

Bishop **ORESTES MARENGO** sdb


NORTH EAST INDIA'S UNPARALLELED MISSIONARY



**On the 10th Anniversary
of the Missionary Encyclical
Redemptoris Missio
(1990-2000)**

JOSEPH PUTHENPURAKAL SDB

BISHOP
OREGON MARENGO SDB
NORTH EAST INDIA'S
UNPARALLELED MISSIONARY



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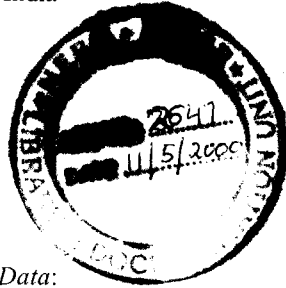
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INTRODUCTION

Documents need time. Writing them, reading them, understanding them. And living them takes more than just time. Some people have no time. They just live the document even before it is written.

When Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) wrote *Poetics*,¹ Sophocles' (496-406 B.C.) *Oedipus Rex*² already existed. However, the tragedian's classical work is seen to exemplify to an astonishing degree the dictums laid down in *Poetics*. To understand Aristotle's document it is quite enough to immerse oneself in Sophocles' stylistic work of art. It had preceded the document.

Redemptoris Missio (1990) ranks among the most significant encyclical letters of Pope John Paul II. It is a pressing invitation addressed to Catholic communities all over the world to help mankind grow into Christ. And yet, for nearly two millennia the ideas enshrined in *Redemptoris Missio* had been lived out by men and women committed to the command of Christ, "Go and preach the Gospel."

Bishop Orestes Marengo answered the clarion call of the missionary document to an eminent degree even before the document came. He was the flesh and blood version of *Redemptoris Missio*. So when the opportunity and desire came to write a commentary on *Redemptoris Missio*, the natural thing seemed to be to write the life of Bishop Marengo.

-
1. A treatise on literary criticism written over a period of several years (335-322 B.C.).
 2. One of the best known plays of Sophocles.

Bishop Orestes Marengo, SDB, a missionary for seven decades and a half

who had trekked the length and breadth of North East India; visited on foot more villages than any other missionary;
 met more people than most other missionaries;
 touched the pulse of the poor;
 shared their life of joy and sorrow;
 comforted the sick and the needy;
 and helped whenever he could.

He astonished the rest of us with the number of languages he learnt - some more, some less, but always a symbol of his ardent desire to resonate with the people's heartbeat: Khasi, Hindi, Assamese, Sadri, Santali, Kharia, Oraon, Munda and Karbi, Bengali, Nepali and Tibetan, Tangkhul, Rongmei and Manipuri, Zoe, Boro, Lotha, Garo and Apathani.

All this in addition to his fluency in English and Italian (his mother tongue), and a workable knowledge of French, Latin and Greek and something also of Sikhmesé - all of which add up to 26! Oh, yes, My commentary did exist. I just needed to capture it. I just needed words.

Lives like that of Bishop Marengo clarify who a missionary is. A Christian missionary is one who is sent to help others to grow. The sacrifices which the missionary makes have no other goal than to see that individuals and communities grow in every respect. The missionary rejoices when Catholic communities multiply; when children receive proper education, excel in studies and are able to find a decent livelihood; when some of them are called by God to dedicate themselves as priests or religious or as committed lay leaders ready to spend their lives for the growth of others; when

among the people there blossom trustworthy politicians and leaders in different walks of life; when the community becomes channels of peace and brotherhood; when Christ's love for mankind is appreciated, and the Good News finds a home in the hearts of more people; and when people have "life in its fullness" (Jn 10:10).

A Christian missionary is one who remembers the words of Jesus: "There is more joy in giving than in receiving" (Acts 20:35), and finds fulfillment in service.

Here it may be remembered that the idea of "growth" which a Christian missionary has is different from the way the world looks at growth. For the world growth means

more power,
more wealth and
more authority *over the other*.

The Christian idea of growth is growth for the sake of service. Jesus says: "... I am among you as one who serves" (Lk 22:27), or again, "... the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28).

The world may not understand this type of a growth. The nearest it has come to experience it in recent times is the appreciation it showed for Mother Teresa, the "Missionary" of Charity. Her entire life was spent in the service of the poorest of the poor. She ministered to Jesus whenever she served the poor, the needy and the sick. Every Christian missionary carries within him or her - in different degrees - the same flame of Charity that burned in the heart of Mother Teresa, the flame of Christ's love.

The concept of growth is central to the Church and to its mission. Anything that grows is alive. That which does not grow is dead. To grow is a moral necessity for man. The

concept of growth, understood in its integral meaning and when applied to a Christian community, would mean growth in number, knowledge, grace, faith, love, and, above all, in Christian influence or service. It is a growth in all ways into Christ.

This is the picture we get of the early Christian community from the New Testament. They grew in all aspects: in number (Acts 1:15; 2:41; 4:4; 6:7; 9:41), in knowledge (1 Tim 2:4), as a body (1 Cor 12:27; Eph 4:16) in grace (2 Pt 3:18), in all ways into Christ (Eph 4:16-21), in faith and love (2 Thess 1:3), in Christian influence: *you are the light of the world, you are the salt of the earth; you are the leaven* (Mt 5:13-14; 13:33).

The need to grow is at the heart of the Church. *Redemptoris Missio* considers it “urgent”. The best way to respond to the call to grow into Christ, the encyclical teaches us, is to share the faith with others. “*Faith is strengthened when it is given to others!*” (RM 2). When faith is shared, both the giver and the receiver grow. With the Christian faith comes other blessings as well.

The Second Vatican Council teaches that the Church on earth is by nature missionary (AG 2). This, we may say, is the heart of the Council’s mission decree *Ad Gentes* (1965). Church’s nature finds its expression in manifold forms of evangelization. The concept and rich reality of evangelization receives a classical exposition in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) of Pope Paul VI.

Evangelization as explained in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* has a global and a specific meaning. Understood in its global meaning evangelization means “bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new ...” (EN 18). In other words, Christian Mission stands for life. It offers life

in its fullness so that individuals and communities may grow, grow in every respect to the full stature of Christ: physically, intellectually, morally, spiritually, individually, socially. The thousands of educational institutions, hospitals and health care centres, technical schools, development programmes, chapels, places of worship and religious formation houses bear witness to what Christian Mission is all about: the offer of life in its fullness.

In its specific meaning the term evangelization would mean bringing the Good News to those who have not heard it at all. The missionary encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* dwells on this specific meaning and shows its importance and urgency for the Church and for the world. We call it *ad gentes* mission, or “missionary” evangelization, or “primary” evangelization, or “missionary” proclamation.

If the 75 years which Bishop Orestes Marengo spent in North East India can be considered as a living tribute to Pope John Paul II’s missionary encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, it is equally fitting to consider the document a tribute to the missionary that Bishop Marengo was.

Crisscrossing the length and breadth of North East India for 75 years, Bishop Orestes Marengo was never tired of offering the Good News of Jesus Christ to everyone who came to him. He showed with his life: that the Church by nature is missionary; that evangelization is the reason for her existence; that among all the different dimensions of evangelization, the *ad gentes* mission is the Church’s top-most priority.

In today’s fast changing scenario of North East India, many realities that Bishop Marengo came across 75 years ago are simply not the same. Today’s North East India is characterized by new aspirations, ethnic and political tensions, insurgency movements, flight from villages to urban centres, erosion of traditional values, weakening of family bond,

educated unemployed, disappearance of age-old institutions, and increasing dichotomy between life and belief, and lack of genuine leadership in society.

At the same time there is a fresh awareness of her natural as well as possible resources, of her historical and cultural advantages, and of her human potential, both men and women.

In a relatively changed context as that of today's can an account of the missionary life of Bishop Marengo be relevant in ways more significant than that of mere history? The reader, after going through the following pages, would be the best person to answer that question.

In preparing this book I have followed a chronological frame of reference:

Early Years (1906-1919),
Valdocco Experience (1919-1923),
Formation to Priesthood (1923-1932),
Missionary Priest (1932-1951),
Missionary Bishop (Dibrugarh) (1951-1964),
Missionary Bishop (Tezpur) (1964-1969),
At the Service of Tezpur (1969-1972),
Episcopal Vicar/Apostolic Administrator (Tura) (1972-1979), Mission in Mendal (1979-1985), in Garobadha (1985-1992), and in Bosco Mount, Rongkhon (1992-1998).

Of course, the most productive, energetic and enterprising years of Bishop Marengo are those as priest and later as the first Bishop of Dibrugarh. Hence, a big slice of the book is dedicated to it. Bishop Marengo was nearing 60 when he began as Bishop of Tezpur and 65 when he had to start all over again in Tura. Everywhere he did a pioneering mission endearing himself to one and all.

May the following pages assist the reader to meet Bishop Marengo, that agile athlete who bagged the greasy-pole prize at the annual parish celebrations in his native Diano d'Alba, the young aspirant who wanted to be a missionary in Ecuador by all means, and the exemplary novice both in Foglizzo (Italy), and in Shillong (India).

May the reader accompany Bishop Marengo to the far corners of North East India to discover his large heart - one that specially loved the Khasis, the Adivasis, the Garos and the Boros, the Nepalis, the Tibetans, and the Tangkhuls, the Zous and the Mayols, the Monsangs, the Paites and the Anals, the Zemeis, the Liangmeis and the Rongmeis, the Lothas and the Angamis, the Rabhas and the Apathanis, and others. Bishop Marengo also received much love from his priests - both religious and diocesan, from Brothers, Sisters, and above all, from his dear flock found almost everywhere in North East India.

Bishop Marengo was the father and founder of three dioceses: Dibrugarh, Tezpur and Tura. For anyone he came in contact with, he was a man of God, who found strength in prayer, and who toiled day and night.

He ran away from glory, power and honour, but lives on in the heart of everyone he met.

The pages that follow are an attempt to give flesh and blood to Bishop Marengo's motto : *To Seek Souls*. It is also a homage to all what the Pope says in *Redemptoris Missio*, and especially to the words: "No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid the supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples" (RM 3).

In all what Bishop Marengo said or did, the focus was clear: to proclaim Christ and to build up Catholic communities. If for *Redemptoris Missio* missionary evangelization is a: "primary service" (RM 2), a "supreme duty" (RM 3), the

“best service” (RM 58) one can render to peoples, and the “foremost task” which concerns the [people’s] eternal destiny (RM 86), it is equally true also of Bishop Marengo.

Some years ago when I met Bishop Marengo in Garobadha where he was retired, he referred to *Redemptoris Missio* and expressed his happiness at such an inspiring missionary encyclical and said how happy he would be, if he could begin all over again, and put into practice many more of its new insights in keeping with the progress in mission theology.

There are certainly many more facts and incidents in the missionary life of Father/Bishop Marengo than what the reader will come across in this volume. It has not been possible to have an exhaustive account. The author will be grateful, therefore, if other significant facts and incidents are made known to him in writing for an eventual revised edition.

Bishop Marengo did not keep any personal diary or note book. He wrote his memoirs trusting in memory alone. But even his prodigious memory played truant at times and some errors were inevitable. Not everything could the present author verify. Here too he would appreciate any correction.

Finally, it must be confessed that the one who has profited most from this book is the author himself. Any exercise in writing is an exercise in learning. For this I am grateful to Bishop Marengo whose impressive missionary life inspired me to undertake this “sweet burden.” If the reader - even one - comes closer to that missionary ardour that filled the heart of Bishop Marengo by reading this book, the author’s effort will be more than amply rewarded.