

# 110th Anniversary of St Gregory's School

Childhood memories of the old school are among the most precious in one's life. The school touches us in many known and unknown ways — and St Gregory School did. It was only much later in life that we found out what profound impact it had on our lives. That is perhaps why, as we move ahead in life, we are more and more drawn to our old school.

In the good old days, St Gregory's School was an institution that everyone tried to get into. It was unrivalled in academic performance, in the quality of its teaching staff it employed and in the type of students it was able to attract. In celebrating its 110th anniversary Mahfuz Anam, an old Gregorian talked with two of the teachers who helped to make the institution as great as it was. He also talked to the present headmaster about the problems and challenges that the school now faces.



**"I feel my work is more appreciated here"**

— Marcel Duschesne, Headmaster



HE is in Bangladesh since 1960. Bro (Brother) Marcel Duschesne, 57, a French Canadian, started his life here in what was then East Pakistan in a school in Barisal 32 years ago. He later went to Narikelbari in Faridpur, again to Barisal, then to Pottia and to St. Placid school in Chittagong where he was for nine years. He became headmaster of St Gregory School early this year.

**Q — What do you think of the Bengalis?**

A — I like them. I have lived for so long in the villages where I have always felt a close friendship with the people. They are simple, hospitable and genuine. I like that way of life.

**Q — You have been involved with teaching in schools for more than three decades. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of our system?**

A — It is difficult to discuss those things. My first comment is that Bengali students are very intelligent. If they had books, proper homes, and necessary diet these boys and girls could achieve very high academic standards. In spite of all this, my experience has been that students are eager and they want to go higher and higher. Those who get some opportunity actually do go high up. The system of education and the syllabus can be further improved. But they are not bad as it is.

But hartals, strikes and politics create a lot of disturbances to regular studies. The

television and the video have also become major sources of distractions for the students and I think they have contributed in making students less studious. But it must be remembered that students all over the world are less serious then they were before.

**Q — There is an impression that St. Gregory school's standard has fallen. Is it true? If so, why?**

A — In 1971 government ordered all mission schools to become Bengali medium. So we closed our English section. This has deprived us of some of the best students in Dhaka. They went to English medium schools. Before we had a very strict admission policy. Now the pressure is to take students from the locality, which constitutes more 90 per cent of the student body. Also people in new Dhaka are not interested in braving the traffic every morning and sending their kids to our school in old Dhaka.

**Q — What about parental support. Do students get enough help in their studies at home?**

A — Parents are not taking care of their children as they did before. In most families both parents are busy earning money because it is so expensive to live in the city. As they both work, they do not have time for the children. They engage private tutors which is not the same thing. Even the teachers have no time because they have too many private tuitions — it is a new kind of business.

**Q — What about the quality of teachers?**

A — It is true that some good teachers have gone to NGOs and foreign embassies for better salary. Many have left for abroad — Australia, Canada, USA and England. But the present staff that we have are devoted and competent. But before we had five or ten brothers in our staff. Brothers had no families. So they gave full time to the schools — day and night. A local teacher, however dedicated, has to look after his or her family. This is becoming an increasingly difficult task. So they need to do private tuitions. Tuition takes away the time which they might have otherwise spent preparing school lessons.

**Q — You have spent 32 years of your life teaching Bengali students. Looking back, did you ever feel that this time might have been better spent among your own people — say in Canada?**

A — I go to Canada every few years. Talking to other brothers and fathers working there, I feel that my work is more appreciated here. No, I feel I was fortunate to have come to Bengal. Here I found a reason for my dedication.

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**"We've all deviated from the right path of education"**

— Nalini K Sarkar



saw myself. Bodies often floated on the Buri Ganga. Oh that were days of hell. Such a man-made disaster perhaps has very few parallels. We all suffered. We were saved from starvation due to the school having stocked some rice, which were given to us against future pay. This saved us all. The days of communal riots after the partition in 1947 is another set of nightmarish memories. However within all these turmoils our school continued, though with ups and downs.

**Q — What makes a good school?**

A — In my opinion, it is the

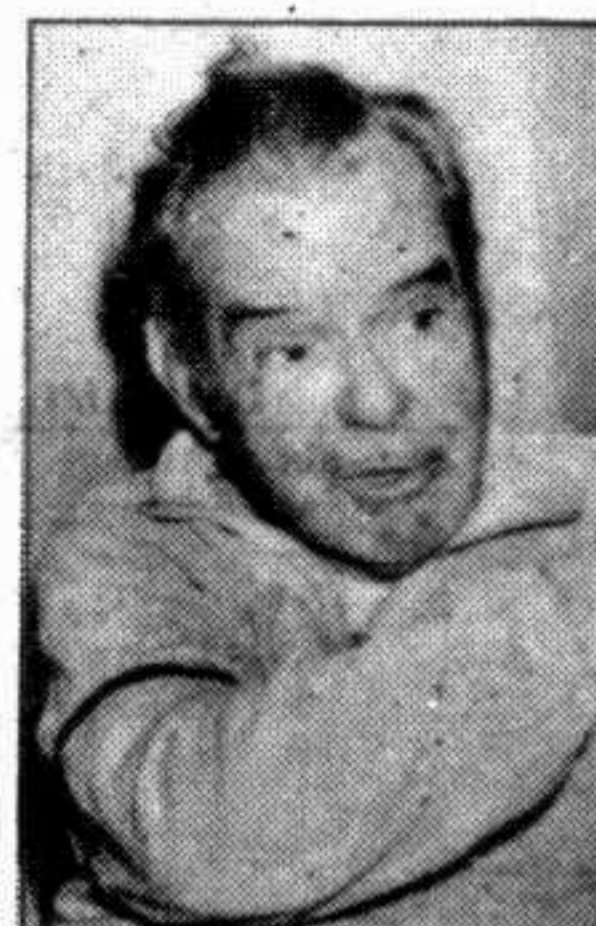
teachers that make a good school. Nothing is more important than good teachers. A teacher must be impartial, must be loving and must care for his or her students. Without a love for students, nobody can be a true teacher.

Today teaching has become a business. If a student gets the slightest reason to suspect the integrity of his teacher than there is no way that particular teacher can be his guide anymore. I used to set the questions. But, never told any student which problems or questions to study and which ones to not. Once I used to privately teach the son of a very powerful government official. The boy was in class 8. He failed in the very subject that I was teaching. The mother was very upset and asked me, how could this happen. I said her son required to work harder for a few more months before he could hope to pass. She asked why didn't I give her son some extra marks as it was within my power to do so in school. That was the last day I gave the boy private tuition. Unfortunately the status of teachers has gone down very much these days. Newspapers are full of stories of students insulting teachers, at all levels schools, colleges and even in the Universities. I feel astonished to read and hear all this.

I feel we have all deviated from the right path — students, teachers, parents, everybody.

**"It seems all worth it when old students come with their kids to see me"**

— Brother Hobart



**Q — Tell us a little bit about yourself.**

A — I am of Irish descent. My father was a carpenter and I was one of eight children. We were poor. I remember the first time I wore a suit was when somebody gave one to my father because the owner had died and his clothes were being given away.

**Q — How did you get to become a brother?**

A — I was deeply touched by the death of my grandmother. She worked as a maid in a rich man's house. Yet when she died, hundreds came to her funeral. Everybody loved granny because of her service to others. I wanted to do the same. I wanted people to love me.

**Q — When exactly did you decide to come to this part of the world?**

A — I was teaching in New York in junior school for brothers. One day in June 1947, I received a letter from the provincial superior to go to Bengal. But before that to go to Washington to learn some Bengali. That was the time of partition, and all we heard was that everybody was killing ev-

erybody else. The Second World War had just ended and all the mission people who were here, needed a rest. So a new team had to come. So about twelve of us from the United States were asked to come here. Three of us, including myself, started from New Orleans by boat. I remember as we were crossing through the Suez Canal, there were numerous ship loaded with British officers and men who were returning from

India. When they heard we were heading for Bengal, they said these Yanks must be crazy. They really thought we were nuts to want to go to India at a time like this.

Well it was winter by the time we reached Bombay where we took the train for Calcutta. Travelling in a train across India at that time was an experience that I will never forget. At that time we heard of riots from all over India. There was no place on the train. We sat on a wooden plank and the conductor locked us in. As we passed city after city we could see samples of carnage all around. Finally we got to Calcutta and then took a steamer for Narayanganj. It was night when we got here. The whole place was pitch dark. There was no light except one far away down the street. Inside the compound there was only one light and I sat under it and tried to get a feel of the place where I had arrived from New Orleans. Next day I had to go over to where the old railway station was — Fulbaria —, to get myself registered. It was a British fellow who was doing the work. No officers of the new Pakistan was yet in place.

In a few days four of us were sent to Bandura, Nawabganj, in Dhaka district, to learn Bangla, which we did for a year. Then I became a staff of the school there. It was just as well, because in the cities you always heard news about riots.

**Q — When did you come to St. Gregory's?**

A — In 1961, St. Gregory School was considered the best mission school in these parts. It was a great honour to be here. But I remember that in Bandura we always spoke Bangla. But when I came here no teacher spoke to the students in Bangla. So when I started to do so, the teachers here said I was spoiling the academic atmosphere of the school. But I really did not care what they said. At that time we had students of many nationalities — Panjabis, Madrasis, Biharis, Pathans and many more. About 12 languages could be heard in the school.

**Q — Having spent 45 years in Bengal, what is your impression about our people?**

A — Like the Irish, the Bengalis are a highly emotional people. They are driven by emotions. When Bengalis like they really become very close.

**Q — What is worth it. Leaving all your family behind and being here for 45 years?**

A — Heavens yes. It is great to see my students coming over with their wives and kids and looking me up. My students showed that they liked me. Like my Granny, I was able to win peoples love. Also for me it was worth it, because I was doing it for God.

## St Gregory's — a Portrait of Glory and Tradition

by Grn. Aslam Khaleel

1882 to 1992 — a long and eventful hundred and ten years. Let us go through the pages of history and try to fathom why St Gregory's School's record is so glorious. St Gregory's flourishes today in a free and developing society — far different than when it was founded during British rule.

Father Gregory de Groote founded what was then a tiny school. How little we know of those first few years in the "Indo-European Correspondence" of Mar 21, 1883, an article states that the staff would be increased from two to four. But Father Gregory had many irons in the fire, and could not personally direct the nascent school. Twice started, it collapsed from lack of public interest. The second attempt at revival was near the old railway colony.

The Holy Cross Fathers and Brothers returned to Bengal after an absence of six years. Father Francis Boeres, c. s. c. resumed the prospect of a school: he nurtured it into a sustaining institution for the next twenty years. In Jan 1889 the school reopened on the ground floor of the present St Francis Girls' School of today. Four Sisters and Mr La Touche made up the staff, along with Father Boeres and Principal. In Jan 1890 there were standards 1 to 6. The Inspector of European Schools granted recognition in April, 1889. In 1890 a Volunteer Cadet Corp was formed. In 1892 the roll held 26 boys and 19 girls. In 1896, Bishop Hurth, Father Boeres and twenty boarding boys moved into five new rooms, which are now the teachers' room, the foyer, part of the hall, and two rooms opposite the front rooms. In 1897 these rooms were extended to the south. A second

floor was added. The enrollment of boys and girls increased to 85.

In 1898 quarters for the girls were enlarged on the other side of the church. Along with Eurasians, there were six Bengali boys and two Bengali girls. Two boys and a girl appeared in the University Entrance exams. Additional land, south and southeast of the school building, was purchased in 1906. The ground was leveled and a wall put up. There were 58 boarding boys, and the total of boys and girls was 122. The present library section went up in 1910. Fr. I. Crowley, later to be Bishop, was nominally headmaster from 1912 to 1915. In 1912 also, the girls formed the new St. Francis' school. Numerous students from Chittagong left for that city, and the enrollment of boys was only 72, with 34 in the hostel. Mr. Andrew Gomes Doctor, a small boy from 1908 to 1911, recalls that the present Headmaster's Office was the dining room.

The room in the southeast corner was the Headmaster's Office. The Fathers and Brothers bunked out on the second floor in different corners, with the boys bedding down in the long hall, now the priest's quarters. Where now the Darjeeling Building stands was single-storeyed building housing a box room, a lamp room, a poultry shed and a big kitchen. The eastern field that now has the covered handball court, had a well and quarters for the coachmen and gardeners.

There was a bandstand at the south end of this building.



between it and the sheds stood a large tamarind tree, encircled by concrete seats. The school then boasted a band and choir, the best in the city. They took part in civic functions: dramas were staged four times a year, mostly in the school hall, with the elite of the city attending.

In 1914 the present Darjeeling Building was built. Also, the Scout Troop was started, and had 40 scouts, later in 1915 Father Crowley resigned as Headmaster. The Scouts took part in two performances to benefit the Scout Movement. Bengali replaced Latin as the second language. In that same year Bro. Eugene was going strong with his Cadets. Father Boulay was headmaster at the time, nominally up to 1918. Actually Bro. Peter, c.s.c. ran the school, for Father was recuperating in Shillong, from 1919 until 1921, the Headmaster was Father Blinn, but Father John Hennessy was the School



Secretary who did all the work.

In July 1923, Fr. Hennessy gained permission to change the European Style school, to the Board Examination. On June 2, 1924 the recognition was granted; Father had pointed out that most excellent Bengali boys wanted to take the matriculation but were not permitted to do so under the rules of European Schools. Father Hennessy had



Two great headmasters

previously founded Bandura Holy Cross High School, and now had the satisfaction of placing St. Gregory's on the path to stability. In 1922, Bro. Bertin carried on the duties of headmaster. Bro Anthony became the next Headmaster. In 1924, 68 boys were on the rolls; in 1925, 85. The staff included Bro. Fabian, Bro. Aloysius, Brother Eugene, Dr. P. C. Sen, Mr. S. K. Choudhury, Mr. B. R.

Ghosh, Brojesh Roy, Phul Chand Sarker and Sylvester Gonsalves.

Father Finner acted as headmaster during Bro. Anthony's sabbatical in 1925. The first matric results of the Dhaka Board had only one candidate, and he passed in the First Division.

In 1927 a third floor was begun for the Brothers. In 1926 the school sent three boys for the Dhaka Board Exams, all passing. In 1927, of the six candidates, 3 passed in the Second Division, two in the 3rd, and 1 failed. In 1928 results were better: of five, 1

passed in the First Division and 4 in the 2nd.

In March, 1929 the Brother Walter came from Bandura to become headmaster at St. Gregory's. This charismatic man remained as headmaster until January, 1938. During school hours he reigned as a martinet; before and after class he was the most gentle and affectionate. Guardians, teachers and students adored him. Mr. Nalini Sarkar, one of the most renowned teachers of the school once commented on Brother's piercing gaze, "He could, if the occasion required, quell a full-fledged riot by merely glaring at the culprits".

The amazing development during his time set a congenial teacher-student harmony. The

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## What Made us Different

Abdus Shahid

Whenever I think of my days as a student of St. Gregory's, image of a disciplined educational institute conjures up in my mind first. St. Gregory's gave us what any other good school can give its students, but it gave us something extra and that was to impart a sense of discipline.

I can remember very clearly that many of our teachers used to say that the first objective of our school was to teach discipline and other things came next in priority. They understood in their wisdom that when discipline is achieved, in broad sense of the term, other things follow more easily. When I entered the working world of my life I realised what they meant and I can only praise their farsightedness.

I studied ten long years in the St. Gregory's, right from class one upto my SSC examinations in 1975. Never during that long period I can remember a day when I sensed any confusion about anything among my teachers or the administration. Now when I look back on those days, I realise how systematically things were

done in our school. I went on to study in higher educational institutes in Bangladesh and I must admit that it took me quite some time before I adjusted to the way things are done in those places including Dhaka University. By the standard of St. Gregory's, everything seemed to be chaotic and unsystematic, lacking care and proper attention. No wonder when I see fellow Gregorians in some place, I can recognise them quite easily. The particular style of handwriting certainly gives the first clue, but the distinctive ways of a self-disciplined man makes it sure. The same thing, and I can say it quite confidently, is true for other Gregorians too.

I don't know much about the present condition of my school, though I still live very near the school as I did during my school days and pass by it at least twice every day on my way to work. But I sure hope that the school authority has kept its prime objective intact, because that's what made Gregorians different from others, and undoubtedly the very best.