

# Educating the Least, the Lost and the Last

by Phang Chung Shin. Posted on September 2, 2012, Sunday

IN 1966, a group of boys in St Joseph's Secondary School were hauled up by Brother Albinus for skipping their extra-curricular activities.



**RECOGNITION:** Brother Albinus receiving the PBB award from the late Head of State Tun Ahmad Zaidi Addrucce.

St Joseph's was one of Sarawak's top schools, and excellence in academics and sports was expected of every student.

One of the students, a 13-year old, started to cry. Brother Albinus, the teacher, asked him why he was in tears. The Form One boy, now a very successful business person, told Brother Albinus he skipped the extra-curricular activities because he had to help his father sell ice-cream.

Immediately, Brother Albinus let him go.

In a later incident, a group of boys were absent from PE (physical education) class and the same Form One boy was among them, but when Brother Albinus noticed him, he let him off once more.

The boy was deeply touched. He was a poor kid, and Brother Albinus' actions "showed me he looked out for the poor and under-privileged. It showed there were fairness and

compassion and respect for the poor. It did a lot of good for my self-esteem and my sense of fairness. I love Brother Albinus and all the Brothers. They shaped my life.”

### **Childhood**

Brother Albinus was born Michael O’Flaherty into a farming family in a village called Ballyhoneen in County Kerry, Ireland, on May 23 1930.

The National Geographic Traveller has described it and the surrounding area as the most beautiful place on Earth, with majestic mountains, sparkling lakes and splendid beaches.

Michael’s family home was one of only three farmhouses in Ballyhoneen. As a child, he had his share of Irish rural life, tending cows, cutting hay, picking potatoes, turnips and mangels, and enjoying the sound of a mechanical thresher making its rounds threshing the corn.

School was “an old stone building with tall rattling windows and black cobwebs in the ceiling” but it was fun. Michael loved the walk to and from school and the football.

The medium of instruction was Irish but they read Dickens and other English books and studied the Penny Catechism.

His mother was a very devout Catholic and every night she made all her children recite a whole body of prayers to Our Lady. She was intent on instilling in her children good moral values.



with granny: Two-year-old Michael O’Flaherty with his grandmother.

## **Brother Oliver's visit**

Young Michael was enjoying his final year in the village school and preparing to move to the Christian Brothers School in Dingle, about seven miles away.

He was 14 and looking forward to enroll in the town school where he could learn more things and play more football. Brother Oliver's visit changed all that and also changed his life forever.

It was May 1944. Brother Oliver of De La Salle Brothers from Castletown in County Leix dropped by.

He "was a small man with red cheeks — neatly dressed in clerical garb."

He spoke to Michael's class about the De La Salle Brothers — how it was founded by John Baptist De La Salle in the 17th century in Rheims in France to help street children get a decent education.

Michael and his class were "mystified" as they had never heard of the La Salle Brothers nor Rheim, Paris or France.

Brother Oliver said he was there to promote vocations to the La Salle Brothers and asked if anyone was interested. Michael volunteered.

Four months later, 14-year old Michael left for Castletown where he continued his education before attending religious training in the Novitiate. He was given the religious name Albinus.

During this period they were visited by some Brothers who had returned from the Far East after the war.

"Their stories were so inspiring that some of us volunteered to go East after finishing our religious and academic training," Albinus recalled.

After a further five years of "Lasallian and academic formation" training with the last two years at the St Mary's Training College, Strawberry Hill, London, doing a vigorous but refreshing teacher training programme, Brother Albinus' wish to "go East" came true.



THE EARLY YEARS: Brother Albinus (left) at the Novitiate in 1946.

### **First posting — Singapore**

In September 1951, Brother Albinus left for Singapore on the P&O Carthage — a three-week journey which took him through the Red Sea on to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), reaching Singapore on Oct 2.

By then, he was ‘truly homesick.’ The Brothers in Singapore took care of him and soon he was off to teaching his first class of students of mixed age.

Some were much older than the others as many had had their schooling disrupted during the Second World War. Despite the high humidity and frequent downpours, Brother Albinus enjoyed teaching at St Joseph’s Institution in Singapore.

In 1954, while teaching in Singapore, he received news of his father’s death.

“But there was no way I could attend his funeral. Brothers travelled by ship and so it was impossible for me to be present for the occasion. It was a very sad experience and I will always remember the occasion when I received the telegram from my director informing me of the loss,” he said.

Brother Albinus spent seven years in Singapore. After that, he returned to Ireland for a much-awaited reunion with his family and went on to earn a degree in English and Literature.

He expected to be sent back to Singapore but was instead posted to Kuching.

## **St Joseph's and Sacred Heart**

In 1960, Brother Albinus started teaching at St Joseph's Kuching and later became its principal, enjoying both classroom work and sports with the students, especially rugby, which he introduced to some very enthusiastic kids.

Being principal in those years was very demanding. He had to teach a lot of senior classes as there was a shortage of teachers and "there was no such thing as a senior assistant" to help run the school.

Brother Albinus recalled: "I remember how in late December or early January, we had to walk to Carpenter Street or Main Bazaar and find ex-Form Five students to teach in Forms One and Two. With a bit of encouragement and training, they generally did quite well but then came September, they were off for further studies or work, so you had to go through the same routine again."

After 10 years at St Joseph's Kuching, Brother Albinus was transferred to Sacred Heart Secondary School, first as teacher and later as principal.

Here, most students and teachers came to school by bicycle and providing parking space for every bicycle was a big task. So was upholding the school's reputation in academic excellence and extra-curricular achievements. For 17 years, Brother Albinus worked tirelessly and year after year, Sacred Heart was among the top schools in the state in public exams as well as in games and sports.

## **St Patrick's Kuching**

Brother Albinus retired from Sacred Heart in 1987 but was immediately appointed director of the A Level of St Patrick's Private School, Kuching.

St Patrick's was a private school set up in 1961 to cater for students who had failed the Common Entrance Exam.

Those were the days when only 30 per cent of primary six pupils made it through the CEE, a superimposed quota system which barred many good students from the gates of government secondary schools.

St Patrick's offered them an alternative route to higher education. Later, it also opened its doors to those who failed the Sarawak Junior and the Senior Cambridge Exams. Over the years St Patrick's has done its part in producing its fair share of professionals and successful citizens.

Many students benefitted from the A Level programme and achieved impressive results in the London A Level Examination, enabling them to pursue studies overseas.

In 1992, Brother Albinus was appointed principal of St Joseph's Parish Tuition Centre until 1997 when he was invited to help out in China.

He went to Fuzou and found it immensely interesting as the students were very dedicated and especially keen on mastering conversation in English as some had their eyes set on the US.

After an arterial by-pass in Australia in 1998, Brother Albinus accepted an invitation to teach World Religions at Inti College Kuching, where he “spent two fruitful years.”

Thereafter, he went back to the St Joseph Parish Tuition Centre and later started his own tuition class in English and Literature for Form Four and Five students.

In 2002, Brother Albinus — with some former students of St Joseph’s and Sacred Heart — started a programme in rural villages to help weaker students in Primary Five and Six cope with UPSR.

It was so successful that other kampungs requested to have similar centres for their children. With support from the tua kampungs, there are now eight centres, the latest being Skibang near the Indonesian border.

A one-to-one guidance programme for slow learners who have serious difficulties in reading, writing, and maths has also been started by another Brother — Brother Justin.

These are the core activities of the Yayasan Lasallian Kuching, brain child of Brother Albinus for “educating the least, the lost, and the last.”

### **Faith, service and community**

Faith, Service and Community is the philosophy of the De La Salle Brothers.

“A deep faith in God and His providential care – the Brothers are there to serve and not to be served and the Brothers start their mission from a community.”

That, said Brother Albinus, is the credence of their life.

I asked Brother Albinus why he chose to join the order of the De La Salle Brothers.

He replied: “Why I joined the De La Salle Brothers remains a mystery as it does for all other Brothers who were called. God chooses, we don’t choose. All the Lord wants from us is to listen. But very often today, there are so many voices, it is difficult to listen.”

### **Dedicated service**

Brother Albinus has devoted 52 years of his life to education. His dedication is hard to match, his contributions immeasurable. Thousands have benefitted from his work academically but more importantly, in their development as well-rounded persons steeped in strong moral values.

At 82, Brother Albinus’ spirit of service hasn’t dimmed. Indeed, he is helping to ensure Sarawakians in need of educational assistance will always have someone looking out for them.

He calls on young people to join him in this worthy mission: “They are more than welcome to join our YLK (Yayasan Lasallian Kuching) and continue our service to the under-privileged.”

On his special love for Sarawak, he said: “I like Sarawak because on the whole, the state is still a very peaceful and civilised place to live. People mix well, are friendly and there is a sense of Godliness in the atmosphere.

“How long more can I stay will depend on my health and well-being because there will inevitably come a time when I will have to head for home and give up climbing stairs!”

Read more: <http://www.theborneopost.com/2012/09/02/educating-the-least-the-lost-and-the-last/#ixzz25Z2lySwL>