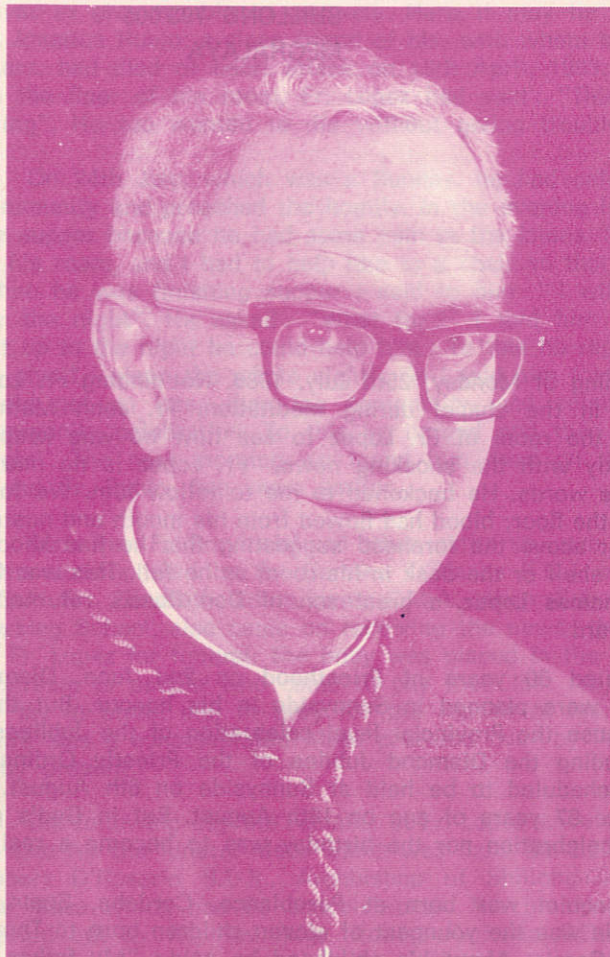


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Rev. Fr.

Joaquim Thomas Lopez
S.D.B.

Dear Confreres,

It was the morning of Monday, 25th July, 1988. Not finding Fr. Lopez at his usual place in the chapel during meditation, Fr. John Mathew, Socius, went up to the room of Fr. Lopez to see how he was keeping. He came back quickly with the shocking news, "Fr. Lopez is no more!" I couldn't believe his words. He beckoned to me to follow him. We found Fr. Lopez lifeless on the floor; blood had flowed from his mouth and nostrils; there was a cut just above the forehead suggesting that he had knocked his head against the shelf or the desk in his room as he fell. This was how **Rev. Fr. Joaquim Thomas Lopez**, a great son of Don Bosco, returned to the Lord for his reward.

He had completed 60 years of Priesthood on 2nd June. Diamond Jubilee celebrations were planned in Sunnyside in his honour. But these were cancelled because the Provincial level celebration of the Jubilees of the Confreres, including the Diamond Jubilee of the Priestly Ordination of Fr. Lopez, was scheduled to be held at Sunnyside on 6th August. He was due to complete 87 years of age on 18th August. But in God's plan neither the Jubilee celebration nor the birthday was to become a reality!

Childhood Days : Joaquim was born at Pozoblanco, Cordoba, Spain, on 18th August, 1901. He was the youngest of eleven children born to Thomas Lopez and Catalina Garcia. About his childhood he said: "My father fell from a mule and was sick for 11 years. Forty days after I was born, my mother went to visit a sick friend out of charity; but she contracted that disease and died within three hours! And we were left without a mother. The eldest brother was 13 years old, and my father was bed-ridden". So Joaquim had to face hard days in his childhood; but he was brought up with love and in the fear God.

Vocation : One day a Salesian Priest went to say Mass in Joaquim's Parish; he served the Mass. At the end of the Mass the Priest asked him, "Do you like to come with me?" He looked at him with astonished eyes; he knew

him and his family, but did not know that he was a Salesian. When he reached home after the Mass the Priest was waiting for him; he was the Rector of the aspirantate; he repeated the invitation and Joaquim went with him without any hesitation. He entered the aspirantate at Ecija on 25th June, 1914, the day on which the First World War broke out.

Formative Years : He did his Novitiate at San Jose del Valle and made his First Profession on 12th September, 1919. He studied Philosophy at Montilla. It was during his Practical Training (Montilla 1920-24) that the first automobiles arrived in Spain. He used to recall how he had the first ride in a car; even though there was a cloud of dust that dirtied him, and after riding some distance he had to get out and push because the car would not go ahead as the engine got over-heated, the experience was a thrilling one. He went through a 4-year diploma course in Engineering (Peritaje Mecanico).

There followed the Theology course at Campelli which was crowned by his ordination to the Priesthood on 2nd June, 1928 at Sevilla.

Priest and Missionary : His first appointment as Priest was to Malaga as Catechist. But Mgr. Eugene Mederlet returned to Europe looking for volunteers to work in his mission territory, and Fr. Lopez offered himself. So the very next year we find Fr. Lopez along with three others coming to India with Mgr. Mederlet, and starting to work in Madras. He was much in demand for his engineering skills and was entrusted with the construction of various buildings.

Not long after his arrival in India he got the news of the tragic end of his Confreres at Malaga, who were among the 210 Salesians martyred in Spain during the Communist rebellion. Fr. Lopez would have been one among them had it not been for his missionary vocation !

In 1933 we find him in North India making plans for Don Bosco, Liluah. Mgr. Mathias wanted him to construct a boarding for 1000 boys ! Fr. Lopez and Mgr. Bars had a hard time convincing him that the project was an impossible one, especially considering the limitations of space, finance and personnel. Later he worked six years in Krishnagar.

In 1936, when Our Lady's House was destroyed by fire, Fr. Lopez went to Sonada to make adjustments to an old building for temporarily housing the Studentate. Later he accompanied Fr. Uguet to Sonada to begin the construction of the present buildings.

In 1937 we find him at Baghmara, and two years later at Barpeta Road. It would not be too much to say that in the early years of the Assam Mission Fr. Lopez was behind the construction of every Mission Centre that came up in North East India.

During World War II, when most of the Confreres were interned in concentration camps, Fr. Lopez was among the few who held the fort; since Spain was not among the warring nations, he was spared. From 1940 till 1954 he worked in Tezpur and Liluah, and in 1954 he was back in Tura where he stayed for three years before moving to Baghmara once again. Later he went to North Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh and Doomdooma.

In 1965, along with the newly appointed bishop of Dibrugarh, Rt. Rev. Hubert D'Rosario, came another master builder, Fr. Ignatius Rubio. From then on Fr. Lopez and Fr. Rubio worked jointly for the construction of a number of buildings in Dibrugarh.

In 1972 Fr. Lopez came to Shillong, and here again continued supervising the construction of many a building which Fr. Rubio erected.

Home Visits and Ministerial Award

'Poverty' and 'Renunciation' were no empty words for Fr. Lopez. During his 59 years of missionary life he paid only three brief visits to his homeland and dear ones.

On his second visit to Spain(1967), the Spanish Foreign Affairs Ministry conferred on him the OUTSTANDING MISSIONARY AWARD in recognition of his long and selfless missionary service in India.

His third visit (1978) was for reasons of health. He was under treatment for some time in the Barraquer Clinic of Barcelona. The visit coincided with the Golden Jubilee of his Ordination, which was solemnly celebrated by his dear ones at home and the people of his locality. On this occasion the Mayor of Pozzoblanco awarded him a Medal for meritorious service, and the event is recorded in the Acts of the Extra-ordinary Session of the Council dated 23rd June, 1978.

The Last Phase : With 57 years of missionary life and 67 of Salesian life, behind him on 18th April, 1986 he arrived at Sunnyside on transfer, his active life deemed at an end. It was here that I came into close contact with Fr. Lopez and got the opportunity to know of his deep religious sentiment and Salesian Spirit. He was exemplary in his religious observance and punctual for community programmes. He would rise at 4.45 a.m. and finish part of his Divine Office and the Holy Mass before the community arrived for meditation. He was then available for Confessions. During the day he would set to other work. People came to him for plans to be drawn up for buildings they wanted to construct, for bringing up-to-date accounts which had been in arrears, for preparing type-written books on Homeopathy, and other tasks which he willingly did in a spirit of service.

He was always thoughtful and considerate towards others and wanted never to give trouble to any one. Here it may be mentioned that when Fr. Ignatius Rubio, a close friend of his, with whom he had worked several years, had died of heart attack on 15th April, 1983, and was found dead on the floor of his room, Fr. Lopez had said: "This is the best way of dying". He too wanted to die without giving trouble to anybody!

On 24th July, which was a Sunday, he had celebrated Mass for the community and preached the homily. In the evening he did not come down for supper because he had some pain in the knees. So we brought supper to his room, and I had to help him to a chair so that he could sit and eat. When he was finishing supper I said to him: "I will keep a novice here for the night". He asked: "What for?" I told him that if he needed to get up in the night he could help him: To this he replied: "What help can he give? I sleep the whole night". So I told him that the next morning he could get up later than the community, and celebrate Mass after the community celebration. To this he agreed and then we bade him "Good Night". The next morning we found him dead on the floor just like his friend, Fr. Rubio, five years earlier.

Soon Rev. Fr. Provincial and other confreres were informed, Fr. J. Larrea came accompanied by Sr. Carmen O'Blanca R.C.J. and Sr. Maria Gordon R.C.J.; Sr. Elizabeth Edattukaran F.M.A., then Superior of the Raspbun Nursing School, also came on receiving the news; they prepared the body of Fr. Lopez for funeral. The body was placed in the study hall. There was a stream of people who came to pay their last respects to Fr. Lopez as he lay in state, and to pray for the repose of his soul. In the evening there was a concelebrated Mass presided over by Fr. Provincial, with the body present.

The following day the remains of Fr. Lopez were taken to the Cathedral in time for the funeral Mass which was fixed for 2.00 p.m. Most Rev. Mgr. Hubert D'Rosario S.D.B., Archbishop of Shillong-Gauhati, presided over the Mass which had 83 concelebrants. The blessing of the corpse was carried out by Rt. Rev. Mgr. Robert Kerketta S.D.B., Bishop of Tezpur. There was a capacity crowd at the Cathedral to participate in the service. There followed the funeral cortege to the Laitumkhrah Cemetery, where Rev. Fr. Provincial conducted the obsequies.

Conclusion : Fr. Lopez is no more with us. But he will continue to live on in our memories as a humble and exemplary religious and a zealous missionary. During a Missions Seminar, which was conducted here at Sunnyside, Fr. Lopez became vibrant with emotion when he narrated how, in his younger days in Tezpur and elsewhere, he used to spend 24 days a month touring. He would sometimes lament that touring, as a missionary practice, is not resorted to sufficiently now-a-days.

In the Second Letter to Timothy, St. Paul says : "I have fought the good fight to the end; I have run the race to the finish; I have kept the faith; all there is to come for me now is the crown of uprightness which the Lord, the upright judge, will give me on that Day", (2 Tim 4:7-8). Fr. Lopez has, without doubt, run the race to the finish and kept the faith as well. Let us pray that the crown of righteousness, which was being prepared for him all these years, may be his without delay.

I would beg you to pray also for the House of Sunnyside, that the novices may be inspired by the good example of Fr. Lopez, whose memory still lingers in our midst, and that they may become good Salesians and zealous missionaries.

In the death of Fr. Lopez, though we have lost a friend and an exemplary Salesian on earth, we have gained an intercessor in Heaven. May he teach us, who are left behind, to follow his spirit of work, the love for his salesian vocation, and the fervour with which he lived it out to the very end.

Fr. M.A. Isaac, S.D.B.,
Director of Novices,
Sunnyside, Shillong 793 005,
Meghalaya.

For Necrology (25th July)

Fr. Joaquim Thomas Lopez, Shillong, India, 1988, age 87.