 Reading time: 4 min.

Fr Jose Luis Carreño has been described by the historian, Joseph Thekkedath, as “the most loved Salesian in South India” of the first part of the twentieth century. In every place where he lived – whether India, the Philippines or Spain – we find Salesians who treasure their memories of him. Strangely, however, we do not yet have a good biography of this great Salesian. Hopefully this will soon be remedied. Fr Carreño was one of the architects of the South Asia region, and we cannot afford to forget him.

Jose Luis Carreño Etxeandía was born in Bilbao, Spain, on 23 October 1905. On the eve of his ordination in 1932 he volunteered for the foreign missions and was sent to India, landing in Mumbai in 1933. Barely a year later, when the province of South India was set up, he was appointed novice master in Tirupattur: he was hardly 28 years old. With his extraordinary qualities of mind and heart, he quickly became the soul of the house and left a deep impression on his novices. “We were won over by his fatherly heart,” writes one of his novices, Archbishop Hubert D’Rosario. Fr Joseph Vaz, another novice, would often narrate how Carreño had noticed him shivering during a conference. “Wait a moment, hombre,” said the novice master, and went out. A little later he returned with a blue sweater that he handed over to Joe. Joe noticed that the sweater was strangely warm. Then he remembered that his novice master had been wearing something blue under his cassock, that was no longer there. Carreño had given him his own sweater.

In 1942, when the British government in India interned all foreigners who belonged to countries at war with Great Britain, Carreño, belonging to a neutral country, was not disturbed. In 1943, he received a message over the Vatican Radio that he was to take the place of Eligio Cinato, the provincial of the Southern province, who had also been interned. At the same time, Bishop Louis Mathias of Madras invited him to be his Vicar General. In 1945 he was officially appointed as provincial, an office he exercised from 1945 to 1951. One of his very first acts was to consecrate the province to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Many Salesians were convinced that the extraordinary growth of the Southern Province was due to this act. The Salesian centres doubled under the leadership of Fr Carreño. One of his most far-reaching acts was to begin a university college in the remote and poor village of Tirupattur. Sacred Heart College went on to transform the whole district.

It was also Carreño who was largely responsible for ‘Indianizing’ the face of the Salesians in India, by immediately searching for local vocations instead of

relying solely on missionaries. It was a wonderfully providential policy: when independent India decided not to grant visas to new foreign missionaries, the Salesians were not caught unprepared. “If the Salesians in India today number more than two thousand, the merit of that growth goes to the policies started by Fr Carreño,” says Fr Thekkedath in his history of the Salesians in India.

Fr Carreño, as we have said, was not only provincial but also vicar of Msgr Mathias. These two great men who admired each other were also very different in character. The archbishop stood for strong disciplinary measures against erring confreres, while Fr Carreño advocated milder procedures. The extraordinary visitor, Fr Fedrigotti, seems to have taken the side of the archbishop, calling Fr Carreño “an excellent religious, a man with a great heart” but “a bit too much of a poet.” A few others also alleged that Fr Carreño was a poor administrator, but it is interesting that a man like Fr Aurelio Maschio strongly denied this. The fact is that Fr Carreño was an innovator and a visionary. Some of his ideas – like that of bringing non-Salesian volunteers to serve for a few years, for example – were frowned upon at the time, but are now being actively promoted.

In 1952, after finishing his term as provincial, Fr Carreño was assigned to Goa, where he stayed till 1960. “Goa was love at first sight,” he wrote in *Warp in the Loom*. Goa, in its turn, took him to its heart. Salesians in those days were served as spiritual directors and confessors to the diocesan seminary and clergy, and Fr Carreño was even patron of the local Konkani writers’ association. And the first Salesians of Goa – people like Thomas Fernandes, Elias Diaz and the late Romulo Noronha – used to tell, with tears in their eyes, how Carreño and others would drop into the Goa Medical College Hospital next door to donate blood so as to buy food and other things for the boys.

In 1962, Fr Carreño was transferred yet again, this time to the Philippines, as Rector and Novice Director in Canlubang. In 1967 – because of differences between missionaries coming from China and those coming from India – he was sent back to Spain. But in the Philippines as in India, his novices cannot help recalling this extraordinary man and the impression he left on them. In Spain he founded a ‘House for Missionaries’ and continued his apostolate of the pen. He left more than 30 books behind him, besides hymns like the beautiful “Cor Iesu sacratissimum” and more popular songs like “Kotagiri on the mountain.”

Fr Jose Luis Carreño died in 1986 at Pamplona, Spain, at the age of 81. Despite the ups and downs of his life, this great lover of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

was able to say on the golden jubilee of his priestly ordination: “If fifty years ago my motto as a young priest was ‘Christ is All,’ today, old and overwhelmed by his love, I would write it in solid gold, because in reality CHRIST IS ALL.”*Fr. Ivo Coelho, sdb*
Councillor for Formation