

MYM history: shades & lights, thorns & crown (1939 – 2013)

A short history of the Salesian presence in Myanmar vice-Provice (MYM)

In our history, as in that of the Salesian Congregation, Mary of Nazareth, Mother of Jesus, Mother of God, features as "Help of Christians" and indeed as helper to all in need. This is our heritage from our Father & Founder Don Bosco. He understood from his own personal experience and that of the Church that 'Mary did it all'. Ad Jesum per Mariam!

"Mary was always my guide. Mary is my treasurer. We cannot make mistakes. Mary is our guide" (Don Bosco).

"Lead us, loving Father. We shall follow you wherever you lead us" (words on the badge of the Past Pupils Association).

The desire of Don Bosco fulfilled in 1939

Don Bosco is enthused by the fact that after a perilous and almost uncharted journey the Oblates of Mary, in 1839, penetrated the Kingdoms of Ava and Pegu (now Inwa and Bago, upper and lower kingdoms of Burma, now called Myanmar). These Oblates even had their own (Italian) Bishop. Great were the fruits of their apostolic labors. In 1842 this missionary territory had been entrusted to them. By that time the British were already getting a foot-hold in Asia.

Fr. Cafasso who notices everything Don Bosco undertakes, lets him study French and Spanish, but when he begins to pick up an English grammar he tells him: "The foreign missions are not for you." (BM vol. 2, pg. 160).

Mandalay and Rangoon (Yangon)

- (a) Fr. Leo Lafon (MEP) is a venerable priest of the Foreign Missions of Paris. He was the founder and manager of the St. Joseph Chinese Orphanage at Mandalay, from as early as 1894.
- (b) Parish priest (=Pastor) of St. Joseph's Church with an Orphanage attached. It was built by Fr. Lafon. He could boast of his church as more beautiful & artistic than the Cathedral! In fact, even today, tourists are fascinated by the gothic architecture of this church.
- (c) Fr. Lafon's orphanage, 11 September, 1895. He was getting old, already 65, and wanted his work continued by somebody.

(d) Fr. Lafon invited the Salesians from India. Two invitation letters were sent to the Salesian Provincial along with Bishop Foulquier's permission. The first was dated 25th August, 1928; the second was 24th November 1934.

Arrival of the first group of salesians

- (1) Fr. Antonio Alessi: pioneer & founder of the Salesian works in Burma (Myanmar); a very zealous and sacrificing leader. In July 1951 he became the Provincial of Calcutta (Kolkata) in India.
- (2) In 1937 Fr. A. Candela of the Superior Chapter (=General Council) and Fr. Scuderi (Provincial of Calcutta) paid a scouting visit to Mandalay and decided to comply with the wishes of Fr. Lafon.
- (3) The pioneering-group consisted of two priests (Fr. Alessi & Fr. Ubaldo Bordin), two clerics (Dennis Cavanagh & John Del Col), and two Coadjutors or Salesian Brothers (Bro. Charles Dell'Acqua & Bro. Angelo Boungiorno).

Official handing over of St. Joseph's Parish and Lafon Orphanage

- (1) On 27th January, 1939, the pioneers arrived Yangon by boat, and on 31st January there was the handing over of St. Joseph's Parish cum Orphanage to the Salesians during the Pontifical High Mass.
- (2) Due to the Second World War (1939 – 1945) the works were curtailed and hampered; but after the War many things, like carpentry and tailoring departments developed with more reinforcements of Salesian missionaries coming in from India. There was also the Japanese invasion (1942-'45) and the Karen (Kayin) insurrection in 1949 which destroyed part of our buildings and works.

1939 – 1964: Silver Jubilee of the Salesians in Myanmar

- (1) Mandalay Lafon Memorial School with carpentry, tailoring & the Press.
- (2) In 1954 a parish was given to the Salesians in Thingangyun, a poor suburb of Yangon. There an academic school was built in 1963.
- (3) In March 1957 a minor Seminary (Aspirantate) for High school students was established in Anisakan, in the archdiocese of Mandalay. The seminary opened with 24 boys.

- (4) Until 1964 the candidates for the novitiate were sent to India, but in 1964 the first novitiate on Burmese soil was opened at Anisakan with 12 novices. In the same complex the Studentate of Philosophy was established in 1965.
- (5) Statistics show there were already about 64 confreres in Myanmar, the great majority of them native vocations.

Salesians in the storm

- (1) Nationalization of schools, 1st April, 1965. We lost a big High school cum technical school in Mandalay, and an academic school in Thingangyun, Yangon.
- (2) 1966: expulsion of all foreign missionaries who came after the War (1945).
- (3) Due to uncertainties caused by the Revolutionary (military) Government and difficulty of communication between the local Salesians and the major Superiors in Rome, the Congregation was, to all practical purposes, closed down for an indefinite period. Many joined the dioceses and some went back home; only nine clerics stuck on, with 4 priests and an elderly Salesian Brother.
- (4) The aspirantate remained close till 1980 and the Novitiate till 1969.
- (5) In 1974 our two Salesian parishes (Lafon in Mandalay and Thingangyun in Yangon) were handed over to the respective dioceses upon request by the local Hierarchy. {In the words of a confrere from Calcutta we (Salesians of Myanmar) are admired "because you fellows persevered in spite of the *Government*, in spite of the *Congregation*, and in spite of the local *Church!*"; and according to another confrere from Shillong: "If this is not a miracle, what is it?".

Salesians after the Storm.

- (1) Thanks to Divine Providence, the closure was only for a year; but by that time we had lost many. Those who remained were allowed to continue their studies.
- (2) In 1980 the aspirantate was open again.
- (3) After the temporary opening of the Novitiate (1969 – '70) it was closed again, this time due to lack of vocations. Only in 1980 it began to re-function on a more or less regular basis (i.e., there were some years without the novitiate until the year 2000).
- (4) Post-novices were allowed to attend the Philosophate run by the diocese.

- (5) Divine Providence opened for us (the 'pusillus grex') Lashio Prefecture (in the Northern Shan State bordering on China) which was entrusted to the Salesians in 1975 November after the Centenary Celebrations of the First Salesian Missions; we officially entered this multi-coloured insurgency territory in April 1976 with the Investiture of the first Burmese Salesian Prelate, Msgr. John Jocelyn and the Sacerdotal Ordination of two young confreres. One of these two young priests would become his successor as Prefect and, later, as its first Ordained Bishop, Msgr. Charles Bo. He is now the archbishop, the Metropolitan of Yangon. The ways of Providence are wonderful!
- (6) In Hispaw (Thibaw), in the Lashio Prefecture a new House was established in 1989 which will eventually serve as the pre-novitiate.

The spring-time of the vice-Province

- (1) There is a regular flow of novices every year, beginning from the year 2000.
- (2) Our own Salesian Philosophate was established in 2008 in Pyin Oo Lwin (Maymyo), though earlier it was already functioning in the Novitiate compound.
- (3) A vast WA Mission, part of the Lashio diocese, was given to the Salesians to develop. We were given a 25-year period to run it.
- (4) A new presence was initiated in Mandalay in 2006; the staff looked after the Youth. DBYES (Don Bosco Youth Educational Services) was initiated.
- (5) Another new presence was opened in Myitkyina (Kachin State) in 2002.
- (6) Also in the Chin State, at Kalay, a new house was established in 2011. The centre is called DBYC (Don Bosco Youth Centre).
- (7) A new parish of Hlaing Thar Yar (in the densely populated township of Yangon) was given to the Salesians by our Salesian archbishop Charles Bo in 2011, under the care of the Don Bosco Studentate of Theology.
- (8) Confreres have the freedom to go abroad to qualify in Philosophy or Theology.

Present new face of the vice-Province of Myanmar

- (1) Map of Myanmar with all the salesian Presences: **Mandalay**; **Anisakan** (aspirantate & Novitiate); **Pyin Oo Lwin** (Post-novitiate); **Hsipaw** or Thibaw (pre-novitiate); **Namtu**; **WA Region**; **Kalay**; **Yangon** (Theologate & Provincial House, and Hlaing Thar Yar); **Myitkyina**.

Statistics of MYM

1. Bishop	1
2. Priests	29
3. Deacons	4
4. Salesian Brothers	8
5. Clerics	38
6. Novices	4

Total 84 (Average age: 33.6)
