

St. Joseph's Church, Panbazar

2016 marks the completion of 140 years of the fruitful journey of St. Joseph's Church, Guwahati. Fr. Jacopo Broy, a member of the Foreign Missions of Milan was appointed as the resident parish priest in 1816 and in 1817 he built the first Catholic Church in Northeast India at Panbazaar and dedicated it to St. Joseph.

Guwahati has been the nerve centre of the catholic missionaries in the Northeastern region. As gateway to the region, Guwahati has witnessed the coming and going of many pioneer Catholic missionaries from various countries of the world. While several of them passed through the city on their way to other destinations, quite a few of them remained and worked here. According to the records available, the first Catholic missionaries to arrive in Assam were two Portuguese Jesuits – Fr. John Cabral and Stephen Cacella who arrived in Hajo and Pandu (Guwahati) on September 26, 1662 on their way to Tibet.

In June 1850, three French missionaries of the Institute of Foreign Missions of Paris, Fr. Julien Robin, Fr. Nicholas Michael Krick and Fr. Louis-Marie-Noel Bernard reached Guwahati. They set up chapels in Guwahati and Nowgong and served the Catholic community, which consisted mostly of Europeans and Anglo-Indians.

In 1870, the Catholic missions of Central Bengal were elevated to a prefecture (an administrative division in the Catholic Church) with North Bengal and Assam as a part of the new administrative territory. Monsignor Antonio Marietti was appointed as Prefect Apostolic to administer this region. Mg. Marietti chose Fr. Jacopo Broy, a member of the Foreign, Missions of Milan to be sent to Guwahati. Fr. Broy arrived in Guwahati on June 10, 1872 after an adventurous journey of 20 days.

In 1877 Fr. Broy built a Church in Guwahati and dedicated it to Saint Joseph, the Universal Patron of the Church. The church in Panbazar is known to this day as the St. Joseph's Church after the name given by Fr. Broy. The church built of wood and bamboo was later destroyed by termites. Fr. Broy traveled extensively on foot, horse, steamer and other means of travel to visit places like Nowgong, Jorhat, Golaghat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Joypur, Tinsukia, Doom Dooma, Margherita, and other areas of the region. He toured all districts of Assam at least once a year despite enormous difficulties. Being the only Catholic priest in the whole Northeast India, he felt the pang of loneliness. However, the love of Christ and the call to serve the people of the region kept him going. It is recorded that in spite of all difficulties he faced, he was always cheerful. After 18 years of his untiring service, Fr. Broy left Assam in June 1890 to join the Jesuit Society and later died in Barackpore in 1898.

The region was then entrusted to the care of German Salvatorian missionaries. Fr. Rudolf Fontaine and Fr. Gallus Schob arrived in October 1906 to stay and work in Guwahati. They began their work among the Anglo-Indian and Adivasi Catholics who migrated to Assam as tea garden labourers. It was Fr. Rudolf Fontaine who discovered Catholic Adivasis among the tea garden workers and began actively ministering to them. On 31 January 1908, Fr. Edward Hackenbrosch was posted to Guwahati.

On January 1, 1910, foundation stone for a new church at Guwahati was laid by Fr. Edward Hackenbrosch. It was blessed by Fr. Angelus Munzoller, Vicar to the Prefect Apostolic, on 27 November 1910.

After the World War I, the Jesuit missionaries from Calcutta were sent to take care of the Christians scattered in Assam. First Fr. A Boone and after him Fr. Stanislaus Carberry worked in Guwahati and looked after the people in the Brahmaputra Valley. Bro. Brisson, a Holy Cross Brother arrived in 1919 to help them. He stayed on until the arrival of the Salesians. In 1922, the Holy See in Rome entrusted Assam Missions to the Salesians. The first batch of Salesians of Don Bosco arrived in Guwahati on 12 January 1922.

Fr. Leo Piasecki, a Salesian missionary from Poland was appointed in 1923 to head the Guwahati centre and carry forward the pastoral activities of the community. Fr. Piasecki started schools and built churches in several places in Assam. In 1926, he established an orphanage in Guwahati, and started a carpentry school for the poor boys of Assam. Fr. Leo Piasecki toured the whole of the Brahmaputra valley extensively and frequently. The whole valley was his parish. Because of his tireless zeal he was called the Lion of the Brahmaputra valley! He established churches and schools in strategic places in the valley. They have grown up to be parishes and later on diocese. He was a great visionary. Other parish priests who came after him followed in his footsteps.

In 1988, the Salesians of Don Bosco decided to build a bigger church to cater to the growing community. St. Joseph's Church built by the Salvatorian Missionaries in 1910, which stood the test of time for more than seven decades was pulled down in October 1988, and Archbishop Hubert D'Rosario of Shillong laid foundation stone for the present church. He blessed it on 6 October 1990.

On 16 August 1992, Guwahati was erected as a Diocese with Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil, SDB as its first Bishop. St. Joseph's Church was elevated to the status of the Cathedral church. The Catholic community grew over the years in this premier city of Northeast. "It is the work of the Lord and it is marvellous in our eyes". After a careful reading of the history of the Catholic Church in Northeast India, we can truly say that St. Joseph's Church, Guwahati is the Mother Church of the whole of Northeast India. In 2006 Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil bifurcated St. Joseph's parish, Guwahati and formed the new parish at Dispur. It

was designated as the Cathedral Church of Guwahati Archdiocese and St. Joseph's Church, Panbazaar was given the title "Co-Cathedral" of Guwahati Archdiocese.