of Kurian and Elizabeth Kallumkel (Narithookil) and baptised at the parish of Paika, Poovarani, in the diocese of Palai (Changanacherry), Kerala on the 12th of July 1930. He was the third child of Mr. Kurian from whose first marriage he had two elder sisters and one younger sister. He lost his mother when he was hardly four years old. After his father's second marriage he had two more sisters and one brother. His was a very pious family of deep faith, love and unity, whose ancestry has been apparently traced back to one baptized by St. Thomas in Kerala. The fruits are seen in the large number of religious and priests among his relatives.

Br. Joseph joined the aspirantate at Salesian College, Sonada in 1948 with the blessings of his beloved father who wrote: "May God bless my son and his good will. May the grace of God come down on you Father and on your Salesian Family! Please remember us also in your precious prayers". His parish priest was all praise for him. He found him to be a good boy with a good character and pleasing manners.

Early Salesian Life

Anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life (Jn 12: 25)

Br. Joseph' first encounter with Salesian life started at Salesian college, Sonada. He was asked to stay a little longer at Sonada than the rest of his companions so that he could learn his trade of tailoring. He applied for admission to the Novitiate in April 1953. In his application he wrote: "*My one desire is to be a holy and zealous Salesian Coadjutor first to save my own soul, second to work for the congregation and save many other souls*". He stated quite emphatically that he was ready to undertake any hardship to persevere in his vocation. He promised to do his very best in everything which he might be asked to undertake. His superiors at Sonada found him good in all things though a little reserved. He was admitted to the Novitiate at Yercaud in May 1953.

At the end of the Novitiate his Novice Master, Fr. Sola, noted that Br. Joseph made a very good novitiate. He found him pious, intelligent and studious. He was obedient and sufficiently open, tranquil and a person of few words. He was seen as happy and hard working. His was admitted to the vows and made the first religious profession in May 1954 at Yercaud.

His application for the First Profession reveals his convictions and earnestness. He wrote: "I want to make my profession in order to imitate Jesus in His poverty, Chastity and Obedience. I can be sure of doing the will of God in obeying my superiors. I want to be a religious, first to save my own soul, second to work for the glory of the congregation and to save many other souls. With the help of Mary most holy I am sure to keep the virtue of purity. It is my greatest desire to be a son of Don Bosco and to do his work of saving the youth from sin. ...**I am ready to undergo any hardship in order to preserve my vocation**".

Later while renewing his vows in May 1957, his superiors at Don Bosco Technical School, Shillong, found him obedient, pious, industrious, a little timid and with a somewhat delicate health. Br. Joseph in his application declared that he had grown in his understanding of religious life and had made every effort to be faithful to all that he had promised God and his superiors at his first profession. One can see in him a great eagerness to make his perpetual profession. He referred to it when he applied for the renewal of his vows. "I have no other choice of life except the state of life in which I am at present and **it is my greatest desire to consecrate my whole life for God** as a Salesian coadjutor in the house of Don Bosco." One notices in him the good will to strive toward perfection. He wanted to make great efforts at improvement.

After his first profession Br. Joseph continued to be in Shillong for the Practical Training. Though having a somewhat delicate health he was always seen as a good worker. He even tried his hand at playing the Harmonium which he learned to play on his own. He had a good religious spirit. He qualified himself in his profession as a tailor at the same time. He was a good Salesian Assistant and practiced the Preventive System well. His superiors, sensing that he would probably keep better health in a warmer climate, transferred him to Don Bosco Liluah in 1959.

While being admitted to the Perpetual Profession the Provincial council noted that Br. Joseph had normal health although a little delicate. He was regular with his practices of piety and made every effort to do his duties well. **He loved his vocation.** Br. Joseph also

noted in his application that during the period of his temporary vows he had tried to understand and practice the Preventive System and the spirit of Don Bosco which he had been taught. He wrote further: "Now, I think I have **understood what it is to be a religious**, what it is **to be a Salesian**. Therefore, it is my greatest and the only desire to make my perpetual vows and to be consecrated to God throughout my life **as a son of Don Bosco**".

His love for his Superiors

One thing that has always stuck me about Br. Joseph was his great love for the Superiors. He was grateful to them for the smallest favour done for him. Whenever he wrote to them he mentioned that he was praying for them. "I don't know how far efficacious my prayers are. But one thing you can be sure of is that I am constant in doing that".

I personally have received cards and letters from Br. Joseph written with much difficulty because his arthritis would make writing very hard for him, and he would have to use both his hands to hold the pen to write. His letters were really very precious and full of love because he truly took a lot of time and trouble to write them. At one point he wrote to a Provincial: "It is a time of trials and tribulations and you are really in need of prayers. Let us hope that everything will be put right by the delicate hand of Mary help of Christians". This was written at a time when the House in Cossipore was having a lot of trouble – Br. Joseph was there to help with his prayers.

Br. Joseph has a number of very loving letters to all the Provincials. He was regular in wishing them for their birthdays and feast days. He was also very frank in expressing his opinion on matters in the house or regarding himself. There was great frankness, love, respect, simplicity and concern in all that he wrote.

His talents at the service of the Mission:

In his great simplicity and love for his boys Br. Joseph made every effort to develop his talents. I was pleasantly surprised when I landed up in Liluah as a cleric for a stint of substitution from Salesian College Sonada, to find Br. Joseph at the electric organ. I had never known about his talent for music till then. Both of us would combine together to take singing practice and boost up the singing in the chapel of the boys. He used his talent well in the praise of the Lord. Even when he was here in the Provincial House he would intone the hymns at the Eucharist. A good number of us would remember with joy his singing of the *Exultet* at Easter. Br. Joseph did that truly very well and prayerfully.

He also tried his hand at painting. In a letter to the Provincial he wrote: "Here in Liluah everything is going smoothly. These days I am spending all my spare time in painting something for the retreat." He wanted to use this talent also for the good of his dear boys.

He was also a Master tailor. It was a pleasure seeing him at his job. It did not last too long because providence led him in another direction. He took great pleasure in ironing clothes and would do it with perfection as long as the arthritis did not prevent from him doing so. However he did not really want to continue with his trade of tailoring. He got into this profession almost by accident – owing to a persistent headache in Sonada. He soon found that the Lord wanted him to do something different by getting involved in health care.

The “Doctor”

The day before Br. Joseph had his heart attack some of us were with him in the hospital. He was in the best of spirits and was talking about how he was often mistaken for a Doctor. Yes, Br. Joseph was in his element when caring for the sick. So many of us have experienced his dedicated and loving care in the infirmary! His apostolate for the sick started in Liluah where he was given charge of the Infirmary. He was there day in and day out looking after the boys and confreres in their moments of sickness. A good number would take advantage of his kindness and go to him to get a good dose of his TLC (Tender Loving Care). He did his utmost to care for those who were sick. In one of his letters we read thus: “As a birthday present I got plenty of sick people with flu. Two of the clerics remained in bed five days each, Fr. Rector, three days and many boys did so even for weeks. It is still carrying on but the number has decreased.” In a number of letters we find him mentioning his service to the Sick and the infirm. Even when he was discussing a future obedience with the provincial, his preference was for the care of the sick. He did his best to attend some useful courses and study something of medicine and First Aid so that he could render this service of his with a professional touch. Br. Joseph used to take personal care of each sick boy and see to his every need. His nursing care brought a lot of relief to the sick. Though some did take advantage of his kindness it did not matter to him, because he loved to serve the sick and serve them well. This effort of his contributed much to remove the normal heartaches and home-sickness of the new aspirants at Bandel and help them tide over the first months of their stay there. Fr. Samuel Mondol wrote to me yesterday sharing his personal experience about the care that Br. Joseph had for the sick: “During the final examinations of class XI in March 1990, I was very sick. Br. Joseph nursed me like a mother, changed my menu to a healthier diet consisting of eggs and milk and revived me in a couple of days. Thus I could take the last few pending exams”. There are a host of other confreres and boys who could easily testify to the TLC that Br. Joseph imparted to them.

Care for Vocations

Br. Joseph took an active part in recruiting vocations whenever he was asked to do so by the Provincial. He lamented the fact that there were very few boys asking to be Lay Brothers and stated clearly that the Brother Vocation was not understood. At the same time he was very appreciative of his Salesian Coadjutor vocation. He believed that if the boys would come in contact with this vocation they would opt for it. He spoke of the need for a better vocation strategy and of looking for a better time to go in search of vocations. He felt that it was important to have a way of getting in touch with the boys before they wrote their examinations. He also suggested that we need to keep in touch with the prospective vocations through regular letters. He lamented the fact that there was a change in mentality among the boys he was trying to contact. He felt that they lacked a missionary spirit and that they did not have a desire for the spiritual matters. In spite of this he took a keen interest in vocational pastoral as long as he was able.

As a Member of the Formation Team

Br. Joseph loved any apostolate he was given and put in his best. During his many years as a Salesian he made a lot of contribution to the area of formation. He spent most of his Salesian life in formation houses starting with Bandel from 1976 to 1982 and again from

1986 to 1999. During these years he cared for the infirmary and all the sick. He spent four years in Kalyani and six years in Mirpara. He took classes, taught good manners – he was a perfect gentleman in all ways, and even took pains to dress simply but well. Some teased him for being very handsome! He also served as the Bursar and in spite of his limitation in this field did his utmost and got the collaboration of others in the community when he could not do things on his own. Br. Joseph was able to perceive when a formee was going the wrong way or when a confrere was in crisis. He has pointed out things to the Provincial in great confidence and as honestly as possible. He wanted the young confreres and the boys to grow into mature spiritual persons convinced about their values and principles, free from any trace of the worldly mentality.

Salesian Loving kindness and Effective Presence

Br. Joseph was always there with his boys. He was their smiling brother, their “best” brother. At recreation he was at their side and he would join in the games as long as his health allowed it and if he was able to play. He was constant in assisting the boys at the different moments of the day. He was happy to relieve the young cleric who needed a little rest. He was unvarying in his dedication to duty and never left his post unless his other duties demanded it. He went personally with the boys to the Doctor and made sure they would be given the medicine on time when they were in bed. His Loving kindness was proverbial. He could be strict, but with love. Many young people loved him and appreciated all he did for them.

A community Man

Community life was something very dear to him. He loved taking part in all the community practices. He followed up keenly the various community events and as long as he was well he never missed any community prayer or meal. He had deep concern for the community members and wanted the community to grow in fervour and regularity. Any irregularity in the community practices pained him immensely. He speaks of this in his letters to his provincial at different moments. Community life for him was a joy and he participated in it even when he had to make some personal sacrifice. He was very helpful to the younger members of the community, be they aspirants or young confreres in practical training. He was always there to help them in the best way he could.

A Man of Relationships

Br. Joseph was one who could relate well with people in a quiet, simple and unassuming way. Fr. Francis Alencherry, the General Councillor for the Missions, writes about the capacity of Br. Joseph to keep in touch with people. He writes: *“I wish to express to you and to all the confreres of the Province my heartfelt condolences on the passing away of Bro. KK Joseph. After suffering so much he has finally gone to the Lord. Now he will intercede for us all with the same love with which he followed every event in the province.”*

“Bro. Joseph was a real friend to me in spite of the difference in age between us. From the time I did my practical training in Liluah I came to know him more intimately and to admire his humble and simple ways in living his Salesian consecration. He was faithful till the end and did all that he could in spite of several difficulties and handicaps. I can never forget the encouragement he gave me in my own vocation and the great respect he had for

me when I was appointed his superior. He was a truly humble, generous and available Salesian".

The suffering servant of the Lord

The Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces; and the reproach of his people will he take away from all the earth: for The Lord has spoken it It shall be said in that day, 'Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is The Lord.' We have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation. (Is 25: 8f)

All through his life there seems to have been some anxiety about his health. But he took it all in stride and did not make it an issue when it came to caring for the sick and fulfilling his duties. He did suffer a lot of pain as he advanced in years. At times we might not have taken him seriously when he complained about pain – in those situations he never took it amiss. Even shaking hands with people became difficult for him at times. He hardly complained, but he knew when he had to care for himself. Though of a delicate disposition, he cared for the sick very lovingly. He did not take medicine till he was diagnosed with cancer and suffered a heart attack a few years ago. From then on he was a veritable medicine chest! He made sure to take all the medicines according to the Doctor's prescription. He did the same with his charges.

He accepted all his pain and suffering with great serenity and patience. He truly had the gift of sharing in the suffering of Christ for the sake of his body, the Church, and he did all with joy and love.

I have described above the last years of his pain and suffering. The intensity of his suffering was matched by a marvellous growth in serenity and peace. There was hardly ever a complaint that escaped his lips. He just took it all as part of his vocation and accepted it for the Glory of the Lord and for the Salvation of Souls.

The source of his strength

Whoever serves me, must follow me, and my servant will be with me wherever I am. If anyone serves me, my Father will honour him. (Jn12:26)

From the very first moment of his formation we notice in Br. Joseph a great love for prayer! He had a deep interior life and was often seen praying the Rosary and making his own personal visits to the Lord. He cultivated a deep religious spirit and was always punctual for his practices of piety and meditation. Even when he was not in the best of health he was always punctual at the community prayer. When he did not turn up we knew immediately that things were not at all OK with him. He wanted every one to be punctual too. He tried to make the liturgy meaningful and used his simple talents to enliven it for the sake of his boys. His love for the Eucharist is truly to be admired. It is this love that urged him on to give his best to make it lively and attractive to his boys.

Every letter of his mentions our Blessed Mother, the Help of Christians, in very loving terms. He had a great trust in her and entrusted himself to her care. He had a very simple but deep prayer life and strove to be united with the Lord during the day. He was a great intercessor! I am sure he will do that for us now that he is free from all his pain and suffering enjoying the heavenly bliss.

My Sincere Thanks

Before concluding let me express my sentiments of gratitude. In the first place I would like to give my sincere thanks to the Almighty God for the wonderful gift he had given us in the person of Br. Joseph Kallumkel: he was indeed a genuine Salesian, a faithful and saintly religious, a caring human being. Then I would like to express my thanks to all the members of the Provincial House Community. They have spared no pains in looking after Br. Joseph from the moment he came in here in 2005. In a special way I would like to mention Rev. Fr. Vice Provincial and Rector of the Provincial House community, Fr. Jose Chunkapura, who tried in several ways to reduce the pain and suffering of Br. Joseph by looking for relief wherever possible, including homeopathic medication. Fr. John Puthiyedathuchalil was close to Br. Joseph and found a regular doctor to visit him. Fr. Antony Earathara was always there caring for Br. Joseph in every need and accompanying him to the Doctors and seeing to his well-being. He was constantly helped in this task by Fr. Joseph Pampadiyil and Fr. Jude Sebastian. Fr. Joseph Verzotto and Br. Joseph Paranthara were ready companions placed at his side during the day. Many other confreres were also there along the way especially during the last few months to cheer him up and encourage him as he moved into battle against the Cancer. He was much loved and cared for by all, and the doctors like Dr. Dipankar Dutta and Dr. Pratik Das and the homoeopathic doctor, Dr. Chanchal did much to improve his condition, ably assisted by the watchful care of the home nurse Mrs. Bijily Mridha. I thank the Lord for such loving and caring persons and for the Sisters of Mary Immaculate and the Sisters Adorers who contributed to the well being of Br. Joseph by their sisterly visits and care. I would like to thank the two communities of Bandel – of the Basilica and the Seminary - for very efficiently making all the arrangements for the funeral and for taking care of all the guests. May the Lord bless all these persons and reward them for their loving service.

Conclusion

Father, glorify your name! A voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will again glorify it.' (Jn 12: 28)

Dear Br. Joseph, we will truly miss you! Quite a number of us owe you our vocation because you were there to look after everyone – especially the new ones with a great loving care! We can be sure that from his place in heaven Br. Joseph will be ministering to all the sick and the needy with much love. As in the case of Joseph of Old, St Peter would be telling us now "Go to Joseph". Yes, we will go to our Brother Joseph in prayer and ask his intercession for all the sick and the infirm, but above all for more zealous and generous vocations to the Salesian Brotherhood.

Yours lovingly in Don Bosco

Fr. John Berger

Fr. John Berger, SDB
(Provincial)

