

# FR. JOHN VARRICATT SDB

A LIFE IN FIDELITY TO A "RULE OF LIFE"



31 May 1931 to 21 August 2002



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**"He must increase, but I must decrease" Jn. 3,30.**

"The Province has just completed the first 10 years of its existence. God has revealed his presence among us in many ways. Today the Lord has visited our province in a different, though difficult way, yet symbolic of his love for us in taking one of us to himself, the first from this province, in the person of Rev. Fr. John Varricatt. Though he was 71 years old, no one expected him to leave us so suddenly. Every one loved him and misses him" spoke Fr. Medabalimi Balaswamy at the funeral.

### **Circumstances of His Death**

Fr. John gave us the first shock on 18<sup>th</sup> August, Sunday, when he returned rather too soon from Ramnagar, a sub-station of Kazipet Parish. He had complained of pain on his upper arms and shoulders and had been sweating profusely. He had allowed the catechist to distribute communion and had come away soon after the Mass. The doctor who was called

immediately prescribed some medicines and also requested that an ECG as well as an X-ray of the neck be taken. Interestingly Fr. John had done the dowsing for his illness and declared any heart trouble out of bounds and had tried to convince the doctor also of the same.

On 20<sup>th</sup> evening Fr. John said his last Mass which was attended by Bro. Castilino and Deacon Thumma Vijaya Prathap. After Mass, he had supper and was talking to the young confreres who went to meet him. Later at around 9.30 p.m., on hearing the sound of the Radio from his room, I had gone in to inquire about his health. Teasingly I had asked whether he was listening to Radio Vatican or BBC. At 10.00 p.m., when I went to the chapel, Fr. John followed me. Later he closed the door of the chapel so as not to disturb

me and put on the light outside, to verify from the notice board who was to say the community mass on the following day. It was his turn. Later, he asked me whether I would substitute him. I was edified to see how he was taking responsibility for tasks entrusted to him even in his illness.

On 21<sup>st</sup> morning he got up late. He had his breakfast as usual, served by Br. Ery Balraj, his secretary. After breakfast he sent his secretary for breakfast and asked him to come back with some water. At 8.25 a.m. Fr. John called out to Br. Suman Toppo who was sweeping the varandha. Seeing Fr. John without his shirt, Suman started to tease him, 'Thathagaru, you are showing off your muscles'. Fr. John asked him to bring a glass of water urgently. Realizing that Fr. John was serious, Suman ran down to bring some water. When he returned he found that Fr. John had already slumped into his chair and was struggling for breath. It was 8.30 a.m.

Suman immediately rushed down and informed us. Three of us were already on the way to see Fr. John. Immediately I asked Deac. Prathap to call Fr. James. Fr. Rayanna was asked to contact the doctor. As I rushed to Fr. John's side, I called Br. Naresh and some of the other brothers who were around. We immediately started to pray for him. While I was still holding him, Fr. John gasped for breath three times. The third time his head fell forward. It must have been 8.35 a.m. We shifted Fr. John

to his bed and tried to revive him. Dr. Suresh arrived at 8.40 a.m. He examined him and he too tried to revive him. At 8.45 Dr. Suresh confirmed Fr. John's death.

The event was a deep shock for all of us. All fell silent, trying to make meaning of what was happening. Fr. John, even in his death, looked calm and serene. All of us took turns to pay our homage to Fr. John and pray at his side. The bishop, priests, sisters, children from the nearby institutions and the people from the neighbourhood came to pay their last respects to Fr. John. At 9.00 p.m. Fr. Provincial arrived with the mortuary on wheels. Dressed in a chasuble and holding a rosary and the cross, Fr. John's body was shifted to the chapel and placed in front of the altar. Throughout the day and night, the brothers and the student sisters took turns to pray for him. In the morning the community had a special Mass said for Fr. John. Being the feast of Queenship of Mary, Fr. Provincial remarked that 'what was fulfilled in Mary has become a reality today for Fr. John.'



Provincial Fr. Balaswamy: Adieu Fr. John

Being the first death in the province, it was decided that the burial would be at Karunapuram. The relations of Fr. John arrived by 3.15 p.m. The funeral began with the farewell service at 3.45 p.m. At 4.00 p.m., due to rainy weather, probably due to the prayers of Fr. John himself who would not have liked an open air Mass, we began the funeral Mass, presided over by the Bishop Thumma Bala of Warangal, in the chapel. Then we bade farewell to Fr. John. Fr. Provincial spoke on behalf of the Salesians. Br. Aruldass Pichaimuthu sdb, Br. Poliseti Jojappa and Br. Suman Toppo sdb spoke on behalf of the students. Br. Gabriel Fernandez, Fr. John's novitiate companion, also spoke. Then there was the funeral procession and the burial which ended by 6.45 p.m. Salesians from practically all the houses of the province, relations of Fr. John, priests, religious and people from around joined us in our moment of sorrow. This was also a special moment when all of us at Vishwa Jyothi Don Bosco College, fathers, brothers and sisters spontaneously came together around Fr. John. This experience of solidarity will be cherished always.



Bishop Thumma Bala blesses Fr. John

After supper, when all had dispersed, we sat together at the portico to share our sorrow and our experience of these two days which had gone by. Many of us shared our personal feelings and recalled our last moments with Fr. John.

### **In Retrospect: Early Life**

Fr. John was born to Thommen Ouseph Varricatt and Annamma Chemparathi in Idduki District, Kerala, on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1931 as the youngest in the family after seven elder brothers and two elder sisters. Sr. Mary (Gertrude) SABS, his eldest sister who is at Thodupuzha, and Paul, an advocate and just elder to him, are the only siblings alive today. He has several other close relatives who are priests and nuns. His priest brother, Msgr. Jacob Varricatt, the former Vicar General of Thalassery diocese, died on 21<sup>st</sup> June 2001.



At Sr. Gertrude's Jubilee with brother Msgr. Jacob

Mr. Paul recalls John as a quiet boy who minded his own business. When John came to Madras to study, he stayed in his house. Paul chose Hindi as the second language for John who

found it very useful later when he was going to the oratories in Shillong. John was at Loyola College for four years, from 1948 to 1952, doing his intermediate and B.Sc. (Hons.). Archbishop Joseph Powathil of Chengannasserry was his college mate at that time. Though a quiet lad, John was fond of Hindi songs and used to call his brother to watch Hindi Movies. Paul found this strange and he could not understand what attracted John to these songs and movies. At the same time, Paul recalls, it was difficult for any one to make John change his mind. He had his own mind and he would argue to defend his position. He wrote after Fr. John's death, "Right from his childhood he was docile and maintained his cherubic calm, and smile, and he was the darling of our family. The unique feature in him was that he refused to be provoked and was always happy and sprightly."

After his graduation in Physics John heard God's call to become a missionary priest and joined the Salesian Aspirantate as a late vocation at Tirupattur on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1952. He was immediately appointed as a demonstrator at Sacred Heart College, Tirupattur, and had to teach his own companions and assistants. Fr. Yeddanapalli Selvaraj, one of his senior companions, recalls being taught Analytical Geometry and Calculus by him. Being their teacher, they used to call him *Sir John*. He was very conscientious in his work and quite strict with all.



With Fr. Master after the vestition

From here he went to the Novitiate at Yercaud. Fr. Egidio Sola, his novice master, saw in John a very promising vocation and had great confidence in him. John received the cassock on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1954 from the hands of Archbishop Louis Mathias and professed as a Salesian on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1955. He did his philosophical studies at Kotagiri, and on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1957 came back to Tirupattur for his Practical training. He was appointed as a Lecturer in physics, as in those days the university allowed first class B.Sc. graduates to be lecturers.

There are many stories about Fr. John's practical training days. Fr. Chacko Thattil, who was an aspirant at the time, recalls how Br. John, who used to teach in the college and looked after the hostel boys, also used to assist the Pre-University aspirants who had their study hall in the college. Fr. John was strict but fair, and there never was any complaint of partiality.

Though he may not have been popular like some others, he was loved and appreciated by the boys. The hostel boys were very fond of him because of the attention he gave to them. Other assistants like Br. P.E. Abraham were cunning and used to bluff him or take advantage of his simple and straightforward ways. Thus when there were inter-group matches, P.E. Abraham, the assistant of the second group, rather than field two equal teams, would field a weak team as well as a strong team. In this way his strong team would come out victorious in the end against the first group.

On 24<sup>th</sup> May 1960 he made his Perpetual Profession in the hands of V. Rev. Fr. John Med, the Provincial, and went on 8<sup>th</sup> July 1960 for his theological studies to Shillong. He was always a diligent rather than a fun loving student. He was taken up with the mission work in the hills and picked up Hindi and Khasi, and was going to a Hindi speaking oratory.



The Gathukuli oratory team, 1963

He received his tonsure and four minor orders from Msgr. Ferrando

in 1961 and 1962. On 24<sup>th</sup> November 1962, after two and half years of theological studies, under the emergency of the Chinese attack, he came down to the south along with his other theology companions. They reached Kotagiri on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1962 and resumed their theological studies. Here too the students went to the various oratories in the villages around Kotagiri. As John liked mission work, he grabbed the opportunity to learn Tamil. At Kotagiri on 28<sup>th</sup> April he received Sub-Diaconate from Msgr. Anthony Padiyara and on 25<sup>th</sup> October 1963 Deaconate from Msgr. P. Pereira.

### Priest and Teacher

Fr. John was ordained by Msgr. David Marianayagam, Bishop of Vellore, on 8<sup>th</sup> April 1964, along with ten others, at the Salesian House, Tirupattur. He celebrated his First Mass on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1964 at Christ the King Church, Chelave, his home parish. He did his confession examination and received the faculty for confessions on 29<sup>th</sup> Sept 1964.



Fr. John Med at the ordination of Fr. John by Bp. David Marianayagam

On 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1964 he returned to Salesian House Tirupattur as the Warden of Rinaldi Hostel and as Science and Mathematics teacher for the aspirants. I can recall how he used to call one of my companions ‘lucky dip’ because, without much thinking or logic, he always had a ready answer for any question. During his class I had the privilege, along with my friend K.J. Joseph, to stay close to him, one on either side, as his guardian angels. This helped us to pay more attention and he could concentrate better on the teaching! Later on Fr. John would recall this to the students of philosophy when I was their Rector. We enjoyed his classes and his pleasant company. It was a pleasure to watch him play basket ball with the staff team. It is said that he made the first basket ball court in Tirupattur during his practical training days. He was constantly on the move, walking or cycling to and fro between the college and Rinaldi Hostel, or the Hostel and the Aspirantate. Though he was strict, he was very much concerned about his wards, the college students, and was very much liked by them. He assiduously followed up their studies as well as their Christian education.



Hostel Day at Tirupattur, 1966: With Fr. Hugh Tuena and Fr. James McGuire

John was not satisfied with his work in the college as he wanted to be a missionary. On 5<sup>th</sup> June 1966 he was sent to Pannur as confessor and also as the Mathematics and Science teacher. He was a much sought after doctor with his poison stone as a sure remedy for snake bites or scorpion stings, and the Eight De Chane Remedies for any common disease. On 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1969 he went as Catechist to Varadarajanpet where he continued his work as mathematics and science teacher.

### Life as a Missionary



The Young Priest John

His missionary urge finally began to find expression on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1970 when was made assistant parish priest of Jolarpet. Fr. John became the parish priest when Fr. Francis Guezou moved up to Yellagiri Hills

At Jolarpet, beyond the routine pastoral work, Fr. John involved himself in direct mission work. Since Fr. Abraham Panampara, then Vice-Principal of Sacred Heart College, Tirupattur, had been in Guntur, and knew a little Telugu, Fr. John used to ask him to go to a sub-station on a hill near Kuppam, in Chittoor district, to say Mass occasionally. Since it was very far, Fr. Abraham and his Salesian companion used stay there over night. There were no conveniences whatsoever in the small sacristy where they had to stay. From there they would proceed ten kilometres more to say Mass for three or four poor families in another village. There too sometimes they had to remain overnight in a cowshed where John was accustomed to sleep when he went there. Fr. Abraham noticed that John did not mind any of these inconveniences in his work in the villages.

From Jolarpet Fr. John moved to Udiyandiram on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1973 as the assistant parish priest there. Finally on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1974 Fr. John came to Brahmanakodur of Guntur diocese to be the parish priest, marking the first phase of Fr. John's missionary life in Andhra Pradesh.

The Brahmanakodur parish was handed over to the Salesians on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1971. Fr. Thomas Chinnappa was the first Parish Priest. Fr. John succeeded him when he went to Mangalagiri to begin Don Bosco Prem Nivas for the physically challenged orphans. Fr. John

continued in earnest his mission work in the various villages around Brahmanakodur as well as in the town of Ponnur. Fr. John picked up Telugu very fast and started giving short sermons and teaching catechism. He was often on the motorcycle and visited various mission stations, preaching and baptising. In the beginning Br. M.D. Jacob, then a student of theology, was his regular helper during the summer holidays. There was no place of worship anywhere other than a prayer hut at Mamillapalli and that too was destroyed in a storm. He built two good churches, one at Modukur and the other at Vallabiraipalem.



The Church at Modukur

Fr. John used to speak about the way that the Church in Modukur was built. The work was half done and no money was forthcoming. Fr. Tohill, the then mission councillor had written that nothing more would be given for this. Fr. John would not give up easily. When Fr. Tohill visited Brahmanakodur, Fr. John took him to the village and impressed on him the urgency of the situation. Walking on

the slushy road and seeing the good-hearted and poor people, Fr. Tohill agreed immediately to send the required money.

The community that he built up at Modukur is one of the greatest achievements of Fr. John. He took a lot of interest in the people and instructed them strictly. The people of Modukur fondly remember Fr. John as the one who gave them faith in Christ. He also found a place in Ponnur belonging to Mrs. Thulasireddy, a Catholic, running an English Medium School. This is where the present Bosco Ashram is situated now.

Fr. Thattil Chacko, was his assistant for a few months in 1976-77. Both were missionary minded, yet their missionary methods differed. Their differences were such that everyday their discussions would go on late into the night and end with the same conclusion, "you keep your view and I keep mine". Fr. John was very observant and did everything very meticulously. He was so correct that sometimes materials meant for the people remained undistributed. "It is better that things get spoilt rather than spoil the people with things or bring division among them," he used to say.



Fr. John Lens with his old assistants at his Golden Jubilee

He was interested in the people and visited them often. Though Fr. John lived a very austere life, he was generous with others, and did not want force his austerities on others. One day Fr. Chacko noticed a new tiffin carrier on the shelf. When asked Fr. John said that he had bought it to buy meat for him. The fact is that they never used that tiffin carrier, though the intention to use it was always there.

On Nov. 19, 1977, the great killer cyclone destroyed most of the huts and thousands died. Although only a few Catholics died, most of them lost almost everything that they had. Fr. John tried his level best to be support to his flock at this time of their dire need.

An interesting incident took place in May 1979. Fr. John had expanded the work of the parish and had wanted someone to help him in the Parish. Hence Fr. John asked the provincial for a priest. On a fine day our good Salesian Brother, Charles Dias,

arrived at Brahmanakodur. Fr. John wondered what the provincial was planning to do. In his own inimitable way he communicated his feelings, urgently, through a telegram: "Charlie has come, where shall I go?" The meaning was very clear. The Provincial was not able to respond to Fr. John adequately and Fr. John was not satisfied with the way in which the missions were cared for in Andhra Pradesh.

A meticulous chronicler, he himself recorded this in the chronicles of Brahmanakodur: "Fr. John is transferred and is going to Madras province. It seems that he is not satisfied by the treatment of the missions by the superiors here." Fr. John was back at Jolarpet on 5<sup>th</sup> August 1979 and took charge of the parish on 24<sup>th</sup> August. Fr. John returned to Andhra Pradesh decisively on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1981.

He was sent as an assistant parish priest at St. Theresa's Church, Sanathnagar, Hyderabad. Fr. John Lens was his Parish Priest. Fr. John was not very happy with the city apostolate and was eager to go to the missions and so was sent to Ravulapalem in 1982. After one year he went as Confessor, and Mathematics and Science teacher to St. Anthony's Industrial Institute, Kadapa. After three years, in 1985, Fr. John once again back at Ravulapalem as Assistant Parish Priest.

Babji Savarapu, the Catechist at Ravulapalem, has very fond memories of Fr. John. "He is a

simple father who said Mass well and preached well." He would visit mission stations regularly and was very close to the poor, talking to them, helping them in little ways in their needs. He would visit their families and say Mass for them even if they were two or three only so that they would have a chance to receive Holy Communion. There were regular meetings of Catechists every week. He would take classes for them on Old Testament, New Testament, Church History, Family Planning and other topics of interest and concern for them in the ministry. On his visits to the mission stations he would visit the sick, and would give them communion which he was always carrying on his person.

Together with the catechists he had prepared tapes with gospel passages and religious songs. These he would play in the mission stations before the service. The recorded sound of church bells would serve for the Church bell. Everywhere he prepared the people for confessions, and communion would be distributed only for those who had confessed. He would search and find out catholics who had come as migrants and saw to it that they were looked after and felt at home in the parish.



Baptism at P.T. Parru, 1988

In May 1987 Fr. John came back to his first Parish in Andhra Pradesh, now shifted to P.T. Parru. He worked for one year as assistant parish priest. After one year, in May 1988, he was asked to be the parish priest of the new parish of Mary Help of Christians that was attached to St. Michael's, Guntur. During his third year, in 1990 May, the Destroyer Cyclone struck with its epi-centre in Guntur district.

His Guntur sojourn was marked by his efforts to make sure that the new Parish had a good foundation. He had the task of drawing up the boundaries of the parish, reaching understanding with the neighbouring parishes and contacting all the parishioners. Contacting people was the *forte* of Fr. John, who would go out of his way to get in touch with any family that he would hear of. He was very methodical in preparing the documentation required for the parish and brought all the records up-to-date. He also ensured that the people would not have to run to their old parish for their records. Fr. John also updated the family records, issued family cards and visited every family. Some of his

difficulties came from unforeseen quarters, yet he ensured that the parish had its independent identity, not merely as an appendix to St. Michael's. This was difficult, yet important, because the people who were coming to the Sahayamatha Church too had their own identity now as members of the parish.

Fr. Jose Abraham, who had a very close association with Fr. John Varricatt speaks of him with great enthusiasm: "I was inspired by his simplicity of life and his life of poverty. He was very kind and showed respect to every person he met, especially the very poor. He gave me lot of timely and practical pieces of advice, which are very useful to me as a priest today. He had great zeal for the missions and for evangelization. He was always available for celebrating the Holy Eucharist and other sacraments. His visits to the families made an impact in the life of the people. He personally prepared people for baptism, confession, first communion and marriage. He did not look for popularity but lived up to the convictions he had. The sufferings and pain that he had to endure due to misunderstandings, he suffered by himself and did not express to others. He had a deep and filial devotion to Our Lady and St. John Bosco."

Come 1991 and it was again time for Fr. John to move on. This time he

was back to Kadapa, a second time as confessor and teacher. He revived his contacts with the different substations and helped to build up the Christian communities there. People were fond of Fr. John who would visit them and celebrate the Sacraments of Penance and Eucharist without fail.

**Fr. Ramedini Balraj writes from Kadapa:** *“I was with Fr. John here as a student, practical trainee and as a priest. He taught me Mathematics. He was very systematic and took extra classes for the weak students. In front of the church there are big margosa trees planted and nurtured by him. The shade and the cool breeze reminds us of Fr. John. He used to teach the boys to make rosaries. During the recreation they used to rush to him. He was friendly with the boys and they used to go to him for guidance.*

*Fr. John was a good missionary and was interested in preaching the good news to the people. He would go regularly to Bachumpalli and Buggalapalli. Before Mass he would make sure that all made their confessions. He admitted some of the boys at the institute.*

*Fr. John was very strict with himself and expected all Salesians to be faithful to the rules of the house. He was always ready to preach recollections to the sisters. There used to be a big rush for confessions to Fr. John. He used to say that he was never a superior*

*in his life and used to joke that we must keep the superiors far away.*

*I saw Fr. John as a man of prayer, pure in word and deed, a living saint.”*

1993 saw Fr. John as the Parish Priest of Don Bosco Parish, Chandur in Nalgonda Diocese. He was also the confessor for the college students and the novitiate community. Once again, the not so young Fr. John was busy looking after the various substations. He would reach wherever people were, not withstanding the weather or the roads or the distance. Here he had a jeep and he would go with his audio-visual aids. By now he had also upgraded from his slide projector, or 16 mm projector to the video projector.



With the Community at Chandur,  
1993

In May 1996 Fr. John went to St. Antony's Industrial Institute, Kadapa, for his third and last stint there, as Confessor. Fr. Ignatius Peyyala, who as earlier with Fr. John in Guntur, was now his Rector. He considered Fr. John like his own Father and trusted him in every way.

**Fr. Salibindla Balashowry, then a young priest at Kadapa recalls:** *“I had the joy of living with Fr. John just after my ordination. Out of simplicity and honesty, one day I told Fr. John in the refectory, ‘You are my guru’. ‘Are you serious about what you say’, he asked me. ‘Then you are a fool. I am not fit to be your guru, because I do not have any degree or hold any office’. From then on he remained my guru. Even at his old age he was eager to go for Mass to the substations. His willingness to sit for confessions at any time of the day speaks a lot about his zeal and enthusiasm for saving souls. He used to say very often, ‘a priest is for everybody irrespective of whether one is rich or poor, whatever caste, diocese or congregation one belonged to. We need to form ourselves to be with the people of God’. He was always contented with his life and work. He is the one who instilled in me the urge and interest to be more pastoral minded. I was able to realize contentment in the course of my priestly life. In his own way he lived a perfect religious life as a holy priest. Even today I consider Fr. John as my Guru. May his soul rest in peace.”*

### **The Last Years**

On 1<sup>st</sup> June 2000 Fr. John came to Don Bosco Philosophate, the last place where Fr. John was to work. Having lived with him as an aspirant, later as a priest in Guntur, I can say that these nearly 27 months he spent here were

probably the happiest in his life. He was truly an elder in the community. The young Salesians affectionately called him ‘Thathagaaru’. We had been asking for a resident confessor for this post-novitiate house. Fr. Provincial asked me if I would be happy to have Fr. John with us. I was delighted at the idea and shared the news with the confreres. It was a different Fr. John than the one I had known earlier. He would still joke with me and the brothers about my adventures in his class and how I would be made to sit on the floor near the platform so that I could pay better attention in class. What was most embarrassing for me was the fact that now I was his Rector, but on his part he soon made me feel comfortable. As a confessor his role in the house was really exemplary and kept the community together with his cheerfulness and his timely suggestions or word in the ear.



His last Birthday celebration

He was much sought after as confessor and as spiritual director, both in the community and outside. Those who went to him for confession considered it also an important

moment of spiritual direction. When some young Salesians wanted him to be their spiritual director, he would admonish them and send them back to the Rector. At the same time he would assure them that he was always available to be their confessor; during confession he could give them any amount of time for spiritual direction. It is interesting to note that the first thing that he requested when he arrived here was a confessional. This was immediately made and gifted to us by Fr. Chacko Thattil, his friend and co-missionary from the Brahmanakodur days. His presence at the confessional itself was an invitation to everyone to go for confession. Due to acoustic reasons and to give more time, often he heard confessions in his room.



Confessor at Don Bosco Philosophate-  
2001

Fr. John was always present during the practices of piety. He would be seen spending long periods of time praying in the Church. In everything he was first and foremost a priest. He gave importance to his priestly duties and was always available for the administration of the sacraments. The missionary in him could not be suppressed even at this age. He got

permission from the Kazipet Parish Priest and took up the responsibility for the Rampur (Kadipikonda) sub-station. He immediately set about creating a Christian tradition among the people. In a Church where only children attended Mass, the number of adults participating in the Sunday Mass steadily increased. He taught the people how to make confession and made himself available to them. In fact his final sickness started when he was saying Mass for these people and good number of them were present at his funeral four days later.

Ever since he became a member of the post-novitiate community, he took great care of the young Salesians in formation by his total availability for the sacrament of reconciliation. As Rector of the community, I often turned to consult Fr. John, who was a great source of inspiration to me. With his many years of experience as a Salesian, Fr. John made prudent suggestions and above all listened to me in a caring manner.

**Nagothu Bala Kishore, a young Salesian who professed in 2000, testifies:** When I heard of the death of Fr. John I was stunned and I couldn't believe it. I remembered the moments that I spent with him the previous evening. When I looked at his face I felt as if he was sleeping. When I stood near him I remembered the good experiences that I had with him. I felt sad and tears rolled down my cheeks.

On 13<sup>th</sup> August 2002, I was sick and resting in the infirmary and he came to see me and enquired about my health. For me he is a person who had concern for others even though he himself was sick. Whenever I walked with him after supper, he spoke about the mission he went out. After sometime he came and told me that he had come to see me in the morning. He enquired about me how I was eating and so on. When I asked him how he was, he said that am getting better. For me he is a person who had concern for others even though he himself was sick.

Whenever I walked with him in front of the house after supper, he spoke about the missions, especially of P.T. Parru and Kadapa. Often he shared his experiences, about the teaching of the Church and of religious life. He used to repeat often that we should not seek power, rather serve Christ in the poor, teach them how to pray, promote devotion to Mary and teach the people to pray the Rosary. For me he is a person who is holy, prayerful, always smiling and a committed Salesian. From him I too learned to be cheerful. I enjoyed his simple jokes. He had good general knowledge which inspired me to listen to him.

### **Apostle of the Gospel and a Great Missionary**

Though Fr. John began his Salesian life as Physics lecturer in the Sacred Heart College, Tirupattur or as Mathematics and Science teacher, later he zealously dedicated his life as missionary. The faithful in the missions of Jolarpettai in Tamil Nadu,

Brahmanakodur, P.T.Parru, Ravulapalem, Guntur and Chandur in A.P. bear testimony to his ardent missionary zeal. Fr. Chacko Thattil speaks of him as a convinced missionary. His interest in the people took him frequently to the villages where he would meet everyone. Daily he went to some village or other along with a companion. His missionary methods were not popular nor the results visible immediately. He sacrificed himself for the missions and hence the results are seen more in the faith of the people and the depth of their conversion.

Something that he leaves behind about his missionary style is his eagerness to build Christian traditions wherever he worked. He earnestly learned Khasi, Tamil and later Telugu to preach the word of God in the missions. His proficiency in the vernacular was a significant indication of his identification with the people for whom he worked. In his '**Rule of Life**' he had pledged: '*I will never omit a chance to learn a new language for they are a great help to be a missionary.*' Even in the very last mission centre where he worked he was keen to start a tradition of a faith-community that nourished itself on the sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation, and lived a life according to Christian values. He

appreciated the Christian tradition that he found in the parishes of Guntur and wished the same for Warangal.

The experience of Sr. Alma Joseph and Sr. Mary Arogya who were his trusted lieutenants in the mission field at Ravulapalem and later at Guntur can throw a lot of light on his missionary methods. They appreciated his simple way of life and his great interest in the missions. He did every work with precision and looked into every minute detail. He had the family cards and the *status animorum* always up-to-date. The sisters learnt from father how to record the family history. He guided them in the all important task of building up the Christian faith of the people.

He followed up broken families, got the necessary permissions to rectify their marriages and brought them back to the community. He taught the provisions of the Church's teaching such as the Pauline privilege to help out the people in difficulties. When conducting camps, Fr. John would be there daily to inquire about the progress and to give guidance. He would ask how the people behaved, how they were responding or took interest in the catechetical programme. On returning from the village or when he visited them during camps, he would ask them about the different problems that they encountered. He would try to understand these problems together and guide the sisters to help the people to solve

them, especially to unite broken families and bring them back to the Church.

Fr. John was also keen on going to new villages. He would get the children admitted in the boarding and through the students try to reach their parents. Sr. Mary Arogya recalls how Fr. John made the first approach to the people in Vaddiparru. Children were admitted in the boarding. As the parents showed interest he sent the sisters for catechetical programmes. Later he too followed. One girl, Chandravathi, got her parents to the faith. She wanted to follow the sisters and is now Sr. Sangheetha MSMHC.

He took meticulous care of the sisters. Sr. Alma and Sr. Arogya recall with nostalgia their camp at Gollavaripalem, a mission station of the Sahayamatha Parish, Guntur. He was very understanding even when there were mistakes or failures and encouraged them in their work. The sisters liked the way he behaved with them respectfully, appreciatively and lovingly. He was always available to them and they felt free to approach him or send people to him. He was very patient and waited till every one learnt what was being taught.

Fr. John was a simple missionary who would not be satisfied unless he gave his best for the missions. He was very simple with himself, yet he spared no efforts to get the latest

equipment for the missions. In fact he got the first video projector in the province for use in the remote mission stations of Chandur. Fr. John was very pained to see that sufficient interest was not shown towards the missions by the superiors or the confreres. He bemoaned the sad neglect of the missions in the congregation as well. He used to say that the Church no longer considered the Salesian Congregation a missionary congregation.

Fr. John was very thorough about what he said or did. He was not an arm chair missionary. He would reel out statistics with regard to the missions in India as well as in the whole church for the benefit of his listeners. He taught missiology and Christian Doctrine and enthused the young Salesians and seminarians about their missionary vocation and Christian responsibilities. He gave them up-to-date information on the missionary situation in terms of statistics as well as developments taking place in the field. His wealth of information about the church and the various events the world over was amazing and this kept his brothers glued to whatever he said.



Instructions at Ponnur-Vapanacheruvu

He would celebrate the Mass for the evangelisation of peoples

whenever opportunity presented itself and spoke of the missions. He made use of the occasions of the Eucharist to instil missionary values as well as to connect the young Salesians through prayer and reflection to the missions and to the missionaries. He was a good teacher of Missiology and made the young Salesians and seminarians take mission work to heart. It is to his credit that missionary vocations have started blooming in the province. Already one of his young Salesian students, Casper Charles, is in Papua New Guinea. Others are waiting to be sent. Here too his love for the missions was evident.

There were some who would tease Fr. John as a 'failed missionary'. Once I asked him about his missionary vocation. I am happy that I broached the topic because it helped me to understand him better. Fr. John was a late vocation. He joined the aspirantate after completing his degree, at the age of 23. The missionary ideal was clearly before him. He was clever and knew his subject Physics very well and was made a lecturer even without his post-graduation. It is here that some insinuate that he opted for the missions because his companion was selected for higher studies and he was ignored. There is nothing farther from the truth. When I referred to this talk Fr. John smiled and said that he had

always wanted to be a missionary and had been disappointed that he was getting stuck in the college. In fact, Fr. Chacko Thattil recalls, that Fr. John was very angry, and refused to go for B.Ed. as suggested by Fr. Di Fiore who was then his provincial. He felt that he would be stuck somewhere as a headmaster and he would never realize his goal of becoming a missionary.



First Baptism at Gurrampadu, 1995

Our conversation went further and he shared with me his constant struggle to keep the interest of the missions in focus. He was disappointed that the province and the communities neglected the missions. He had constant tussle with the superiors on this point. He felt that often the provincials lose their idealism and become mere administrators. Roles have to be fulfilled. Their paramount concern would be to see that institutions adequately staffed and for this vocations are to be promoted only for this. Fr. John was very angry and sad at this style of development of the province. His appeals for greater attention and support for the missions went unheeded. If missions were important, more so in a mission territory like India,

then we need to act as befits this missionary reality. He felt that our priorities would be seen convincingly not by mere words, but rather in the allotment of resources, especially time, personnel and money. He would ask uncomfortable questions such as: How much time do the superiors have to visit the missions? And what was the proportion of the money or personnel allotted for the missions?

Fr. John would remark that in the province, the Missions got only a secondary place. The statistics are a sad commentary of the state of affairs in a province that claimed to be a missionary province. When I was the moderator of the Chapter, he asked me to look at the place that the parishes occupied in the province. Going through the Directory of 2000-2001 we found that there were 11 parishes entrusted to the Salesians in the province and there were only 2 priests working full time. No wonder that Bishops had taken away parts of the parish or the parish itself on a number of occasions because we did not attend to pastoral work sufficiently. With such incisive analysis of the situation, it is understandable that there were many insinuations against him. Even during his last years here he did not lose his enthusiasm for the missions, in stead he passed on the flame to the young Salesians.

### **A Great Devotee of Mary**

His devotion and love for Mary was most tangible. His love for Blessed Mother was seen in the way he spread devotion to Her especially through the recitation of the Holy rosary. He spent free moments making Rosaries and distributing them. He backed it up by teaching people to pray the Rosary. He had leaflets to explain how to recite the Rosary. He was always regular for the community rosary. One of the hobbies that he taught the boys or the brothers was to make rosaries and it was a past time for a number of them. He received rosaries for distribution and used them as a means to bring people to Jesus, through Mary. At the time of the funeral, as homage to the memory of dear Fr. John, we made rosaries available for all present.

### **A Time of Illness**

His illness at the end of 1999 was a unique experience for those around him. He had Bell's Palsy and his face had become rather distorted. He himself had noticed it. In the morning Fr. Joshtrom came to me to tell me that Fr. John was sick and that the right side of his face had become paralysed. It had been slightly distorted, and he was looking funny. I put on a straight face and went to speak to him as empathetically as possible. When I met Fr. John, he was upset with my response. 'Why are you not laughing? Can't you see how I look?' Fr. John remarked. I was relieved.

At our insistence he came to the hospital. As the senior doctor was absent, a visiting doctor prescribed a lot of drugs. At home we also tried some simple natural remedies. One of those days Fr. Joshtrom and I were away for a meeting of the Chapter Preparatory commission. On our return, at the station itself we had the premonition that something was amiss. We rushed by auto to find that there was a hush over the community. Many were rushing about and others were standing pensively outside Fr. John's room. Dr. Suresh and the Missionaries of Mary Mediatrix were there. Fr. John had been vomiting blood, probably due to the adverse effect of very strong drugs that caused bleeding from the intestines. Fr. John had been given the Anointing of the Sick by Fr. Thomas Thottiyil, at his own choice and under his guidance. His experience of catechising and administering the sacrament was now directed towards himself.

At the hospital too he was quite receptive, and also a bit too independent, wanting to manage as much as possible by himself. Finally he had to accept dependence on others for everything. Later on he had to be rushed to St. Theresa's Hospital, Hyderabad, where he endeared himself to the doctors and the nurses. The brothers who attended on him were happy to spend time with him. In fact the people did ask who was looking after whom?

## **An Exemplary Religious**

Fr. John took his religious life very seriously. The word of the Superior was a command for him. He was a confrere who was noted for his humble, simple and quiet but effective life among the poor and ordinary people who were entrusted to his care. He lived and worked in a truly unassuming way. He expected nothing for his own self but was always ready to help out others in every way he could. Whenever he was asked whether he needed anything, he would always reply that he had everything that he needed and he was being looked after very well.

Fr. John was very particular about his religious life. Though he hailed from a well to do family and all his brothers were well educated, the practice of poverty was an important concern for him. "When we got down in Alwaye for our first Mass in our home parish," Fr. Abraham Panampara reminisces, "my people came in a taxi from Bharananganam. There I was surprised to see Fr. John and his elder priest-brother asking us for a lift to his house which was on the way." Fr. Abraham also recalls how Fr. John was very serious about everything in his life. He took his religious life too very seriously. His prayer life was exemplary. When sisters came to see him at Karunapuram, part of the visit was set aside for making their confessions.

## **The Project of Life**

The 25<sup>th</sup> General Chapter invites us to prepare our own Personal Project of Life. Fr. John had his **Rule of Life** from 1955, the time of his first profession. There are interesting aspects in the Rule of Life of Fr. John that tell us about how his life evolved: His simplicity of life, his love for the missions and his obedience to the superiors are all there. Those of us who have known him can all vouchsafe that he lived his pledge faithfully.

### **RULE OF LIFE**

#### **In all my life**

1. Jesus in the BI. Sacrament will be my Master and Leader and Mary my mother.
2. Jesus Mary and Joseph will be my friends always.
  - I shall always be faithful to the practices of piety, prescribed by our constitutions.
  - I will try my best for daily Mass. I will receive holy Communion daily even if I have to fast a little longer.
  - Thursday is my weekly confession day.
  - Often I will renew the purity of intention during the day.

Together with it I will renew the following:

1. Presence of God.
  2. Living the Holy Communion.
  3. Praying the mass.
  4. Meditation.
- I will never give up a chance to make a visit to the BI. Sacrament.
  - I shall be faithful to the daily recitation of the Holy rosary.
  - I shall be faithful to the daily particular examination of conscience.
  - Daily during the elevation I will pray our BI. Mother for purity and perseverance.
  - Always duty first and the rest afterwards if there is time.
  - I shall be more generous helping other.
  - I will always try to remain an ordinary member of the community.
  - Nothing, even my exercises of piety, must not make me conspicuous among the others.
  - Only in one thing I shall be very exact: Obedience. I shall be

Very careful to keep the rules in all its details and to fulfill the will of my superiors.

- I will take greater interest in the sacred ceremonies and liturgy.
- I will never omit a chance to learn a new language for they are a great help to be a missionary.
- I shall be faithful to my private spiritual reading.

Ordination Retreat 1964:

Add to the Rule of Life.

- Mass will be center of life.
- To love it and make it loved.

### **A Man of Deep Gratitude**

Fr. John remembered with gratitude for the rest of his life any service done to him. Many confreres, who associated with Fr. John for many years, have this to say about him: he respected every confrere, the old and the young, with his gentle way of speaking and his listening to whatever they had to say. Some of his old boys, even though still very poor, continued correspondence with him in Tamil or Telugu. Some would come all the way to meet him. He kept a very personal approach towards them. He replied

every letter and acknowledged every favour received. When he received books he would personally write in the book a thank you note with the name of the benefactor, and a request for prayers, before distributing them. He always kept his word when he promised prayers or when he had to reciprocate in any way for the favours received. Those who worked with him in the Mission field recall how he was very appreciative any thing done for him.

### **Silent Apostle, Unique Personality**

Fr. John loved the quiet and hidden life and he cherished it till the very end. He was not a man fond of public celebrations on personal milestones in his life. True to his character he spent many years of Salesian life guiding many youth and faithful through the sacrament of reconciliation as a confessor. He spoke in a simple way, but effectively. Till the very end, he was always available for the ministry of the confessional. He was indeed a true pastor. Br. Tulumelli David recalls how Fr. John used to visit the sick and when he himself got sick after the death of Fr. John, he really missed him because no one went to see him. He fulfilled in letter and spirit his Rule of Life: *“I will always try to remain an ordinary member of the community.*

*Nothing, even my exercises of piety, must not make me conspicuous among the others.”*

Fr. John kept a low profile all his life. He set a record of never being a Rector. He lived a quiet and unassuming life, many years serving as assistant Parish priest or as confessor in many Salesian Communities. He spent nearly 40 years in supportive pastoral roles without the least dissatisfaction or complaint. He learned to adjust to the styles of functioning of different superiors, while living his religious life with conviction and dedication. I can acknowledge with great satisfaction that I relished the 27 months that I spent with Fr. John. Not that we agreed on everything. Yet he was really an elder to me. In fact we were confreres belonging to four generations living in the community together. I miss the fatherly support that I received from him. He respected me as his Rector and came up with timely suggestions as to how I could be more effective in the formation process.

Fr. John had the power of divining water and has helped many people to find water. In divining water he teamed up with others, Mr. Melchior and Fr. Abraham Mattathilani in Chandur and Fr. Thomas Thottiyil in Karunapuram. The present sources of water both at Don Bosco and at St. Xavier's Seminary here were found out by him.



Bore well at St. Xavier's Seminary, 2000



Easter Vigil at Kadapa

### Prayer Life and Sacramental Life

Catechesis was for Fr. John an integral part of his Missionary drive and commitment. Wherever he was parish priest he had systematic programme to ensure that the Christian community was really instructed and cared for. He would ensure that catechetical camps were conducted to build up the faith of the Christian community. Sacramental Catechesis was very important for Fr. John and he prepared the people very diligently for the sacraments. He carried out in his life and as well as shared with others his Rule of Life, *“I will take greater interest in the sacred ceremonies and liturgy.”*

Fr. John brought in his missionary zeal also into the formation context. We can understand his insistence on Sunday Mass. He would insist that the brothers have a well conducted liturgy every Sunday so that they remember to keep the Sunday holy.

He insisted that the formation of the young Salesians should take adequate care of their formation to Christian living, including Sacramental life. Though he was conservative in liturgical matters, and that was our point of contention during the Guntur Days, he helped to keep the decorum of the Church and sacredness of the Liturgical moments. He promoted the active participation of all and insisted on making the liturgy meaningful. He had difficulties with confreres who trivialised prayer or liturgy. One young priest would taunt him and say, “I don’t believe in prayer.” He would be patient with him. Then another was so careless that at Mass he used water instead of wine. He also noticed young priests would easily put aside practices of piety that once he noted in his journal after a picnic: There was not even an attempt to pray. Bro. Charles Dias, who was with Fr. John for a number of years, has happy memories of their life together. Fr. John was a priest devoted to his personal prayer life and witness, and methodical and regular in his mission work.



Fr. John in 2002

### **His love for the Superiors**

Fr. John always spoke with a certain joy and pride about the superiors and senior Salesians he had the fortune of knowing personally. Obedience was his strong point though his being critical of the superiors is what is remembered most. In his rule of life he wrote: *“Only in on thing I shall be very exact: Obedience. I shall be very careful to keep the rules in all its details and to fulfil the will of my superiors.”* Fr. Thomas Myladoor, as Provincial, wrote to Fr. John on 07.03.92: “My dear John, I appreciate your frank way of putting down the various points.” His truthfulness and directness was often uncomfortable for the superiors who often acted according to their convenience rather than according to the priorities they themselves had set. In the process Fr. John’s role was not always appreciated adequately.

### **Conclusion**

At the funeral, Fr. Balaswamy, the Provincial, thanked Fr. John’s family and relatives who had gifted Fr. John to us and who had come from far to bid farewell to their dear one. While commending him to the Lord, he referred to Fr. John, as the first fruit plucked by the Father from our Province. He concluded thus: “In a world of glamour and thirst for power and fame, when a humble and simple religious like Fr. John Varricatt passes away after spending long years in peace and serenity by merely being of service to others in a hidden way, we cannot but bow our heads in admiration and gratitude. Admiration for the way in which he lived his religious way to the full; and gratitude for the example he has left behind. May the Lord receive and reward abundantly his faithful servant who was faithful in little things. We ask the Lord to send into our ranks many more young people who are convinced of and dedicated to follow Christ in Don Bosco way as Fr. John Varricatt was.”

T.D. John SDB  
Rector  
Don Bosco Philosophate,  
Karunapuram,  
Peddapendiyal 506151,  
Warangal District,  
Andhra Pradesh, India.

24.04.2004



First Anniversary, 2003

**Necrology:**

Born : 31 May 1931  
Professed : 24 May 1955  
Ordained : 08 April 1964  
Died : 21 August 2002  
Age : 71  
Place : Don Bosco Philosophate,  
Karunapuram,  
Warangal.  
Province : Hyderabad (INH)

