



REV. FR. DIRNBERGER CMF



*Our Master*



*Our Guide*



*Our Model*



*Our Inspiration*

**O**n December 28, 2016 we, the Claretians in India, celebrate the birth centenary (1916-2016) of Rev. Fr. Franz Xavier Dirnberger. It is a significant occasion to remember and celebrate the memory of a great missionary who left his homeland at the age of 55 and became the driving force behind the success story of the Claretians in India.

It was his love for God and love for the Congregation that energized and encouraged Fr. Dirnberger to insert and immerse himself in the various vicissitudes of Indian situations. Nothing daunted him. His commitment to the growth and development of the Congregation in the Indian subcontinent and in Sri Lanka made him transcend all the cultural and linguistic barriers and the excruciating pain he had to endure after the accident in 1980. There is no doubt that the success story of the Claretians in India and in Sri Lanka is the



## A parable of God's love

Fr. A. Alex CMF

success story of Fr. Dirnberger.

I had the privilege of being with him as a student of philosophy for three years at Claret Bhavan, Karumathur. As the infirmarian of the community I used to check his sugar, administer injection and attended to his needs all the three years and this gave me the opportunity to observe him, to listen to him and to learn from him. I felt proud whenever he introduced me as “my doctor” to the visitors. I can say without any iota of doubt that my religious traits were germinated, nurtured and matured in his presence and he will remain as a model for my religious commitment always.

This souvenir is unique in the sense that it carries only the experiences of our senior priests who lived and worked with Fr. Dirnberger as well as some others who were associated with him in his missionary endeavours. They

bring out beautifully the personal and missionary traits of Fr. Dirnberger and present him as a parable of God's love. He is seen and experienced as a man of conviction and commitment, as a man of prayer and hard work, as a man of compassion and concern, as a man of simplicity and obedience, as a friend of the poor and the marginalized and as a man for all seasons. He changed his opponents into admirers, challenges into opportunities and suffering into prayers. His portrait of a humble farmer, fearless soldier, decisive leader, unambiguous guide, magnetic model and urging inspiration could be normative principles for our religious life and missionary endeavours.

I thank Rev. Fr. Jesu Doss CMF, the Provincial Superior and his council members for their decision to celebrate the birth centenary of Fr. Dirnberger and to bring out a souvenir on this occasion. I also thank all those who shared their experiences with Fr. Dirnberger to make him known to the younger generation of Claretians. I gratefully acknowledge the works of Fr. Roland Joyson CMF, Deacon Kulanthai Selvan CMF and Mr. Saravanan in compiling and printing this souvenir. May Fr. Dirnberger bless each one of us, from his heavenly abode, and inspire us to be committed missionaries.





# Message

on the Occasion of the

## BIRTH CENTENARY

of Rev. Fr. Franz Dirnberger CMF

I like to look at a newborn baby as the beginning of a love letter God writes to humanity. We are recalling a beautiful tale of God's love that began in little boy born in Trosendorf, a Bavarian rural village in Germany on 13th January, 1916. God led him through the horrors of the Second World War to the discovery of a different world through his Claretian vocation. Fidelity to that vocation took him to India where he dedicated his life for the people to the very end. We called this great pioneer missionary, Fr. Franz Dirnberger, our "Thatha".

Remembering Fr. Franz Dirnberger is to remember the early phase of my own vocational journey, especially in the Novitiate in 1977. They were the mature years of his missionary life. For us novices, that was the year of watering the sprout of missionary vocation in our hearts. His life taught us the definition of the son of the Heart of Mary, which St. Claret described in his Autobiography: A man on fire with God's love....(Aut 494). I remember vividly how he was teaching us the missionary journeys of St. Paul from the Acts of the Apostles with such a zeal that it looked as if he had been a companion of St. Paul in those journeys. He would use all opportunities to speak of the need to go in mission. He even sent us, the novices, to different dioceses to look for vocations.

He used to ask us, "Are you happy?" If the response were to be "No Father", he would say, "Then go home". For him one could not be a Claretian without joy.

CONGREGATIO  
MISSIONARIORUM  
FILIORUM  
IMMACULATI CORDIS  
B. MARIAE VIRGINIS  
(Claretiani)  
SUPERIOR GENERALIS

Via Sacro Cuore di Maria, 5  
00197 ROMA  
Tel. 06 809 100 11 –  
Fax 06 809 100 47  
28th December, 2016

Nothing daunted him. Later in 1980 I, as a regent student, was part of the team that Fr. Dirnberger accompanied to Andhra Pradesh to begin the missions in the dioceses of Guntur and Eluru. We went by a van, and at nightfall, he suggested that we take rest under a tree on the way. The senior priests had to persuade him to look for a lodge. He took that trip during the terrible Andhra heat of summer with his cheerful missionary spirit.

Life in India was of many privations for his native German standards, but he embraced them with delight. Since we were a small group of novices, he used to work with us in watering the growing coconut saplings, and insisted that Claretians should be hardworking missionaries. I began to enjoy manual work and discovered why it was important for us.

Fr. Dirnberger was particularly moved by the endurance of Claret and the persecutions the saint suffered all through his life. He would narrate the Holguin event in the life of Claret with fervour. He also longed to suffer for Christ. His life, after his accident in Germany in 1980 and the consequent physical handicap, was a testimony of joyful suffering in communion with Christ. He taught me how to welcome trials and sufferings that came on my way with a cheerful Claretian heart.

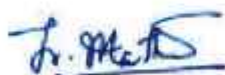
As Claretian presence in India prospered and grew with the pangs of birthing into two branches, Fr. Dirnberger moved to Karumatur. For him, every Claretian in India was his dear children. He came to my home village in Kerala for my ordination enduring the discomfort of his ailing hip. I was touched by his accompanying love. I admire the way he lived as an Indian and loved the Indians as his own. His life challenges us to rise above the discriminatory walls we create based on caste, language rite and race. We should cherish this legacy of transcendence, which he has bequeathed to us with apostolic courage.



As a man of God, his concern was always to glorify God in working and suffering for Christ, and inspiring us to follow the Lord in the style of Claret. One of his constant reminders has become an inner voice in me, "Is it the will of God?" In moments of decision-making, this reminder arises in me as the password to enter in the domain of discernment.

We understand what God wants to say through a human life only when we read it backwards at the end of the earthly journey of the person. The life of Fr. Dirnberger was a beautiful parable of Claretian charism, an example of a missionary on fire with God's love who spread its flames wherever he went. India was privileged to receive him. I think the best way to honour the gift of this great missionary on the occasion of his birth Centenary is to renew our own missionary commitment and to resolve to be available, like him, to go forth to the peripheries with a missionary heart as witnesses and messengers of the joy of the Gospel.

I rejoice with you, dear Claretians and friends, and join you on this occasion of jubilation. We are in communion with Fr. Dirnberger who, in the mercy of God, is united with our blessed Mother, our Founder St. Claret and the blessed Martyrs, and intercedes for us from beyond the veil of the life on earth. May the Lord grand our "grandpa" peace eternal!



**Rev. Fr. Mathew Vattamattam CMF**  
Superior General



“

**T**o remember the past to commit oneself for the future” (St. John Paul II). As we celebrate the Birth Centenary of our beloved Fr. Franz Xavier Dirnberger, we remember him fondly to learn from his spirit and grow in our missionary vocation faithfully. “Blessed are those who die in the Lord! Blessed indeed, the Spirit says; now they can rest for ever after their work, since their good deeds go with them”. (Rev.14:13). These words of the Book of Revelation are very much fitting for our Beloved Fr. Dirnberger. He died in the Lord completing the mission entrusted to him to cast a strong foundation of our Congregation in India and Sri Lanka. His good deeds certainly follow him. He is always remembered gratefully with an amazement for his person as a Claretian Missionary and his commitment to sow the seeds of the spirit of our Father Founder St. Anthony Mary Claret in this part of our continent. All those who lived with him could experience his enthusiastic spirit to share his Claretian Missionary vocation with all of us.

It is a grace for me to live with him for five years, starting from the novitiate till my regency period in Claret Bhavan, Karumathur. He was a man who loved and enjoyed in living his vocation. He used to say, “If I were to be born again, I would like to be a Claretian Missionary once again”. He manifested this Claretian spirit through his deeper spiritual, community and missionary life. His early presence in the chapel before all the members of the community is a model of his prayer life for all of us. As students all of us could observe his devotion to the Holy Eucharist through the Holy Mass, personal visits to the Blessed Sacrament and the Holy Hour. He taught us through his exemplary ways of growing in our filial devotion to our Mother Mary, through rosary, pilgrimages to the Marian shrines, Marian novenas, etc.

During our initial formation time, he taught us the ways on how to spend time with the community members. In our novitiate time, he used to sit in front of the chapel surrounded by us to listen to his life experiences with funs and laughter. When he came to Claret Bhavan, Karumathur, he would sit with





Rev. Fr. Jesu Doss CMF  
Provincial Superior

# Message

us to play chess by becoming one with us coming down to our level in making the game very alive. His accompaniment in the garden work is worth remembering now. His constant quoting of “Ora et Labora” was very well explained during the field work. He taught how to handle the instruments and the types of fields. He could never bear anyone sitting idle. He wanted all the Claretians to be active and happy. “Doing together” is a value we could learn from him through his active presence in the manual work time. For him community life was a value for the Claretian vocation.

The growth of our Congregation in India and in Sri Lanka into various

**“TO LOVE IS TO WORK AND  
SUFFER FOR CHRIST” - FATHER CLARET**

Major Organisms is the result of his dedication to promote vocations. Starting from Kerala, he launched his vocation promotion plans both in the North India as well as in Sri Lanka. His aim of founding formation centres, to form missionaries for the future mission was a marvelous project which inspired the missionary spirit in the younger generations who saw the young Claretians becoming committed to the missions in different parts of the country. Already in his time our Claretian missionaries had reached Northern and the North Eastern parts of our country. We can say that he was endowed with the grace of God to his mission getting fulfilled in his life time itself.

His commitment for the social realities of India reveals his keen interest for the people of our country. His plans for the education of the children by putting up schools and his anxiety to save the innocent female infants from the

infanticide through the Mercy Home are worth remembering now. The sacrifices he accepted for the Claretian Mission in India is a call to deepen the commitment of all the West Asian Claretians. Being a foreigner, he tried his level best to empty himself from his own cultural, social and religious backgrounds and learnt to adapt himself to our situation. He joyfully accepted the simplicity in food, clothing and shelter to the extent of becoming one with us to understand and accept us as we are. Though he suffered a lot because of his fractured hip, this did not deter his missionary endeavors. Though he had to sacrifice a lot because of this ailment, he undertook generously travelling to the far-away places in order to start new foundations and thus encouraging the brothers in those places. He used to say, "I suffer for your sake". He did so, because he loved us all abundantly. Therefore it is fitting to say that he lived the words of Father Claret, "Nothing daunts him; he delights in privations, welcomes work, embraces sacrifices, smiles at slander, and rejoices in suffering" (Auto. 494).





*A short history of the*

# *Life & Mission of*

## **Fr. Dirnberger**

### **IN GERMANY**

**Rev. Fr. Cyriac Njayarkulam CMF**

Fr. Franz Xaver Dirnberger hails from a peasant family and was born on January 13, 1916 amidst the First World War, as the 13th child of the couple Michael Dirnberger and Krescenz born Ruhland from Trosendorf at Flischberg, Schoental in the District of Cham, Oberpfalz, Germany. At the time of baptism he was given the name of the Great Missionary Saint Francis Xavier, an indication that he also should become a missionary. At that time hardly anyone would have thought about it.

His mother passed away when he was six years old. Most of his relatives were farmers. His family was a pious family. His father was a pious man. His mother too was a happy and pious lady. He went to the elementary school, 2 kms away from his

## **BIRTH DAY ADVENTURE**

My mother wished to have me baptized on the day of my birth. It was terribly cold. Fresh snow was lying over the ice. Our house was on a hill-top. I was wrapped in warm clothing. One of my sisters was carrying me to the Church when she slipped on the ice and, dropping me, I rolled about 20 meters down the hill. That was my first success in my struggle for freedom. I let myself roll freely. People said I didn't cry at all. That won at once the sympathy of my sister.

village. He received classes from the parish priest additionally in the 4th year in Latin, German and Mathematics as preparation for the entrance examination to the high school in Straubing.

On 18<sup>th</sup> March 1926 he passed this exam and since he wanted to become a priest and he was admitted to the minor seminary in Straubing. During his stay there he became sick due to pleurisy related with tuberculosis and his right lung was already affected. He had to spend three years at home to get completely cured. He wanted to enter a seminary for late vocations and thus he joined the Claretians in 1932 at Claretinerkolleg, Weissenhorn admitted by Fr. Peter Schweiger who became later the Superior General of the Congregation.

### Fun and Tricks

**After passing the entrance examination to the high school I was admitted to the minor seminary in Straubing. I consider these 4 years in the seminary as my playful years. Dirnberger never missed-out on fun and tricks. There was seldom anything naughty in which Dirnberger didn't play a role.**

Dirnberger was at Weissenhorn for two years and finished the secondary education in Easter 1935. He proceeded to the next stage of education to the old high school in Wuerzburg. Since Hitler was preparing a war and he was in need of soldiers and officers, the time of the higher school was shortened for one year and the final exam was fixed at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> class. Thus he was able to recover one of the three missed years in Straubing.

After the final exam all the school leaving students were taken to seven months of military service. Dirnberger's camp was in the city of Wohldau in Niedersachsen not far from Breslau. After finishing the work service he went to Frankfurt to start the philosophy course in Sankt Georgen, the major seminary of the Jesuits in Frankfurt. From All Saints 1938 until All Saints 1939 he was able to finish one year of canonical novitiate: one half in the Claretinerkolleg at Weissenhorn and the other half in Frankfurt during his studies.

The Second World War broke out in August 1939, Dirnberger was called to the military service. The training was undertaken in the Spare Division 3-73 at Weimar at the foot of the well known Concentration Camp "Buchenwald". There was a transfer in May 1940 to the frontier. He came to the front battalion of the Regiment 87 of the 7th Tank Division under the command of

General Erwin Rommel. After 3 months the division was shifted to the area of Bordeaux in France.

In spring 1941 Dirnberger was allowed to make the final exam in philosophy at the University of Wuerzburg and then he returned to the Division in August, this time near Bonn. Then he was shifted in the middle of June 1942 to the Russian border towards Eastern Prussia. It was the beginning of the attack on Russia. He could proceed until Wolga – Moscan channel – only 25 kms up to Moscau. A bomb fell right in the middle of the lorry and exploded. 6 men were dead. Nothing happened to Dirnberger and to the driver. He contributed this to the protection of the Heavenly Mother.

After Christmas his division was taken out of the fight and got shifted to France after Easter. He returned to Russia in January 1943. The command given was to break through the ring around Stalin Grad together with 3 tank units. In his own words:

*The Stalin Grad fell on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1943. The entire army as far as they were still above got moved to Siberia in imprisonment. I was wounded twice in this night with a shot through the neck and a second time through the right upper arm and lay unconscious in the snow. The Russians let me lie as fallen. After two hours I woke up and came to consciousness, looked around and saw only fallen around me. The wounded*

## MILITARY SERVICE

We had to do work with spade and axes, make water channels and roads, chop down trees and plant new ones. When we marched, instead of rifles we used spades. On a May evening we had to listen to a speech of Dr. Goebbels, the Propaganda Minister of the 'Reich' Government. For two hours he went on attacking and insulting the Catholic Church, bishops, priests and religious. He held almost everyone immoral and perverse. After the speech some of my companions at work assaulted and shouted at me: "What! Do you also want to become a 'Pfaffe' (derogatory expression for priest)?" Other companions came to my protection.



## In Freedom

I reached Flischberg in time to celebrate Christmas at Blomhof. The news splashed immediately that 'Blom Franz' had returned from imprisonment. My old father was there along with my brother, Ludwig, and my two sisters, Anna and Frieda. My brothers Hans and Josef were absent. Josef fell in Russia in 1943 and Hans was on the list of the missing. Brothers George and Michael wrote letters from an English prison. I stayed home only a few days and then had to return to Würzburg at the end of the year to resume my studies for priesthood.

*were already removed. I had severe loss of blood and therefore was immensely thirsty. There was no water. I swallowed some snow. I had the inner yearning to return home. Rescue would be guaranteed only in the West. I got up then and marched towards the Western direction. Avoiding the villages I reached a road in the early morning. As sent from heaven, a lorry was on the scene with the mark of our Division. I was given first aid and was washed and then I slept almost a whole day. With the next transport for the wounded soldiers in goods train I landed in the Reserve Military Hospital Kirchheim in Thuringen after 14 days.*

The recovery was quick. After one month Dirnberger was again fit for getting involved in the war and came to the Reserve Division at Muellheim in Thuringen. There he became a trainer due to his experience at the war front.

In the meantime the Americans and the English had already landed in Italy. The training Regiment was immediately moved to Nettuno and Anzio to drive away the Invaders which was an impossible task. An order came that Dirnberger be shifted to the training place of troops at Grossborn in OstPreussen. The training came to an end at the end of August and he became helper in a new Infantry Division. He came into American imprisonment after 3 weeks near Dueren. The theology students were shifted to another camp after 3 months and were allowed to study. An American chaplain got involved and through his effort Dirnberger got out of the imprisonment ahead of time. In November 1945 he was shifted to Muenster in Westfallen and then in the middle of December sent back home. He was again in freedom, but in a poor and destructed Germany.

Dirnberger went back to the Claretians in Wuerzburg. Since Sankt

Georgen in Frankfurt was completely bombed and was not yet restored. There was no possibility for further study. He studied theology at the Monastery of Marian Hill Fathers in Wuerzburg together with the companion Faust. 3 years of theology passed away quickly. He was ordained a priest on August 8, 1948 by the Auxiliary Bishop of Bamberg, Dr. Landgraf in the parish church HeiligKreuz which was the only church spared from war damages. Fr. Dirnberger celebrated his first holy mass in the chapel of the Home for the Aged of the "BarmherzigenSchwestern" in Steinbachtal. His first solemn holy mass in the home parish was celebrated on August 17, 1948 in the parish church of Doefering in the Bavarian Forest. Fr. Peter Schweiger was the preacher. Fr. Dirnberger was appointed as the prefect of the students in the Claretian Seminary of Wuerzburg. In summer 1951 he was appointed as Superior of the community. In 1957 his next appointment was as Provincial and Superior of the Frankfurt community. The construction of the Heart of Mary church was undertaken in this period. His stay in Frankfurt lasted 3 years.

It was during his time as Provincial that the starting of a Claretian mission both in India (Asia) and in Congo (Africa) was envisioned. In the General Chapter of 1961 this idea was presented officially and Fr. Schweiger, the Superior General was, at first, not enthusiastic about this project in India due to Rite conflicts, but later gave his blessing to both projects. Rt. Rev. Dr. Sebastian Vayalil, the Bishop of Palai, Kerala was instrumental in bringing this project of India to a success since at the initial stage he gave option to his own seminarians in the minor seminary to join the Claretian Congregation in Germany. It would have been really difficult for German Claretian Missionaries to obtain visa to India for establishing the Congregation. The

## Beggar of God

In summer 1951, I was appointed Superior of the Würzburg Community. My new assignment consisted in preaching, helping out in the parishes, vocation promotion and in collecting money to reduce the burden of the debt of the Province. For 6 years I went as a 'beggar of God' from parish to parish, even from house to house in certain places. Those times were difficult, and even humiliating; but still so necessary for the maintenance of our students and houses.

first Indian candidates arrived in Germany in November 1961 and consequent batches followed and the priestly ordination of the first candidates took place in 1968 with Mar Sebastian Vayalil as the ordaining Bishop.

After the stay in Frankfurt for 3 years, Fr. Dirnberger got his next appointment to Claretinerkolleg, Weissenhorn as Superior and Teacher for Latin and Greek. In 1966 he was transferred to Schwyz in Switzerland. During his four years of stay in that country he preached in about 200 churches and promoted well-wishers and benefactors for Claretian missions.

After the priestly ordination of the first Indian Claretians the question came up as to who would be accompanying them as a pioneer missionary to establish the Claretian mission in India. The lot fell on Fr. Dirnberger and Veteran Fathers like Fr. Schweiger and Fr. Back were supporting his going to India. All his reasons not to go to India due to advanced age, not knowing the necessary languages like English could not stand through and in the Holy Week 1970. Fr. Dirnberger flew to India accepting this decision as God's will.





# MY SPIRIT IS FOR THE WHOLE WORLD

**Fr. Peter Schutz CMF**  
Germany.

Fr. Dirnberger left Germany in the Holy Week of 1970 to start his missionary service in India. So he could celebrate the feast of resurrection in this new world. Nobody thought that he would rest there until the end of his life. The plan of the German province was to accompany the young Claretians in India for a certain time by an elder priest, so that they could better start their work as missionaries guided by somebody with a certain experience.

I remember well when we discussed that question during one of the meetings of the Provincial Government. Fr. Dirnberger participated in this meeting since he was the Provincial Economist for the running period. When we mentioned that he could do this service in India he told us that he could not speak English, but we destroyed this problem telling him that all the young fathers had studied in Germany so that he could speak there German. Nobody thought that this missionary service would last up to the end of his life.

The first Indian priests who had done their studies in Germany had been ordained only in 1986 in Frankfurt by His Excellency Sebastian Vayal, Bishop of Palai. For a certain period they participated in India in the same diocese in one of the parishes of the Diocese of Palai. Since we thought to look for boys who could be trained as future Claretian missionaries we looked as soon as possible to make a foundation in the Diocese of Palai at



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the city of Kuravilangad, because there was a college nearby, so that the students could do the responsible studies. So Fr. Dirnberger went there to start with the responsible work.

From there he kept very truthful contact with the provincial. Every Sunday he sent a letter to me, telling confidentially what had happened during the week. Even if nothing special had happened he wrote a letter – just to keep contact and to make the provincial informed about the going on of the mission. When he tried to introduce a new element he wrote and asked for my opinion or for permission to start with it. I cannot help but make the remark that by acting this way he showed that he was really obedient to the provincial government, that he wanted to give the due information to the provincial, to communicate with him and that he wanted to make me participate with the going on of the development in India.

I could almost say that he fell in love with India and the Indian Claretian way of life so that soon he did not think of going back to Germany any more. Slowly the idea came up that he would stay in India for a longer time – even to stay there for his life time. When I made a visit to India as provincial he showed me where he wanted to be buried at Kuravilangad, afterwards in the other communities, where he lived.

We always seriously discussed the next step of the further development of our Congregation in India, looking for the right place of the studies of theology and how to find out the place where we should start with the proper mission work. Fr. Dirnberger always was a perfect example of obedience and cooperation with the provincial.

Finally he never thought of going back to work in Germany. He felt like an Indian, unified with this country. In doing so, he is really an example for Claretian mission spirit following the motto of Claret: “My spirit is for the whole world”.



Fr.P. Callistus Joseph CMF  
Provincial

# German Provincial Message

*Dear Friends,*

It is with deep joy and with a deep sense of gratitude that I write these few lines of felicitation for the magazine that is published in commemoration of the 100 birth anniversary of our dear Thatha - Fr.Drinberger. Those who remember the past learn from the experience of those who have walked the path of missionary life before us.

My memories go back to early eighties. As a minor seminarian at Claret Bhavan Karumathur, my first encounters with Fr.Thatha are vivid in my memory. I would like to share two experiences in particular that deep impressions in me.

It was a Wednesday night. Thatha climbed the stairs (something that he seldom did) to reach to the dormitory where we were four in a room. It is very unusual someone comes to the room after night prayer. But here he was. Thatha was standing, knocking at the door. He called me out to apologize. I was shocked and panicked. I could not comprehend what was going on. He was the Superior of the Delegation, he is an older person and he is a 'foreigner', I thought. All this was because, that morning he had used his walking stick to reach me, as I had not shaved before the Mass. He did not intend but it hit me hard and I cried bitterly out of pain. He took all this pain to come to the dormitory that night just to remind me the famous Bible verse of the Wednesday night prayer, 'the Sunset must not find you still angry'. This was the soul of this missionary.

Another incident was when I had to travel with him, to north Kerala to invite the Dina Sevena Saba Sisters to care for the newly build Mercy Home.

As we know, Fr. Drinberger always chose simple means of transportation. It was a very long journey of nine hours by our jeep. Our fathers modified the vehicle to make a comfortable seat for him to lie down. We would have reached only few kilometers when he shouted stop, stop! Then followed the command 'faule Pürsch kommt back'. I jumped out of the front seat worried something had gone wrong. To my surprise, he wanted to sit in front and commanded me to lie on the comfortable seat that was prepared for him. He told me something that stays in my memory to date. He said, 'I have to make sacrifices so that this project to help the innocent children succeeds. Let me sit in front than lying here in comfort'. That is how much love he put into everything he was convinced of in his missionary responses to challenging situations.

As many stories of his demanding and commanding personality are kept in memory, we as well can recall such simple humble gestures of this beloved missionary that touched and shaped our missionary hearts. Personally, I know that he showed me how to love God and the people to whom I am sent. He instilled that confidence that we could put our hands on the Plough even if we are not sure where God will lead us in plowing.

We are grateful to his missionary generosity and the joy that he exuberated in his life. May his memory linger long, inspiring us and the next generation of our missionaries, to overcome petty barriers to be in generous service to God and God's people, wherever we are sent. I am humbled and privileged to serve in his fatherland Germany, as he did so generously in our part of the world, Asia.

*P. Callistus Joseph CMF*

**P. Callistus Joseph CMF,**  
**Provincial**  
10.11.2016



**Deutsche Provinz der Claretiner**  
Missionare, Söhne des unbefleckten  
Herzens Mariens

**Provincialat**  
Wölfelstr. 13, 97072 Würzburg  
Postfach 5567, 97005 Würzburg  
Tel. 0931-79652-0, Fax: 0931-79652-36

# *Life & Mission*



The missionary journey of Fr. Dirnberger in India began with his generous acceptance to accompany and guide the young Indian Claretian priests, trained and ordained in Germany, to begin the missionary works in India. Considering his appointment as the will of God, Fr. Dirnberger travelled to India in the holy week of 1970. Fr. Madhavath picked him up at the Bombay airport and brought him to Kuravilangad, where he met his fellow Claretians and began his missionary journey in India.

of Fr. Franz Xavier Dirnberger

# in **India**

Compiled by  
Dn. S.Kulanthai Selvan CMF

**Claret Bhavan Minor  
Seminary at Kuravilangad**

Most Rev. Sebastian Vayalil, Bishop of Palai, invited him to stay within the premises of the Bishop's house, but he preferred to live with all other young Claretians in the small temporarily built wooden house. Such was his



eagerness to identify himself with his fellow missionaries. On Easter Monday, Bp. Sebastian Vayalil laid the foundation stone for the chapel of the minor seminary at Kuravilangad. Fr. Dirnberger along with three priests, five novices, twenty one postulants and the cook managed to stay in the small wooden house until the seminary was built. Fr. Dirnberger served as the Novice Master. The seminary, which could accommodate 80 students, was built in sixteen months. The newly built seminary, Claret Bhavan, was blessed and inaugurated by Bp. Sebastian Vayalil on the feast day of Saint Claret, 24th October 1971. The Bishop of Kottayam, Rt. Rev. Dr. Kuriakose Kunnassery and Rev. Fr. Peter Schutz, the Provincial Superior of German Province were present for the celebration.

### **Claretian Seminary in Bangalore**

The first batch of novices took their first professions on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1971. It was decided to send them to St. Peter's Pontifical Seminary, Bangalore for further studies. The Archbishop Most. Rev. Dr. D.S. Lourdasamy welcomed the Claretians. A house, 'Shanti Nivas' near the seminary was bought for the accommodation of the Claretians. Meanwhile one and half acres of land were purchased from St. Peter's Pontifical Seminary to construct a study house. The Claretian Seminary was built in fifteen months and was inaugurated on February 29th, 1976 by Archbishop P. Arockiasamy.

### **Novitiate House, Carmelaram**

Twenty acres of land was purchased from the Carmelite Fathers at Carmelaram for the purpose of Novitiate House in the year 1971. A simple farm house was constructed to serve as the Novitiate. A dairy farm and a poultry farm were established in that land for the maintenance of the students. In the autumn of 1971 Fr. Dirnberger with his young novices entered the novitiate house. The novitiate house also served as a minor seminary for candidates coming from states other than Kerala until the year 1975.

## Claret Bhavan, Karumathur

The minor seminary that was functioning in the novitiate house was later moved to Karumathur in Tamil Nadu. In the beginning the students were staying in a rented building namely "ponnagam" and were attending classes at Arul Anandar College. A beautiful and spacious seminary was constructed at Karumathur and the inauguration of it took place on 27th December 1977. Archbishop Most Rev. Dr. Justin Diraviam blessed the building. In 1978 the Archbishop entrusted the Karumathur parish to the Claretians and Fr. Mathew Njayarkulam took charge as the first parish priest.

### A fateful Year

The year 1980 was a heart breaking and painful year for Fr. Dirnberger. He lost two of his most favorite Claretians in Germany. The first one was Rev. Dr. Andreas Back, who was his high school teacher and an inspiration, passed away at Würzburg. Secondly, Rev. Dr. Peter Schweiger, who welcomed him in the congregation and was the Provincial Superior of Germany for many years, passed away on August 18th at Dreifaltigkeitsberg, Spaichingen. Fr. Peter Schweiger was Superior General of the Claretian Congregation for 18 years and played a very decisive role in giving the Congregation a universal character and in expanding it worldwide. The demise of these two men, considered as the pillars of the German Province, startled Fr. Dirnberger.

Fr. Dirnberger received the death news of Fr. Schweiger from a hospital bed in Roding, the home town of Fr. Schweiger, after he met with a tragic accident. Let us listen to the description of the accident in his own words:

In May 1980 I took three months vacation. From May to July, I drove 1,000 kms on the good roads of Germany and Switzerland in search of new mission friends for India. Everything went well until the 5th of July, our last day. On this day my home parish of Doefering was to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the volunteer fire service. I was to give the festal sermon and say "good bye" to return to India. But things



happened another way. Fr. Cyriac Njayarkulam, who was driving the car, lost control as it skidded on the wet road. It went from right to left and, after a few zig-zags, hit a tree with full force. The car was totally damaged. The driver had only minor injuries, but I was seriously affected. My pelvis and the left hip joint had fractured. I had high sugar and my weight was 105 kg. My situation was critical. It was good that in a few minutes an ambulance came and we were brought to the hospital at Roding in the Bavarian forest.



After a prolonged treatment and fitting of an artificial hip joint, Fr. Dirnberger regained his strength and was discharged from the hospital. The artificial hip joint did not function well and so the bones didn't grow together with the artificial material inside the body. This caused terrible pain to Fr. Dirnberger. A second operation was done to replace the hip joint at Frankfurt. Even after this the hip joint didn't work and severe pain continued to trouble him. Later the artificial hip joint was removed by a doctor in Madurai, Tamil Nadu and Fr. Dirnberger, although doing his jobs faithfully, was limping on two crutches for twelve years, until his death.

### **Dawn of Claretian missions in Andhra Pradesh**

With the guidance and support of Fr. Dirnberger, the story of the Indian Claretians continued to flourish. On 24<sup>th</sup> October 1980 ten Claretians, trained in India, were ordained. Sensing it as an opportune time to venture upon new missions, in the spring of 1981, Fr. Dirnberger and Fr. Madhavath went to Andhra Pradesh in search of new mission stations. After meeting the Bishops of Vijayawada and Eluru, it was agreed to take on the Bhattiprolu and Nallajerla stations. Two teams with Frs. Joseph Madhavath and Mathew Njayarkulam as the animators were sent to the new missions. In that same year, with constant encouragement of Fr. Dirnberger and with the dedicated cooperation of the young Claretian missionaries, another new mission station Medchal in the Archdiocese of Hyderabad was started. All three mission stations developed rapidly and have become mission parishes with the growing number of Catholics.



## **An obedient soldier of Christ**

In the year 1983 Fr. Dirnberger was transferred to Claret Bhavan, Karumathur a dry and hot place in Tamil Nadu. It was painful for him to leave Bangalore but as an obedient soldier of Christ he moved to Karumathur. The year 1984 was a one of the remarkable years in the history of the Claretians in India. The Delegation of India was evolved into an Independent Province and a New Indo-Sri Lankan Delegation. All the houses in India except the house at Karumathur belonged to the Indian Province. Karumathur became a dependent mission house of German Province. Fr. Dirnberger was appointed as the Delegate Superior of the dependent mission named as Indo-Sri Lankan Delegation and was entrusted with the task of turning it into a major organism.

### **Claret Illam, Kumbakonam**

Claret Bhavan, Karumathur was growing in years with many seminarians in formation, the seminarians had to be separated according to the stages of their formation. Fr. Dirnberger with his fellow confreres visited Vellore in view of starting a seminary but the plan was dropped because Vellore was very dry and hot. The search continued. When there was an offer from the Diocese of Kumbakonam, Fr. Dirnberger visited the Bishop of Kumbakonam with Stu. D'Cruz. The Bishop of Kumbakonam offered 3 acres of land which would be suitable for paddy cultivation. The offer was accepted and Fr. Dirnberger with the help of architect Mr. Sowraj made a plan for the minor seminary at Kumbakonam and it was constructed within 15 months.

### **Fight Against Female Infanticide**

In the year 1987 a popular magazine "India Today" published an upsetting article titled "Born to Die." The article reported that around 1,500 newborn female babies are killed, every year, in the Taluk of Usilampatti where Karumathur is also situated. After verifying the fact with doctors and nurses Fr. Dirnberger became restless and wanted to



confront this situation. The result was the establishment of Claretian Mercy Home at Azhahusirai. The house was inaugurated on 28<sup>th</sup> December 1987. Later abandoned and orphaned old people also were accommodated at Claretian Mercy Home. Until now more than 500 girl children were saved and given for foreign as well as domestic adoption through this house. It stands as a symbol of Fr. Dirnberger's love and compassion for the poor and the marginalized.



### **Mission Parish at Ettamadai**

Every year Bishop Arockiasamy of Kottar ordained a Claretian to priesthood. After every ordination he used to ask that whether the Claretians would like to take up a parish in Kottar Diocese. Due to the lack of missionaries Fr. Dirnberger refused thrice. Once, when three Claretians were ordained priests, he surprised the bishop saying that the time had come for us to take up a parish in his diocese. The Bishop was very happy about it and entrusted to the Claretians a mission parish at Ettamadai.

### **St. Antony Mary Claret Church, Karumathur**

The mission of Karumathur was erected as a parish and entrusted to the Claretians in the year 1978. It was named as Good Shepherd Parish, Karumathur. Initially Claret Bhavan, Karumathur served as the place of worship for the parishners. Later when St. Claret High School was established, the parish activities were moved to the school premises. In the course of time the need for a parish Church was felt and a piece of land was bought at Moonandipatti for this purpose. When the local people protested against the construction of the Church, Fr. Dirnberger was able to pacify them and get their cooperation. The foundation stone for the Church was laid on 24<sup>th</sup> January 1989 by Most Rev. Arockiasamy, Archbishop of Madurai. The same Archbishop inaugurated and blessed the Church on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1990. At that time the name of the parish was changed into St. Anthony Mary Claret Parish. Fr. Dirnberger played a greater role in realizing the dream of having a Church building for the parish.



## Claret Nivas at Barrackpore

In 1985 the Claretian mission was extended to the North Indian Territory. West Bengal, Orissa and Bihar were in our mission plan. We have taken an option to work among the Santhal tribes. Due to this reason the Morning Star College, Barrackpore near Calcutta was chosen as the place of formation for our future missionaries in these states. Along with Fr. Anselmus, Fr. Dirnberger paid a visit to Barrackpore and talked to Cardinal Picachy regarding a house near the Morning Star College. Since the Cardinal was well known to the Claretians in Rome, he welcomed us with open arms into his Diocese and consulted his Auxiliary Bishop who was President of the Theology Faculty in Barrackpore regarding the admission of our students to the Faculty. The Rector of Morning Star, Fr. ChackoValiyaveetil, S.J. was known to us from Karumathur. Within few months Fr. Anselmus moved to Barrackpore along with four students. They stayed at the Morning Star College until they were able to obtain land on the campus to build our own house of studies. In the meantime the Cardinal retired and Fr. Henry D'Souza became the new Archbishop of Calcutta.

Meanwhile, we had taken up a mission parish at Keerchand, in the Archdiocese of Calcutta. It was a Santhal mission. We also opened a minor seminary in the Diocese of Raiganj. Fr. Dirnberger, as the Delegate Superior, was the man behind all the moves and developments of the Dependent delegation. In the year 1992 the Indo-Sri Lankan Delegation was developed into an Independent Delegation and Fr. Anselmus was appointed as the Delegate Superior.

### Love for Sri Lankan Missionaries

Candidates from Sri Lanka were recruited from the beginning. The first batch of Sri Lankan candidates joined the minor seminary at Karumathur in the year 1979. They did their novitiate and philosophical studies in India. Later, because of political reasons it became difficult to get student visas and so they were sent to the Philippines for their theological studies. The first

Claretian community was established in Sri Lanka in the year 1992 at Welisara-Ragama near Colombo. It was made as a mission of the German Province and Fr. Cyriac Njayarkulam was appointed as the Superior of the mission. Fr. Dirnberger always had a desire to visit Sri Lanka but the desire remained unfulfilled but his heart was with the Sri Lankan mission. Towards the end of his life he wrote a beautiful letter to Claretian Missionaries of Sri Lanka saying that “the heart of their grandfather is always with them” and he assured them his support through prayers.

On Easter Monday, the 12<sup>th</sup> of April 1993 Fr. Dirnberger slept in the Lord at Claret Bhavan, Karumathur. He was buried on the next day in the special tomb prepared on the house premises of Claret Bhavan, Karumathur as per his wish.

### **He Still Lives with Us**

Fr. Dirnberger was a zealous missionary with full of apostolic charity and immeasurable love for the Claretian Congregation and for God's people at large. He changed every difficulty into opportunities to work for the Lord. He was a friend of the marginalized, vulnerable and the abandoned people of the society, he never bothered about the religion, race, status of the abandoned ones, and his only concern was, how he may help them and win their souls for God. He was a man of God who put his foundation deeper in the love of God. Otherwise it would not have become possible for him to withstand with such hardships and vicissitudes of life. No failures could fail his courage and no sickness could make him stumble in his mission. He was a perfect Claretian who walked the talk. Through daily prayers, sacraments and other spiritual activities he evolved as a person who spiritually transformed and socially concerned. Though he had to bear immeasurable pain and undergo terrible sufferings he rejoiced in the cross of Christ and offered them all to the glory of God. He is no more with us physically but lives with us in spirit. As brothers of his Claretian family, let us emulate his lifestyle and conviction in serving God and His people.





# Experience

Rev. Fr. Josep M. Abella, CMF  
Superior General (2003-2015)

FR. FRANZ DIRNBERGER:

## *A Man of Prayer and of Action*



My first encounter with Fr. Dirnberger was in the month of January 1979, when I went to Bangalore representing the Delegation of Japan for the meeting of ESCLA that was held there as a preparation for the XIX General Chapter. Fr. Dirnberger was the Superior and Novice Master. He used to share with us his dreams for the Congregation in India that, at that time, was already increasing steadily under his leadership. Every night, we used to pray the Rosary together with the Novices. Fr. Dirnberger was walking at the front guiding the path during the recitation of the Marian prayer. It was a parable of what was happening to that young Claretian community at that time: with full confidence in the Heart of

Mary the community was expressing its commitment to respond generously to the call of God. He was the one inspiring and leading the young Claretians who had joined the Congregation in India.

As Major Superior of Japan I participated in several meetings of the Claretian Provinces and Delegations of Asia. Normally Fr. Dirnberger was sending a delegate. He was not a person who enjoyed those kind of meetings, but he always sent somebody and supported the efforts of the Congregation in that promising continent. His heart was truly missionary. In all these meetings I discovered in Fr. Dirnberger a man who truly loved the Congregation and tried by all means to keep alive its missionary charism. This was his dream; this was his main preoccupation. Fr. Dirnberger was a man of prayer and of action. He embodied one of the definitions that were applied to our Fr. Founder: "Mystic and man of action". This was what struck my heart when staying with him and listening to him.

As General Prefect of Apostolate I had the opportunity to meet him several times. He was already in Karumathur living as a grandfather of the many seminarians who were there. His presence continued to be inspiring and his missionary spirit was being expressed by his suggestions of new foundations to bring the "good news" to the Indian and Sri Lankan people he loved so much. Any Claretian can find in the life of Fr. Dirnberger an inspiration to live with courage and, at the same time, with simplicity, his missionary vocation. I join the thanksgiving of so many persons who were blessed by the presence of Fr. Franz Dirnberger in their life.



# Experience

FR. DIRNBERGER-

## THE GRAND FATHER

of the Indian Claretians



Fr. Aquilino M. Bocos CMF  
Superior General (1991-2003)

I made my first visit to India from 16<sup>th</sup> January to 6<sup>th</sup> February, 1993. I don't remember the exact date I reached the community of Karumathur. It was a pleasant visit along with Fr. George Nedumpalakunnel and we enjoyed the fraternal welcoming of the community.

As we reached there, we were asked to have a meeting with the community. Fr. Franz Xavier Dirnberger participated in it with his wheel chair. He was the "grandfather". The interest with which Father Dirnberger paid attention to what I was telling drew my attention. As the beatification of our brother martyrs of Barbastro was still fresh, I carried some relics and mementos to hand over to the community and particularly to Fr. Dirnberger since he had worked with a lot of enthusiasm and total dedication to plant and develop the Congregation in India.

While presenting my gifts, Fr. Dirnberger received them in his hands and with certain indifference, without any comment, left them aside immediately. I was surprised and so understood it as an attitude of his lack of interest in it. But on the other side, I was amazed to see that the Seminary had prepared a festive celebration around the newly beatified martyrs and the drama over the martyrdom. At the same I was informed that the students of all the centres in India had organized various competitions on the Martyrs of Barbastro. I was thinking in myself, "All these are the fruit of what Fr. Dirnberger has transmitted to them".

I left the community with this open question, "Why that attitude of indifference of Fr. Franz Xavier Dirnberger while handing over the gifts I was carrying for him?" Later on, I came to know that Fr. Franz Xavier Dirnberger had

never been to Spain and that he did not know the places of Barbastro as those first German Fathers who were studying in the centres of Catalonia.

I received the answer very soon for that question that remained in the visit to Karumathur. On 12<sup>th</sup> April of this same year 1993, the Easter Monday, the admirable Fr. Franz X. Dirnberger passed away. I was communicated that in the room of the Father, they had found some pieces of the cassocks of the Martyrs of Barbastro. They wrapped a diary of his life. These fragments were handed over to him by the Fathers of Germany who had studied in Spain so that they may accompany him during his mission in India. My eyes were opened at that moment and I thought, "I cannot compare what I offered him with the precious treasure of the religious habit that some of Blessed Martyrs were wearing during the martyrdom."

My strange feeling that made me to think of the indifference of Fr. Franz Xavier Dirnberger in Karumathur disappeared. And so I understood the marvelous growth of the Claretians in India. From then on I maintained the conviction that the Martyrs of Barbastro placed solid foundation to the life and mission of the Claretian Missionaries in this great country. I have shared it in the retreats, meetings and conversations while speaking about the Claretians in India.



**Fr. Gustavo Alonso, CMF**  
Superior General (1979-1991)



## REMEMBRANCE OF A FRONTIER MISSIONARY

The Claretian Missionaries of India have a lot of reasons to decide and celebrate the birth centenary of Fr. Franz Xavier Dirnberger, the one who initiated their mission. At their invitation, I can't but join myself to this initiative despite my limited knowledge about this great missionary. I had my direct contacts with him only in the 1980's on the occasion of my visits to those missions.

Certainly it is worth remembering and celebrating the personality of this Claretian and faithful interpreter and realizer of the Council renewal of our Congregation and its impulse towards an evangelization without frontiers. His priestly and missionary vocation had its origin in a family with very deep Christian roots in the Upper Palatinate and was getting matured through serious difficulties, may be by childhood problems of health, or by the experience of second great World War in which he had to participate. They were the elements that formed his character of the strength of the soul. Overcoming these obstacles, he was ordained as priest in 1948 at the age of 32 and began his pastoral activity dedicated to the formation of the seminarians and the popular missions in Germany and Switzerland.

Preceded by the great personalities like Frs. Peter Schweiger and Andres Back, he was appointed as the Provincial Superior in 1957. As his predecessors, he tried to stress the missionary identity of the Province and from there he made his plans to project it to the territories of Africa and Asia. All would be made into reality in the successive years in Congo (Zaire) and in India. In 1970 at the age of 55, he accepted with



generous availability, to take up the responsibility of starting the Claretian missions in India and to lead a group of native Claretians formed formerly in Germany. He entrusted his life totally as formator and leader.

The foundation of the work was put in the state of Kerala with a vocational and missionary centre with the plan of expansion throughout the country. Ten years later, in a meeting of Claretians of Asia, with his future vision, Fr. Dirnberger was sharing his plan of four claretian provinces in India. It is a dream realized within a few years. Besides, Indian Claretians began to carry out soon their mission in all the continents and in the services of government in the top most spheres of the Congregation.

With the Claretian motto of "making use of all means" and with his own notable creativity, besides a careful promotion and formation of vocations, he transmitted to the young missionaries the awareness of the meaning of the evangelizing work in that great country: presence and witnessing life of the disciples of Jesus, ministry of the Word, service for the poorest and in the most needy regions, defense of life (especially for the children to be born through the Mercy Homes he promoted), education of youth, communication media, support to consecrated life, etc.

Certainly, my remembrance and images of Fr. Dirnberger are very much limited. However, I think that his noble image deserves to be remembered in this anniversary and that his exemplary commitment at the service of Claret has left us a way which the new generations of our Claretian missionary family has to bear in mind.

# With Gratitude and Love



Fr. Jacob Arakkal John CMF  
Provincial Superior, Bangalore

# Experience

There is a lot in one's name. A name is a prophecy; it is an indicator that who could be that person in the future. It could be a call to live to the name. If not why the 13<sup>th</sup> child of Michael Dirnberger and KrescenzRuhland was named Francis Xavier, the same name of St. Francis Xavier the great missionary to India. Francis Xavier Dirnberger travelled from the west to the east. Like St. Francis Xavier and gave up his life for his newfound homeland India. Such was his missionary zeal that he became a true inspiration and model for the young Claretian Missionaries in India. Memories of Fr. Dirnberger are still very vivid in the mind of all the Indian Claretians who lived with him either as a co priest or as a student.

My memories on Fr. Dirnberger go with him as our Novice Master. In fact we were his last batch of fulltime novices. Then, I was with him during my regency in the novitiate house in Bangalore. He was the best in everything. When it came to prayer he was the best example for prayer. When it came to discipline, he was the best disciplinarian. His famous "German time" turned to be an epitome for his punctuality and orderly life. When it came to work there was no substitute for him for hard work. And when it came to love he loved the Congregation above all else. At the same time he was always aware of his human vulnerabilities, that he

used to remind us, "Fr. Dirnberger even at this age (75 Years) can do silly things"! His faith in divine providence was marvellous, that he would affirm, "I have never heard of a religious dying of starvation"!

The passion with which he pioneered the Congregation in India is well reflected in its amazing growth during his lifetime itself. The love with which he loved the young "Indian Claretians" earned him the name "Grandfather" and he was a loving and affectionate grandfather to all. All of us who lived with Fr. Dirnberger had a lot of good things to take away with us. They are not just memories. They have influenced us a lot that those memories became a part of our self and gave us the first experience of living with a true Claretian Missionary that have formed up in us into a strong will to be the best Claretians, the same way as Fr. Dirnberger lived and loved the Congregation. We are grateful to him for the rich legacy he has left behind for us to cherish always with ever affectionate hearts.



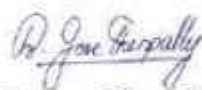
Fr. Jose Thenpillil, cmf  
Provincial Superior  
Province of St Thomas

Dear Claretian Confreres,

Fr Dirnberger was an extraordinary person who committed himself totally to God, dedicated himself to the mission of the congregation and availability to the service of the people entrusted to his care. He was always ready and willing to extend the Claretian presence in India. As one of the main founding father of Claretian Congregation in India, his vision of getting more vocations and then starting the missions helped the Congregation to spread its roots in different parts of India in an organized way. He was an instrument in getting funds for the establishment of different centers in the beginning and its maintenance. At the service time he wanted to make the Indian Claretians self-realist. The life of Fr. Dirnberger as Novice Master had influenced me a lot. His prayer life especially his devotion to our Blessed Mother was an example for all his students. He instructed and motivated the novices to pray at least three Rosaries in a day. 'ora et labora' was his motto. He used to work with the novices and was there in the chapel before the students reached.

He was an extra-ordinary formator having all the qualities of perfection: in depth spirituality, dedication, strong vision, punctuality, compassionate and industrious. Celebrating the birth centenary of Fr. Franz Dirnberger be a time for Indian Claretians to remember him great German Missionary who founded an nurtured the growth of Claretian presence in India.

United in the Heart of Mary,



Fr. Jose Thenpillil, cmf  
Provincial Superior  
Province of St Thomas

*Franz Xavier Dirnberger cmf*

# **R**andom emini**scences**

**Fr. Thomas Vattukulam CMF**  
St. Thomas Province, Karukutty



**A** very happy occasion, indeed for me and for the entire Province of St. Thomas of the Claretians, to celebrate the birth centenary of Rev. Fr. Franz Xavier Dirnberger CMF. He was a Claretian missionary, who not only firmly established the Claretian Congregation in India almost single-handedly, but by doing so, also changed the face of the entire congregation worldwide. In 1970 when the first Claretian community was established at Kuravilangad (Kerala) by the Province of Germany there were only a handful of Claretian Missionaries from India. Fr. Dirnberger was the one destined to accomplish that not so easy task along with three of the first Indian Claretians from the Diocese of Palai. Blessed be God who multiplied that number a hundredfold and sent them to every continent of the globe. The Claretians in India have 4 major organisms now and they owe a huge debt of gratitude to Fr. Dirnberger, to his vision and for his love for India and for our mother Congregation. The fact that he chose to 'remain-in-India-forever' is a clear testimony of that love.

**EXPERIENCE**

My love, appreciation and reverence towards my Novice Master began with the one year formation experience I had with him at Claret Bhavan, Bengaluru. It was the same love that urged me to visit and pray at his tomb at Karumathur and offer the Holy Eucharist there on the day of his death anniversary on 12<sup>th</sup> April 2016, along with other Claretians and some friends. On that day we prayed for him together with the Claret Bhavan community. I was able to recall many happy memories on that beautiful summer day and I could also visit Claret Mercy Home, a wonderful testimony to the love and care of our 'Thatha' for the poor and for the protection of life. I think with those visits I was in a way starting his birth centenary celebration.

Though I had the opportunity to meet Fr. Dirnbergera few times and listen to him during my minor seminary years at Claret Bhavan, Kuravilangad, I did not have opportunities to interact with him at that time. I began to get to know him a little closer only after I began my novitiate in Bengaluru on 30<sup>th</sup> May 1976. Through his conferences and personal dialogues, through his example of an exemplary spiritual life filled with great devotion to the Holy Eucharist and to Mother Mary and also by means of his capacity for hardwork together with the novices, even though he was 60 years old, he made a lasting impression on me and my companions during those twelve beautiful months at the novitiate house.

Fr. Franz was proudly Bavarian-German in many aspects but most importantly, he was firmly rooted in Christian faith and was a zealous and great Claretian missionary. The hard experiences of World War II as a soldier in the army of Hitler, which he used to narrate to us, only increased his desire to be a Claretian missionary to witness to God's Kingdom and to His love. In spite of his lack of knowledge of English he accepted the appointment by his Provincial Superior to go to India and to plant the Claretian Congregation at





Kuravilangad, the cradle of Christianity in India. Fr. Drinberger's enthusiasm for evangelization was evident in his decisions to send Claretians to Punjab and Andhra Pradesh and also to welcome vocations from Sri Lanka so as to found the Congregation there as well.

Conversing about obedience in one of his personal dialogues with me, he asked me if I would obey if I were asked by the Superior to go to the moon. I recall the words Fr. Peter Schutz who was the Provincial of Germany: Fr. Dirnberger used to send me a letter every week from India narrating all the events of that particular week'. Fr. Franz used to ask us often, 'are you joyful?' He was convinced that a Claretian who was not joyful could not become a good missionary. He was a visionary with a universal outlook like our father founder who said "My spirit is for the whole world". He was also an effective leader. He could not see anybody being idle or lazy. He might have appeared to be a little tough at times but he was never too hard on me. He was tender-hearted. I know instances when he would not hesitate to ask pardon from anyone if he hurt or offended him. The affectionate side of his personality has also been narrated to me by other novices as well as his co-workers of the time.

I thank almighty God for the gift of Fr. Franz Dirnberger especially to the Claretians in India. He was capable of connecting well with benefactors in Germany for the growth of the Claretian mission in India. His birth centenary is an opportunity to rededicate ourselves to the Gospel ideals of the Kingdom and to spread them in the characteristic way St. Anthony Mary Claret proposed to us and which Fr. Dirnberger tried to follow. Let us give glory and praise to God who sent this great Claretian missionary to us. While praying for him it would be opportune also to pray to him. May he intercede for us from his heavenly abode! Caritas Christi urgetnos!

