

## **History of Fr. Lafon Church in Mandalay**

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### **Abstract**

St. Joseph Church, which is widely known as Fr. Lafon Memorial Church, is one of Mandalay's historic religious buildings. It stands on 80<sup>th</sup> road between 35<sup>th</sup> and 34<sup>th</sup> streets, Mandalay. It was built by Fr. Lafon in 1894 for the Yunnan Chinese Christians. At the same time, Father Lafon founded an orphanage and leper school in the yard of this church. In 1928 it was destroyed by fire. After its burning, Fr. Lafon faced many difficulties for the restoration of his school. Fr. Lafon took an active part in the missionary and social affairs of the Christians in Mandalay and its surrounding areas. When the activities of orphanage and leper school came to a halt he asked for help from the Salesian mission in India. At that time, two hundred and fifty students and many lepers were under the care of Father Lafon Church. Although Fr. Lafon encountered many difficulties he resolved to settle them by opening courses of sewing and carpentry and selling lottery tickets to raise funds. In this way, his missionary and social works could be restored. Fr. Lafon performed not only missionary work but also social work. St. Joseph Church is widely known as Fr. Lafon Church because he played a vital role in promoting and maintaining Roman Catholicism in Mandalay and its surrounding areas. This paper highlights Fr. Lafon's and the Salesian Society's activities in Mandalay.

**Keywords:** church, Fr. Lafon, St. Joseph, orphanage, leper

## Introduction

Fr. Lafon Memorial School was named in honor of Fr. Lafon who took over St. Joseph Chinese Orphanage School in Mandalay from Bishop Simon in 1893. Upper Myanmar was recently occupied by the British government when Fr. Lafon began to run this school. So he faced many difficulties because the national patriotic leaders fought against the British invaders with the weapons at their hands. However, as time passed by he was able to develop his school. He also built lepers' and orphans' homes. Many of his alumni served the British government as government servants. So his school became a school recognized by the British government. Nearly 300 students attended his school. He appointed headmasters and teachers. The students included Catholics, Buddhists and even Muslims from different parts of Myanmar. His primary aim was to evangelize the Roman Catholic religion in Mandalay and its surrounding areas. At that time, Catholics, known to us as *Bayingyi*, remained few in number. The students were taught art and science and vocations. He maintained his school by undertaking some businesses activities such as rice-milling, cultivation of crops, selling lotteries etc. However, the disastrous fire that broke out in Mandalay in 1928 sapped his activities. So he decided to hand over his institution to the Salesian Society, based in India. In 1939 the Salesian society began to run Lafon Memorial School. Under the administration of the Salesian priests, this school developed considerably. On the other hand, the Second World War delayed their activities because some of the Salesian priests were arrested and some of their supporters left for India. In 1945, Fr. Lafon peacefully passed away. In spite of Fr. Lafon's death, his institution stood until 1965 when the military coup broke out in Myanmar. Today, some buildings of Lafon Memorial School still stand as government buildings. My ambition is to show gratitude to Fr. Lafon Memorial School in Mandalay.

### 1. Review of the Relevant Literature

Before the rise of missionary schools, residents of Mandalay largely depended on monastic education on the basis of Theravada Buddhism. Fr. Lafon School was one of the Roman Catholic Missionary schools in Mandalay. At that time, besides this school, there were also Baptist Mission schools in Mandalay. The primary aim of these schools was to promote Christianity in Mandalay. However, they also carried out works for the betterment of the residents. These schools were Kelly High School, American Baptist Mission Schools, St. Peter's English High School, Anglo-Vernacular High Schools, Buddha Thathana Noggaha High Schools (National Schools), Aided Central National High School, St. Michael's English High Schools and Government English High School. Schools for girls were also

opened in Mandalay by the Christian missions. Fr. Lafon also founded co-educational schools. St. Joseph Convent School founded by Fr. Lafon was for girls.

At first when they occupied Upper Myanmar the British did not pay much attention to education. However, later, they opened government schools to sustain their administrative machinery. Initially, the British attempted to use the existing monastic system to fashion a rudimentary system of western-style schools in the education sector. However, their attempt was in vain. And so, the British government unwaveringly depended on the Christian Missionary schools. The Christian missionaries built and opened schools, dispensaries and hospitals for residents in Mandalay. In addition, they took charge of the residents' education and health care. Lafon Schools opened in 1894, American Baptist Mission Schools and the Wellesley Schools, opened in the 1850s and became the government aided schools. On the other hand, most of the residents in Mandalay continued to depend on the monastery schools. Only a few residents used the missionary schools. Later, the success of the mission schools persuaded the residents and local students enrolled in the aided mission schools, which cost very little. Fr. Lafon School and other mission schools became famous in Mandalay. In these schools, the students studied land-surveying, geography, history, elementary arithmetic and geometry and physiology, including vocational education. Lafon School was administered under three headmasters from 1902 to 1938, before the Salesians took over. Under Mr. Charle, the first headmaster, all candidates who sat for the Seventh Grade of the State Examination passed. The students enrolled in Fr. Lafon Schools were two hundred and fifty in number. Any student who passed the middle examination could join a government department, factory or industry beginning as a clerk. I think that at least twenty or thirty students annually passed the State Examination.

At that time, a clerk earned from 15 kyats at the lowest to 80 kyats at the highest. A clerk's salary could well support a family of four or five. In short, the mission schools including Fr. Lafon School were undoubtedly owed gratitude by people in Mandalay. My purpose of writing this paper is to show Fr. Lafon's benevolence towards the residents in Mandalay so that future generation knows well the Christian missionaries' activities in Mandalay.

## **2. Purpose**

The purpose of this research paper is to highlight Fr. Lafon's activities and the role of Salesian Society in Mandalay.

### **3. Research Methodology**

In writing this paper “History of Fr. Lafon Church in Mandalay” sources based on the Roman Catholic Missionaries and their activities in Myanmar were used. Many of these sources were taken from Sacred Heart Cathedral (Mandalay) and my collected books and Mandalay University Library. Interviews, Questionnaires and Survey Methods were also used. Christian Fathers’ advice was taken into consideration in writing this paper.

### **4. Research Questions**

1. Why was this paper about Fr. Lafon and the Salesian Mission in Mandalay written?
2. How did Lafon School contribute towards the Society in Mandalay?
3. Why did Fr. Lafon hand over his school to the Salesian Mission, based in India?

### **5. Findings and Discussion**

According to the Mandalay Gazetteer and many other historical sources, Roman Catholic and Baptist Churches, Mosques, Hindu temples and other religious buildings were allowed to be built in Mandalay, the last capital during the reign of King Mindon (Searle, 1900, p.58). During the late Konbaung period, the most of the missionary priests like Bishop Charles Bourdon, Bishop Bigandet, and Bishop Simon from the Foreign Missions of Paris (MEP) reached Mandalay for propagation of their faith. In September, 1874, Bishop Simon started doing missionary work for Chinese and Tamil Catholics in Mandalay (Evans, 2014, p.485). At the same time, Baptist priests like Dr. Mark and Judson built their churches and western style schools where the residents’ offspring and even royal pages usually went for western education (James, 2002).

Many residents in Mandalay largely relied on the schools, opened by the Christian Churches for their generation. The Christian population also increased in Mandalay totaling 1500 in number, out of 35,000 Catholics in the whole of Burma (Evans, 2014, p.418). Christian quarters like Kelley enclosure near their churches appeared in Mandalay. There was strong rivalry between the Roman Catholics and the Baptists and Buddhist monks pertaining to religious affairs and education. In truth, Buddhism was so strong in Mandalay due to King Mindon’s support at that time. However, the missionaries struggled for emergence of their co-ed schools which transformed the monastic education traditionally held by the Myanmar society (U Kaung, 1963, pp.44-45). With the arrival of Christianity in Mandalay St. Michael High School, St. Peter High School, St. Mary High School, Fr. Lafon Institution, St. Joseph Convent, Wellesley Schools simultaneously sprang up. In addition, the homes for the lepers and orphans were also built (Evans, 2014, p. 501).

In the political and diplomatic arena, during the reigns of King Tharawaddy and King Mindon, there were diplomatic relations with the Papacy. Bishop Bigandet served King Mindon as a diplomat. With the help of Roman Catholic Missions, King Mindon sent the royal pages and Myanmar envoys led by Kinwinmingyi (port officer), and U Kaung to England (Tin Maung Yin, 2008, p.282), France, and Italy. King Mindon aimed to modernize the country with the help of the missionary priests (Stewart, 1972, p.57). Myanmar scholars like Maung Shwe Oo worked for the country and King Mindon was able to conclude the treaty of commerce and friendship with Italy and France (Ba, 1970, p.18). The mission schools continued to exist until 1965. Thus, the emergence of the western style of schools resulted in a renaissance of the then society in Myanmar.

What mainly caused the missionary schools to emerge in Myanmar? The emergence of the missionary schools like Fr. Lafon School was mainly based on the politics, the military and the economy prevailing in Myanmar. In 1721, Fr. S.M Calchi and Fr. G. Vittoni from the Barnabite mission, based in Italy, introduced western education in Myanmar. They built a church at Ava, capital of Nyaungyan dynasty. King Taninganwe allowed the Christian missionaries for the development of his country (Ba, 1964, pp.290-291).

The king established diplomatic relations with the Vatican, with the help of Fr. Vittoni, a Barnabite priest (ibid. p.290). As a result, the western education could be introduced in Myanmar. However, the western education only affected the royal circle and the Christian community at that time. Therefore, King Taniganwe's aspiration for the progress of his country was in vain. It is found that the missionaries continually came to Myanmar in order to do their evangelization for their faith and education and social welfares from the time of Nyaungyan to the Konbaung period.

On the other hand, the Mon-Myanmar struggle for power put pressure on the missionaries at that time. Some of the missionary priests lost their lives due to this struggle. Some evidence suggests that some priests were allowed to do their missionary and educational works in both countries. Fr. G. Rosetti, Fr. P. Gallizia, Fr. M. Nerini were the Barnabite priests who sowed the seed of the western education in Myanmar (ibid, 00.293-294). The western style schools opened by the church had contributed the Myanmar society through Konbaung period.

These missionary schools including Fr. Lafon School experienced the ups and downs of ongoing Myanmar politics. In late Konbaung period, the military, the political and the economic needs made the Christianity strong so that western education developed more during the reigns of King Mindon and King Thibaw (U Kaung, 1963, pp.64-65). Thus, the missionary schools, commencing from

Nyaungyan period made contribution to the Myanmar society until 1962 when the Revolutionary government led by General Ne Win seized the power.

#### **Fr. Lafon's Social Activities**

The time in which Fr. Lafon reached Mandalay coincided with the armed struggle against the British yoke in Myanmar. The missionaries inevitably received the natives' hate for Europeans. Amid the difficulties, the missionary schools developed in Myanmar due to British support. In 1894, Fr. Lafon built a school and a home for orphans in the compound next to St. Joseph Church (Aung Nyunt, 2014, p.289). Fr. Lafon School was included as one of the Anglo-Vernacular Schools, recognized by the British government. Fr. Lafon also built and opened dispensaries and a hospital for lepers. It is supposed that his philanthropies would attract most of the residents who professed Buddhism. In addition, he also built the churches at Ywahtaung in Sagaing and Amarapura in Mandalay. The Home for the Orphans and Lepers and the schools founded by Fr. Lafon enrolled two hundred and fifty students including Anglo-Chinese in 1889 (Evans, 2014, p.489). With the arrival of the missionary priests, the lepers' condition was considerably uplifted under their care.

Myanmar is a tropical country and so it inevitably faces diseases like leprosy which was endemic there since ancient times. Lepers were not allowed to enter into villages and towns including the capital city during the times of the Myanmar kings. They lived outside the towns or villages under a minister who took a charge of their affairs (Than Tun, 2011, p.68). In 1891, the prevalence was estimated to be 8.6 per 10 000 population for the country as a whole and 14.4 per 10 000 for central Myanmar. Lepers often experienced stigma and discrimination and became outcasts of society (ibid.) It is seen that in mid-nineteenth century the Christian missionaries came to take care of them building Leper Homes in Myanmar.

Bishop Eugene Foulquier and Fr. Johannes Wehinger, members of the Paris Foreign Mission (MEP) reached Myanmar in 1889 to help Fr. Lafon's social activities. Bishop E. Foulquier ministered to Catholics in Nabet, Yemethin. Then he came to Mandalay accompanied by Frs. Tobias and Paul including twenty-five French priests to help Fr. Lafon's activities (Evans, 2014, p.490). At that time, Catholic *Sasana* began to develop in Mandalay due to the MEP missionaries. Bishop Usse's seminary was transferred to Maymyo (Pyin Oo Lwin). In fact, this seminary was built up for the Tamil mission and Anglo-Tamil schools in Mandalay had 150 pupils (ibid., p.485). To crown the work he brought over the Sisters of St. Aloysius Gonzaga from Pondicherry (India) for the education of girls. He then went to Shwebo. He died at Shwebo aged 52. Fr. Paul built St. Michael's Church.

In 1889, Fr. J. Wehinger also took care of Lepers, outcasts and the poor in Mandalay. Besides he built a church in Kyaukse, Mandalay (Aung Nyunt, 2014, pp.131-132). The British government gave him land outside Mandalay for his ministrations and missionary works. He built a home for lepers from Kyaukse on this land. In those days, leprosy was prevalent in Myanmar. Money would have to be spent to eliminate this disease. Therefore, he left for Europe to get aid from the leaders of France, Germany, Britain etc. for Myanmar lepers. He also sought help from Pope Leo XIII to support his philanthropies showing his pamphlet in which he used the profound words, "My children and lepers. Franz Joseph, emperor of Austria, Kaiser Wilhelm, emperor of Germany, Prince of Wales in England including his family and friends in Europe donated a large sum of money to his social welfare in Burma. Sisters in Austria decided to take care of the lepers as voluntary nurses in Myanmar (The Silver Jubilee Issue of Don Bosco (n.d.), Tin Maung Kyi, collection, p.46).

At the International Congress on Oriental diseases in Berlin he spoke frankly to the states' leaders, doctors and researchers and other attendants about the fact that many Asian countries were dangerously under the threat of leprosy and that emergency aid was necessary for the lepers. This disease would spread to Europe sooner or later if it could not be checked in the East. After he reached Myanmar, he built and supported the leper asylums' medical equipment (ibid., p. 44).

Therefore, in Mandalay the missionaries built schools, hospitals and shelter for lepers. Missionaries like Fr. Bigandet, Fr. Paul Abbona, and Fr. Judson established friendly relations with the then kings so that they would be allowed to build orphanages and lepers' homes in Myanmar. In this way, generations of the leprosy-affected families received western education, carried out by the missions.

From the time of the Myanmar monarchs to the colonial period, social welfare was mainly performed by missionaries from abroad. It is seen that in Mandalay, the Baptist and Catholic churches simultaneously not only propagated their faith but also performed secular activities. At that time, Mandalay society backward except for a few of the elite class. Under these circumstances, the missionary priests took an active part in the development of social welfare in Mandalay.

In Myanmar, the orphanage schools, the leper asylums, hospitals, convents, colleges and schools sprang up soon after the arrival of the missionaries. During the reign of the Myanmar monarchs the lepers had been outcasts. They were not allowed to enter the towns. However, the Christian priests took care of them by curing their diseases. Then they built huts or hospitals for them outside towns or villages. Bishop Simon and his colleagues, Fr. Girud and Fr. Boulanger, cured and nurtured them and uplifted their life. Thus, the social conditions of the lepers were developed under the care of the missionary priests like Fr. Lafon.

### **Fr. Lafon School in Mandalay**

In 1894 and 1895 Fr. Lafon opened Anglo-Vernacular School and St. Joseph Orphanage School at the Chinese quarter in Mandalay. The headmasters of the orphanage school were appointed by Fr. Lafon. Mr. H. Scheppelmann was the first headmaster who served from 1895 to 1902. The second headmaster was Mr. Charles who served from 1902 to 1936 (Aung Nyunt, 2014, p. 128). Under Mr. Charles' administration, all the students who sat for in the seventh grade examination passed and the school became prosperous. Mr. H. Cornelio served as a headmaster from 1936 to 1939. During his tenure, the Lafon Memorial School became the Salesian school (ibid, p.129).

The orphanage school enrolled 230 orphan-boys of all nationalities including Chinese and Anglo-Indians. In 1903, Fr. Lafon collected subscriptions from all the towns of Myanmar. He also asked for the donors to contribute money into his institution, visiting all the towns in Myanmar. A large semi-pucka building which accommodates 150 boys was built with a government-in-aid of Rs. 15,000. The registered school got the usual grant-in-aid from the government (Evans, 2014 p.489). Fr. Lafon operated his institution including the Leper Asylum with income received from various businesses besides the government support. It is found that Fr. Lafon ran the business in order to maintain the institution, Leper Asylum and Home for Orphans in the long-term. In 1914, he ordained Fr. Ignatius, his pupil. The students came from Puta-O in Upper Myanmar and Bassein in Lower Myanmar (ibid).

However, fire broke out in Mandalay in 1928 and destroyed the Boarding School and dispensary. The fire caused many losses of Fr. Lafon's philanthropies. Therefore, in 1928, he decided to ask the Salesian Society in India to take over. His decision was supported by Bishop Foulquier, vicar apostolic of Upper Burma. In 1928 Fr. Lafon wrote to Fr. Mathias, an outstanding apostle of the Salesians of South India to hand over his institutions including the leper home within a few years. He had served his institutions for twenty eight years in Mandalay. He decided to hand over his institution to Salesian society founded by Don Bosco when he faced difficulties and financial problems. The Salesians name derived from "Pious Society of St. Francis of Sales." It was formed of priests, clerics and lay brothers (Tin Maung Kyi's collection, n.d., p. 40).

In 1936, he requested the procurator of the Paris Foreign Mission (M.E.P) based in Rome to seek the help of the Salesian Society. However, Fr. Lafon had never received any reply from the Salesian Society in India. In 1937 Fr. Candela, the Catechist General of the Salesians with Msgr. Scuderi, the Provincial of Calcutta, made a quick trip to Burma. They were honored guests at the residence of Bishop Albert Faliere and spent a few days in Mandalay. All the final arrangements were made for the official handing over of the School and Orphanage of Rev. Fr. Lafon.



### **The Role of the Salesian Society and its Aftermath**

The Agreement reached between the Salesian Society and Fr. Lafon in 1938. According to this agreement, the properties owned by Fr. Lafon were transferred into the Salesian Society. The properties owned by Fr. Lafon were as follows;

1. The Lafon compound extended around 100 yard in width in which new church on right side of road and institute of technology on the left.
2. St. Joseph Chinese Orphanage Institution would permit the Salesians the present incomes and properties as their own property.
3. This Institution would grant the Salesians complete freedom in the management and administration of the Institution and properties.
4. The Salesians would demand the consent of the Vicar Apostolic when they dispose of any of the properties for the benefits of the school.
5. The yearly allowance of Rs. 500/- would be continued to contribute. It may be more or less, according to the amount received by the Vicar Apostolic from the "Holy Infancy."
6. The parish of St. Joseph would be entrusted to the Salesians for the Chinese with the Widows' Home attached to it (Tin Maung Kyi's collection, n.d., p. 45).

In September, 1939, the transfer of Lafon Institution between Fr. Lafon and the Salesian society were officially performed. The transfer took a considerable time. Lafon institution and its all properties were now officially owned by the Salesian Society. Salesian priests named Fr Antonio Alessi and Fr. Urbano Bordin, Anthony Del Col and Denis Cavanah, and Charles Dell'Acqua and Angelo Bongiorno reached Mandalay in order to run the Lafon Memorial School in 1939. Fr. U. Bording, Anthony Del Col, and Denis Cavanah, and Coadjutors Charles Del'Acqua and Angelo Bongiorno were given their formal obedience to staff the new House in Burma. Fr. Anthony Alessi was to be the first Rector of Lafon Memorial Schools.

At that time, three boarding students and twelve day students remained in the school. Besides, the Salesians could take care of one hundred and twenty-two orphans who remained in the Lafon School. Soon after the Salesian heads reached Mandalay all the schools in Myanmar including the Lafon School were closed because the students boycotted against the British colonial rule. The students' strike delayed the Salesians' works. On the other hand, WWII now threatened.

As soon as the war spread to Myanmar, an Italian priest, Fr. Alessi imposed strict disciplines for the students and teachers. He did not allow his students, confreres and teachers to read any newspaper in the school or to express their opinion whatever about the war (Evans, 2014, p.503). World War II

was a war fought between the Axis Powers led by Germany, Italy and Japan and the Allied Powers led by the English and France and America and Russia. In truth, the war damaged the political and economic and religious infrastructures in many corners of the world.

In 1941, the Italian Salesians Barattoni, Giacomini, Bongiorno and Bertolino who took in charge of the Lafon Memorial Church were interned by the British government. Fr. Alessi demanded the British authorities to release his colleagues because the Lafon Memorial School was nearly closed up by their arrest. In addition not only the bishop and Fr. Lafon, but also the commissioner of Mandalay wrote a long letter to the government in favor of the three Salesians (Evans, 2014, p.505). As the situation seriously intensified four Italian priests left Myanmar for Calcutta.

Many of Christians who lived in Mandalay and Maymyo left for India before the Japanese entry into Myanmar. Among those, the generous donors of Fr. Lafon Institution also left Myanmar. The donors' departure made a difficulty for the superintendents of the institution. In the meanwhile, as Toungoo in Lower Myanmar was caught up in the fighting the missionaries were forced to leave (Tin Maung Kyi's collection, n.d., p.47). The Italian priests such as Fr. Di Meo and Bro. Santino came to Mandalay to stay with the Salesians. In difficult times, the superintendents hoped that the examination would be held. The Lafon students numbering fifty continued to stay as they had nowhere to go. Mgr. Kerec, the administrator apostolic of Chao Tung in China came to Mandalay in 1941 to press his Salesians to leave for India (Evans, 2014, p.508).

When the Second World War spread to Myanmar, Lafon institution became a war refugee camp where many students and donors including Anglo-Indians, Indians and Chinese took shelter before they left Myanmar. They deposited their valuable properties to the Salesian priests. Lafon Church's authorities decided to store all these properties in the crypt of the church and to close the entrance with cement. Lafon institution was the most trusted by the people at that time. When cholera spread in Mandalay all the boys and confreres were injected with anti-cholera medicine.

In 1942 when the Japanese entered into Myanmar the Salesian society persistently maintained the Lafon Institution against the dangers. In 1943, Lafon Memorial Church was partly damaged by the Allied forces' bombing against the Japanese. A few of those who took shelter in the building lost their lives. 200 war refugees and the Salesian priests who temporarily took charge of the institution remained in Mandalay. The Lafon institution was affected by the war efforts as it was too close to Mandalay. Fr. Alessi decided to move the refugees and his colleagues to a safer place. Fr. Alessi sent the boys with Fr. Bordin, Bro. Dell'Acqua and Bro. Joseph Kramer to stay at two wards of the Home for Lepers, west of the St. John Leper Asylum. Though Home for Lepers really belonged to the Protestants

who ran away Catholics now took charge of it. Fr. Alessi and Fr. Lafon also took shelter inside this Home of Leper Asylum.

In September, 1943 all the Italian Salesians named Alessi, Fr. Bordin and Bro. Dell'Acqua were arrested and interned at St. John Leper Asylum. During those periods Fr. Lafon alone remained at the school, with about 50 refugees. In 1944, it was difficult to feed thirty-two orphans, 8 seminarians, 21 families of refugees who depended on Salesian Institution due to financial problems. By now very few students were left. Since Salesians could not afford to pay salaries to teachers, the seminarians took charge of teaching. As the seminarians did not have experience of teaching some students left the school. Besides, half the boys were always absent because of urgent work or sickness. On 24, February, 1944, the 56<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his ordination was celebrated for Fr. Lafon at the Home for Lepers where the Salesians were staying. In July, 1944 Fr. Lafon again got sick of cerebral malaria. He was taken to the Home for Lepers in order to cure him.

In August, 1944, agreement was reached between the sisters of the Leper Asylum and Fr. Alessi. The seminarians under Fr. Alessi provided the firewood for the Leper Asylum. In return, the sisters supplied medicines, and clothes for the Lafon students. In addition, they sent doctors to the sick students. The devaluation of the Japanese notes made it difficult for everyone including the missionary schools. The prices of all commodities had sky-rocketed by ten times their former prices.

Under these circumstances, Fr. Alessi bought the essential things such as rice, salt, edible oil, milk, etc. for the students and confreres. During the Japanese period, the life and property of the people and the students who were studying at the different mission schools were vulnerable. And so they were hoping that the Allied armies would soon reoccupy Myanmar. Fr. Lafon died of malaria on 25, January 1945. His dead body was re-buried in the crypt of his St. Joseph's Church in 1946 at his will (Aung Nyunt, 2014, p.130). The number of female students enrolled in school rose 61 percent (by 45,000 students) from 1911-1921, and another 82 percent (100,000 students) from 1921 to 1931 with expansion of the colonial and private education system, primarily in the form of all-girls schools. From 1921 to 1931, there was a 33 percent increase in employment of women in public administration, law, medicine (Evans, 2014, pp.503-505).

#### **Fr. Lafon Memorial School in Post-independence Period**

On 4 January, 1948 Myanmar gained her independence. Ethnic insurgencies broke out in Myanmar as soon as it gained independence in 1948. However, Fr. Alessi continued to send yearly three or four students to India for further studies. Among those, Sein Nyut and Francis Tin Maung returned to Myanmar as clerics. At the end of 1948, Bro. Silvio Vitali came to Myanmar to help the Salesians who

took charge of missionary and social affairs (Tin Maung Kyi's collection, n.d., p.49). In January 1949, Mandalay and May Myo (Pyin Oo Lwin) were under the control of the Karen and so the schools including Lafon Memorial School had been closed.

The fighting between Myanmar government forces and the Karen forces destroyed the Lafon School. Fr. Alessi narrowly escaped death while the fighting was going on. In the meanwhile, some of the students were sent to Anisakan village near May Myo to save them. In May, 1949 Fr. Alessi returned to Italy when Bro. Francis Tin Maung, Fr. O' Brien and Bro. Sein Nyunt respectively reached Mandalay. It is possible that they took charge of Lafon Memorial School after Fr. Alessi's departure.

In May, 1954 St. Joseph's Parish of Thingangyun, Rangoon was officially handed over to the Salesians. Fr. Thomas D' Sousa was ordained a priest at Lafon Church on 17 December, 1955. The new Rector, Rev. Fr. William Balocco had solemnly opened a new Aspirantate at Anisakan, Maymyo on the 19 March, 1957 (Tin Maung Kyi's collection, n.d., p.55). In this same year, the Girls' school was opened in Mandalay. At the beginning this school was put under the Catholic teachers. Later in January, 1961 five Salesian Sisters took up the running of this Girls' school.

The students enrolled in the Salesian Lafon Institution increased in number. In April, 1964 the First Novitiate School was opened at Anisakan village, May Myo. After the Second World War, the Salesians could develop the Lafon Memorial School. The student number increased from 1200 to 1800 in 1962. In the meanwhile the Salesians extended their works beyond Mandalay. In 1954, another Salesian school was opened in Rangoon. In 1957 an aspirantate school was founded to recruit local vocations. The Novitiate School was opened to produce the novices.

In the 1950s, Burma was one of the richest countries in Asia. It had a high literacy rate. When Burma gained independence in 1948, U Nu's government sought to create a literate and educated population, and Burma was believed to be on its way to become the first Asian Tiger in the region. However, the 1962 coup d'état isolated and impoverished Burma. All schools were nationalized and educational standards began to fall. Burmese replaced English as the medium of instruction at Burmese universities in 1965, with the passing of the New University Education Law a year earlier (Nyi Nyi, 1964, p.50). This led to a rapid decline in English proficiency among the Burmese. English was reintroduced as a medium of instruction in 1982.

### **The Education System, Adopted by the Revolutionary Council Government in 1962**

While the Salesians' religious and social works were flourishing the change of government took place in Myanmar in 1962. The military junta led by General Ne Win abolished the Democratic parliamentary system and adopted the Socialist system. According to this system, General Ne Win nationalized all

the private enterprises in the whole country. In 1965 the revolutionary government nationalized the Lafon Memorial School and renamed it the government high school. In addition, the government issued an expulsion order on the foreign missions. In this order the foreign missions including the Salesians left Myanmar. In this way, the Lafon Memorial School run by the Salesians became the government high school since 1965. Fr. Lafon Institutions became No. (8) Basic Education High School (girls' school), No. (22) Basic Education High School (girls' school), University of Distance Education (UDE), No. (14) Basic High School and Higher Education Department (Mandalay office) since 1965.

The Education System based on socialist moral values was adopted by the Revolutionary Council led by General Ne Win (Nyi Nyi, 1964, pp.50-51). According to this education system, Science took precedence over all other subjects. Arts subjects were considered to be intellectually inferior. Therefore, most of the students were interested in science for they could go to Medical University and Rangoon (Yangon) Institute of Technology (RIT) if their matriculation examination marks were very high. The students were divided as arts students and science students according to the results of Matriculation Exam at first, and later at the results of the 8<sup>th</sup> standard examination. As a result, the arts students did not have any chance to access the Institute of Medicine and Institute of Technology.

The use of Burmese (Myanmar) language as the medium of instruction was used. There was no consideration for indigenous vernacular languages for those whose mother tongues were not Burmese. There was also no provision for religious education in the curriculum. English was taught as a second language from the Fifth Standard. As a result of this policy, about 70 per cent of students continued the science route and 30 per cent the arts route. In the science stream, the combinations of subjects were Myanmar, English, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Biology.

Discrimination was introduced under Burma's 1982 Citizenship Law, whereby full citizenship was confined to those who can prove ancestors resident in Burma before the first British annexation in 1824-25, which for many of the country's estimated 1.5 or 2 million Indian and Chinese inhabitants was nearly impossible. On the basis of this law, holders of Foreign Registration Cards and their children are barred from many occupations, and under the Ministry of Education's 1980-81 regulations on university entrance, an applicant must be a 'Burmese national'. Moreover, those Indians and Chinese who pass this obstacle are still barred from professional subjects such as technology and medicine. In short, the education system on basis of Socialism had many defects and so this system became unpopular.

**The Above Questions were answered as follows;**

1. I have two main factors on this paper. The first factor deals with St. Joseph Church called Fr. Lafon Church which was the first Roman Catholic Church built in gothic style in Mandalay. As of now, this Church is among the historical buildings in Mandalay. However, my research paper is mainly based on education and social welfare. The second factor concerns Fr. Lafon's missionary works and philanthropies and the Salesian Mission Society in Mandalay. My primary aim is to show respect to Fr. Lafon and his successors, the Salesian Fathers.

2. In 1894, Fr. Lafon built and opened the school for boys and girls living in Mandalay. In his school the lay students firstly met art and science, called western education. In addition, they were taught the art of weaving, carpentry, tailoring etc. Those who learned a trade from Fr. Lafon School could stand on their feet after they left the school. The alumni of Fr. Lafon who passed the Grade Seventh could aspire to higher posts in government departments and private enterprises. Fr. Lafon took care of lepers and orphans in Mandalay. Therefore, Fr. Lafon School contributed towards the Society of Mandalay.

3. In the year of 1928, fire, broke out in Mandalay caused a great disaster to Fr. Lafon School. He tried his best to reconstruct his school by selling lottery tickets and from other activities. However, all this was in vain due to the anti-British movement and economic conditions. Finally he decided to hand over his school to the Salesian Mission based in India. Soon after the Salesian Mission took over, anti-British colonialism and the Second World War greatly affected Lafon Memorial School. From the post-World War period to 1965 when General Ne Win nationalized Lafon Memorial School, the Salesian Fathers and authorities concerned contributed to the society of Mandalay. Prominent scholars like recently late Dr. Tun Lwin, a meteorologist, Ludu Sein Win, a famous journalist who died in 2012 were the most prominent alumni of Fr. Lafon Memorial School. Today, the alumni of Lafon Memorial School who live in different parts of Myanmar are serving for our country.

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the emergence of mission schools, operated by Christian priests, diffused the western education into Myanmar. On the other hand, Christianity also spread. In the colonial period the Myanmar students became aware of national consciousness by studying the world history taught by the mission schools. In the colonial period, most of the students passed the matriculation examination from those schools.

Missionary priests like Fr. Lafon earned money to support the mission schools. In addition, the vocational schools produced the professionals such as carpenters, tailors etc. In social affairs, the orphanage and the leper homes show their philanthropic spirit. They uplifted the social conditions of the lepers and the orphans giving them social awareness and education. However, military and political affairs halted their philanthropic and missionary works. In 1939, the Salesian Society based in India took over the Lafon Memorial Schools in Mandalay due to the financial problems. The Salesian priests and authorities had developed Lafon Institutions amidst the difficulties. As a result, the Salesian schools had emerged far and wide in Myanmar.

On 1 April, 1965, the Mission Schools like Lafon Memorial School were nationalized by the Revolutionary government led by General Ne Win. This dealt a major blow to the Salesians engaged in social and educational works in Myanmar. Salesian Missionaries were expelled in November 1966. In this way, the Mission Schools faded away. Nevertheless, Fr. Lafon uplifted society in Myanmar by opening the day schools and the boarding schools. Later, the Lafon Memorial School under the administration of the Salesian priests and the superintendents produced many prominent politicians, journalists, physicians, artists and writers. They were as follows;

1. U Khin Maung Myint, Retired Rector University of Pharmacy Mandalay,
2. Ludu Sein Win, a prominent writer, journalist and political activist who passed away in 2012,
3. U Aung Naing, now a chairperson of Myanmar Election Commission, 2020 (Loikaw District)
4. U Win Maung (Tampawaddy), a scholar of Myanmar Culture,
5. Dr. Tun Lwin, prominent meteorologist, who passed away in 2019,
6. Cardinal Charles Maung Bo,
7. U Soe Thar, ex-minister for Union of Myanmar Communication,
8. KMD U Thaug Tin, scholar of Computer,
9. U Tun Lin, former player of Myanmar Volleyball Selection (Commander),
10. John Tun, former player of Myanmar Volleyball Selection,
11. U Kyaw Moe Thar, an excellent painter,
12. Maung Ko (Amarapura), writer and
13. Ko Nay Win (Mandalay), composer.

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Fr. Lafon School



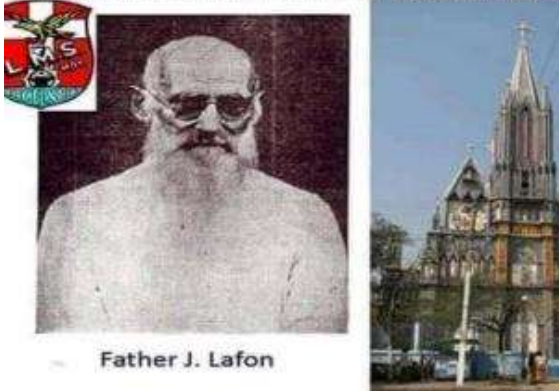
Sitting: Fr. Alessi, Fr. Lafon, Msgr. Faliere, Fr. Scuderi, Fr. Bording; Standing: Bro. Bongiorno, Bro Del Col, Bro Cavanagh, Bro. Dell'Acqua



Don Bosco, founder of Salesian Society



**Lafon Memorial School**  
 80th Street, Between 34th & 35th Streets, Mandalay, M



Father J. Lafon







Cardinal Charles Maung Bo and Pope Francis, 2015



Paying Homage Ceremony of Alumni of Fr. Lafon

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### Notes

1. The word “Salesian” derives from Saint Francis of Sales and Don Bosco founded the Salesian Society in 1859 in Turin, Italy.
2. The Chinese who inhabited in Yunnan, the province of China migrated to Burma due to the political determinations in China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

3. “*Bayingyi*” derived from the Persian word “*Ferinji*” meaning foreigner. Later, the natives inhabiting in Myanmar called Roman Catholics “*Bayingyi*”.
4. Buddha Thathana Noggaha High Schools, the schools based on Buddhism and began to be built on the Myanmar nationalism after the students’ boycott in 1920.
5. “*Ludu*” means the people and Ludu Sein Win was a prominent writer and a political activist. He died in Yangon, 2012.
6. MEP, Missions Etrangères de Paris in French (the Foreign Missions of Paris) began to do the missionary works in Myanmar in 1860s.
7. Mandalay was the last capital of the Konbaung dynasty where Fr. Lafon School and other Christian mission schools flourished till 1965.

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