



**Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice**

*Salesiane di Don Bosco*

**S. Thomas Apostle Province - INM**

**Madras - India** *Salesian Sisters, Mazzarello Convent, Kodambakkam, Chennai - 600 024*

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## *Toward the Centenary - 04*

### **LITTLE FLOWER CONVENT, PALLIKONDA - A HISTORICAL GLANCE**

*A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history. - Mahatma Gandhi*

The first two FMA to visit Pallikonda, an entirely non Christian village of 12 miles distance from Vellore, were Rev. Sr. Tullia de Bernardinis, the newly appointed Provincial of the Visitatoria or the Minor Province of St. Thomas the Apostle, Madras, who was on her visit to Vellore House and Rev. Teresa Balestra, Superior of the FMA Mission in North Arcot, on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1929. They came accompanied by the Salesian Fathers to see the new works under construction which were to be entrusted to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

A certain Mr. J.J. Murphy from Ireland, owner of tea estate in Kerala was ready to give to the Sisters the three buildings he had constructed, one for the Sisters, another for a dispensary and the third for a mixed school. Mr. Murphy had employed many workers from Pallikonda in his estate and in gratitude he was eager to develop Pallikonda and the surrounding villages. The buildings were isolated, at the foot of the Pallikondan Hills. The Sisters considered this as an opportunity for evangelization. In the beginning Sisters from Vellore used to visit Pallikonda and render medical service and became acquainted with the people. The Sisters would travel miles on foot without counting the cost as their only aim was to preach Christ by their life and healing service.

In the year 1932 when Pope Pious XI was Head of the Church, Fr. Ricaldone, Rector Major, Sr. Luisa Vaschetti, Superior General, the **Little Flower Convent at Pallikonda** was established on 3<sup>rd</sup> October in the then North Arcot and the present Vellore district. Msgr Eugene Mederlet SDB, Archbishop of Madras, accompanied by Fr. George Pajetta SDB, prefect of Vellore Mission celebrated the first Mass in the chapel a small room adjusted for that purpose. The new centre was dedicated to the patronage of St. Teresa of Child Jesus. The first community consisted of Sr. Teresa Merlo, the Superior, Sr. Maria Mezzacasa and Sr. Magdalene Maretti. The Archbishop exhorted the Sisters to take up missionary work with a spirit of sacrifice, charity and patience and to have great confidence in the help of St. Teresa of Child Jesus, the Little Flower, and patroness of the missions.

The FMA mission was supported by a small grant from the diocese of Madras. The missionaries set to work immediately visiting villages, helping in the school and distributing medicines to the sick. Their zeal and friendly approach conquered the hearts of the simple people

and children would flock to them in large numbers. The mission flourished with the hard work of the Sisters and the blessings of the superiors. The house chronicles record the frequent visits of Msgr Eugene Mederlet, Archbishop of Madras. During one such visit, in fact, he winged his flight to heaven. On 12<sup>th</sup> December 1933, while on his mission tour, accompanied by Fr. Eligius Cinato, Provincial and Fr. Ter Beck, he halted at Pallikonda and received a grand welcome from the Sisters, teachers, orphans and pupils. He spoke about our Lady Help of Christians and Don Bosco, recited his breviary, had supper, played with the little orphans and heard the confessions of the boys who were to receive first Holy Communion the following day. After seven boys, when the superior went to confess, she noticed bishop Mederlet lower his head while giving her the initial blessing. His face seemed pale and so she called out to the priests for help. Fr. Provincial and Fr. Ter Beck rushed and did all they could to revive but the zealous pastor had already returned to his Creator. His death was a terrible blow and a great loss to the community and to the Salesian Missions. There stands in our Chapel a memorial of his death even today.

For several years Sisters were not able to have daily Mass. A Salesian from Vellore went twice a week to celebrate mass for the Sisters. At times they were deprived of mass even on Sundays and feast days. What gave them consolation was the good number of baptisms they administered in the dispensary and during their visits to the villages. Only in June, 1935, Fr. Francis Philip SDB, an Italian Priest who was sick and who needed special care was sent to Pallikonda as chaplain. He arrived on the 19<sup>th</sup> June and took up his residence in the dispensary building. From that day Fr. Philip took charge of the mixed parish school, started by the Salesians. Some years later when his health improved, he was appointed as parish priest of Pallikonda. The convent chapel and adjoining verandahs served as parish church on Sundays and feast days. With the arrival of Fr. Philip, daily Mass was offered in the chapel and liturgy was well animated.

In 1943, Fr. Philip was transferred to Vellore and Sisters had no regular Mass. Fr. Mathew Kunnel, Fr. Alcide Seeber, and Fr. Frederick Capiaghi were Chaplains until Fr. George Pajetta was appointed as the Parish Priest. The Little Flower Convent chapel served as a mission station and parish till 1954. After 25 years of prayer and sacrifice, on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1956 the mission of Pallikonda was blessed by God with the gift of a new parish church and a parish priest. The Church was dedicated to St. Teresa of Child Jesus, patroness of the missions by Rt. Rev. David Marianayagam SDB, Bishop Vellore.

### **DISPENSARY (1932)**

From the very beginning the Sisters were engaged in medical care. As they visited the villages they would carry with them medicines and administer them to the sick. One of the buildings given by Mr. Murphy was used as a dispensary. In 1953 a dispensary was built with a small clinic for lepers. The number of lepers increased to 200. The Sisters were able to help the poor sick people with foreign Aid, both in kind and cash. Leprosy day was celebrated every year. From 1970 onwards 150-200 leprosy patients used to visit the dispensary. With the help of Sr. Mary Fino's benefactors leper's colony was built in Pachaikuppam and Kattupadi. In 2008 a

new dispensary was built. It was in use for some years. Since the Primary Health Centre of the Government was established close to our centre we were forced to close down our dispensary.

### **ORATORY (1932)**

The first oratory at Pallikonda was started on 29<sup>th</sup> November 1932. Girls and boys gathered on Sunday afternoons in the school play ground. Gradually, the Sisters went into three of the neighbouring villages and began to teach the children values after the games. At present we have nearly 50 children coming for the Oratory at Othiathur village.

### **THE ORPHANAGE AND THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (1933)**

The Little Flower Orphanage was started on 11<sup>th</sup> December 1933 with six little boys between the ages of four and ten. Msgr Eugene Mederlet SDB Archbishop of Madras, blessed the premises of the new orphanage in the presence of Rev. Fr. Cinato, the Provincial, and the superiors of the communities at Vellore, Arni and Polur. The affable, generous and self-sacrificing Sr.Maddalena Maretti, looked after the boys with great love and dedication. The number of orphans increased steadily and need was felt to put up a bigger building to accommodate them. In 1938 new building was inaugurated. There were 70 boys on roll at that time and they were attending the R.C.M. school.

Boys staying in the orphanage and studying in R.C.M. school created a lot of problem for the Sisters. So the Sisters decided to have a school for the boys of the orphanage in the convent premises. According to government rule another school cannot be opened when there is one in the vicinity. But the Sisters prayed, did penance, worked hard and obtained the permission. Section B of every class from R.C.M. School was shifted to the convent premises. Automatically four teachers too were transferred to this school. To start with, the boys were very few. Sisters made every effort to raise the strength of the school. Mr. Joseph, the then assistant Head Master of the School was of great help. He visited different places and recruited boys for the school. He has done much for the sisters and even today he is of great support to the community.

As the strength of the orphanage increased there was a need for another dormitory to accommodate all the boys. In 1958, Sr. Cesira Gallina, Provincial gave permission and the construction was under the direction of Fr.Maggioni SDB, engineer, and Sr.Nancy Perira, supervisor. There were five classes with nearly 200 children. Today we have 10 aided posts and three sisters are teaching in the school drawing government salary. The little boys were very well looked after by the missionaries. A good number of past students of Little Flower School are in high positions, holding big responsibilities. Many of them are priests, both diocesan and Salesian. Some are doctors, engineers, professors, teachers, writers etc. The number of boys has risen to 308. The community takes pain in giving holistic formation to the boys during their five years of stay in the Institution. They take the place of the mother and the father in their lives.

### **NURSERY AND PRIMARY SCHOOL (2005)**

The people of the village felt the need to educate their children in English Medium School to ensure a better future. Hence, in 2005, L.K.G was started with 15 children. Now there are 183 children on roll from LKG to class V.

### **CRAFT CENTRE (1973)**

On 16<sup>th</sup> September 1973 first needle work classes started with nine girls. They were trained in cutting, stitching and embroidery and appeared for examinations conducted by the Department of Technical Education. Integral formation was given to them. Currently nine girls are getting trained in Tailoring.

### **VILLAGE VISITS (1928)**

Visit to the villages started even before Little Flower Convent came to existence, and has always been one of its major apostolic works. In the beginning Sisters were visiting the families daily. During one such visit they found a woman possessed and very much tormented. When Sr. Mezzacasa put a medal of Don Bosco around her neck, she was instantly relieved. Besides giving Christ to these poor people, the Sisters were making efforts to develop their living conditions and improve them economically, socially and spiritually. Every week on Wednesday Sisters go for the family visit in three villages and revive their Christian faith. On every first Saturday poor people from the neighbourhood come to our house and we offer them rice.

### **PAST PUPILS UNIT (1978)**

The unit started in 1978 with 50 past pupils on roll as active members. Most of them are well placed in society and earn an honest livelihood. Animation and formation given through periodical encounters and meetings with them enhances their life and their contribution to the society. Today, there are around 20 of them are regular for the meetings.

### **SALESIAN COOPERATORS (1987)**

The Salesian Cooperators unit was started on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1987 with 5 members. At present there are 23 active members. They collaborate with the Sisters in the mission of the community and in the life of the Parish.

### **VIDES (2014)**

The VIDES Movement started in 2014 with six volunteers. They are actively involved in various developmental activities of the poor in our surroundings. At present there are 11 young and vibrant volunteers who generously commit themselves. They share their time, talent, energy and offer monetary help to those in need.

Little Flower Convent was the fourth house that was established in Tamil Nadu. Over the years thousands of students are educated, young girls and women are empowered to be the catalysts in the society. We pray the Lord and our Patron, Little Flower, to grant us the grace to continue to be channels of God's love and grace to the poor enabling the people to become good Christians and upright citizens. May our Blessed Mother Mary accompany us as we walk along with the children and young people on the path to holiness.

- *Sr. Susai Josephine Rani*  
& *the Sisters of Little Flower Convent, Pallikonda*

