

BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

Circular 463

In Memoriam
Br. Michael Jacques



General Council
Rome, Italy

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Brother Michael Jacques

1916-2011

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General Council

Rome, Italy

Brothers of the Christian Schools

Via Aurelia 476

00165 Rome, Italy

1. Early Years

Brother Michael Jacques in his lifetime attained an eminent profile as a De La Salle Brother, notably when he was Assistant Superior General for Asia 1966-1976, a critical period of turmoil for the Asian Brothers and their work. It may take a leap of the imagination to realize that this distinguished Brother came originally from the little known island of Borneo, which when he was born in 1916 was still without roads or towns and most travel was by river boat. In later life, reflecting back on the 14 years he spent as a child on this tropical island he came to feel proud, even thankful, for the privilege. By then he had come to realize how closely his career had been guided by Providence at every stage.

His father Edward William Harry Jacques was an Englishman recruited by the British colonial authorities to teach English at a local Chinese school. His mother, Chin Jin Khoi, was Hakka Chinese who had migrated from Dutch Borneo, drawn by the better employment prospects in Kuching in British Borneo.

Michael, the second of their three children, was born 6 June 1916 when the first world war had reached a level of intensity in Europe. His father felt duty bound to return home to fight for his country. His brother Reginald, then Master of Music at Queen's College in Oxford, had just returned from battle severely wounded. However Jin Khoi wouldn't hear of it, she pointed to the futility of getting himself killed and leaving her and the growing family with no means of support.

When it came to baptism, Mr. Jacques, a staunch Anglican, was determined to have his children baptized into his church. When the pastor refused on grounds that their marriage was invalid, he turned to the Mill Hill Catholic missionaries whom he greatly respected. The priest invoked the Pauline privilege, regularized the marriage and baptized the children as Catholics. His mother Jin Khoi was supportive, making sure they attended mass regularly, while she herself remained devoutly loyal to her traditional Taoist religion.

They were living in Kuching, then a rapidly expanding river settlement, with a confluence of many traditions and cultures. It was the seat of British administration. The British had already dealt effectively with endemic piracy that preyed on the busy shipping routes, and had put down the tradition of headhunting among the people of the interior. This facilitated increased trade and the growth of a mainly Chinese business community. For centuries boats came here all the way from China and India trading in 'gold, camphor, tortoise shells, hornbill ivory, rhinoceros horn, crane crest, beeswax, lakawood [a scented heartwood and root wood of a thick liana], dragon's blood, rattan, edible bird's nests and various spices' [*www.incitoprime.com*]. These were among the most valuable items from Borneo.

Mr Jacques found teaching English quite frustrating and was persuaded by his wife to quit and enter the colonial service as an assistant financial officer. His duties entailed frequent long trips by boat into the interior lasting many days, leaving her at home anxiously awaiting his return. When scarcely five Michael often joined him on these trips, at her insistence.

In 1923 Mr. Jacques went on home leave to England, to Oxford. Michael, now approaching seven, joined him and during the six months away received excellent schooling in a private college and made rapid progress in English, such that one day he asked his father to stop speaking to him in Malay. At Oxford it was possible to trace the origin of their rather un-English surname. According to Brother Michael the family name was traced to the battle of Waterloo when a French drummer boy whose first name was Jacques was taken prisoner, brought to England where he eventually settled down taking Jacques as his surname.

On his return from England Michael's formal schooling began, first in the convent school, and later at St Joseph's School run by the Mill Hill Fathers. Among his teachers was the Mill Hill missionary priest Fr. Delaney, an Englishman, whom he remembered as the perfect gentleman, a superb teacher with well prepared lessons, elegant penmanship and a warm encouraging rapport with the students. Michael seems to have adopted him as a lifelong role model.

Just as Michael had reached 14 his mother got infected with tuberculosis, declined rapidly and passed away in 1930. The future lay before him. He was thinking of becoming a doctor and his father was supportive. He also considered the priesthood. Either way he would have to transfer to a Brothers' school in Singapore or Malaysia to continue his studies. The Brothers had arrived in Asia in 1852. Reports of their excellent schools reached Borneo and it was decided he should go to Penang, to St Xavier's Institution, one of the first Brothers' schools in Asia.

Looking back Brother Michael saw the hand of Providence, especially in his mother's death at this critical time. She would never have consented to his going to Penang or becoming a Brother. In addition as a boarder at St. Xavier's he would have a close-up experience of the Brothers, whom he came to admire greatly as teachers and as dedicated religious, easing his way to becoming a Brother. Michael topped his class in studies, held a high rank in the military cadet corps, and was later appointed head prefect of the school. He graduated in 1932 with honors in the Cambridge School Certificate examination, the highest level examination in schools at that time.

By then his mind was set on becoming a La Salle Brother. Earlier notions of becoming a doctor or priest had no further appeal, as he writes:

This idea changed when I came in contact with the Brothers who impressed me by their total dedication to education as a full life-time vocation. The example of zeal and devotedness, coupled with the skill and the effectiveness of the Brothers who taught me swayed my thinking. Furthermore the Brothers worked as a team and eschewed other preoccupations, living a life of prayer and austerity which attracted me. Once I decided to join them I was prepared for all eventualities.

When it came finally to leaving home and Borneo in July 1933, little did he realize that he would never see his father again, and that it was a definitive farewell to Borneo as well. His next visit would be twenty-five years later in 1958. The interim would take him through some dramatic personal experiences.

2. Joining the De La Salle Brothers

On arrival at St Joseph's Novitiate in Penang he was greeted by Brother Barnitus Kennedy, an Irishman, who combined the roles of Director of Juniors, with that of Director of Novices and Scholastics. Michael was at once touched by his gentleness, affability and obvious holiness, a man held in special reverence on all sides. He became an important influence on Michael. But being a junior was not easy. He felt the rigid daily routine was tiresome and the stress on silence at all times needlessly excessive. In addition he began to get severe attacks of migraine which he associated with studying in bright light, particularly artificial light. He became acutely anxious that this would disqualify him from becoming a Brother. Brother Barnitus was able to reassure him that there was no question of this. Having already passed the Senior Cambridge School Certificate Examination he was in effect two academic years ahead of his fellow juniors and hence did not join them for their daily lessons. Instead he was encouraged to do private study for the London Inter Arts examination. After two years he proceeded to the postulancy and novitiate and came to be known as Brother Theodoret Michael. When he was posted to community this became Brother T. Michael. Even the T. was eventually discarded.

After novitiate and scholasticate when his companions were mostly posted to community, he was retained to teach the juniors. By July 1941 he was already 25 and made his final profession as a De La Salle Brother.

3. The Japanese Occupation 1941-1945

The Second World War had already been raging in China since 1937 and in Europe by 1939: by 1941 East Asia became embroiled as well.

Due to Japanese attacks on Penang, the community Brothers at St. Xavier's took refuge in St Joseph's Novitiate where conditions became quite congested and would remain so for the duration. Brother Michael led a team of young Brothers to plant vegetables and fruits, and to do some fishing in the sea nearby. As conditions stabilized somewhat he studied Japanese and qualified to teach in the Brothers' school nearby, now under Japanese control with Japanese as the sole medium of instruction.

In 1944 as the war continued, American bombers began to pay daily visits to Penang and among the direct hits was St. Xavier's prestigious edifice which was reduced to a heap of rubble. The Japanese authorities in Penang were now getting more nervous and instituted a fresh round up of suspects, especially those who had even one parent who was an enemy alien. This would include Brother Michael. Three Brothers from St. Joseph's Novitiate were taken away to Changi prison in Singapore. Miraculously Brother Michael escaped. However he no longer felt secure, it would be only a matter of time before he was taken as well. He had his bag packed as a precaution and did his best to keep a low profile. It became a time of acute anxiety day and night. He even began to question his vocation as a Brother and pondered the priesthood.

He also felt acutely anxious for his father and his family back in Kuching. There was no way to communicate. Only after

liberation did he learn his father was interned and had been ailing for some time and had passed away just weeks before the Japanese surrender.

At the end of the war, the presence of Allied soldiers on the streets ended the long nightmare and it was possible to start thinking and planning again for the future.

4. Post war Recovery

In an astonishingly short time the Brothers' schools began to re-open. The Brothers were back in the classroom, even though many suffered from malnutrition and malaria. Their numbers would be augmented with new arrivals from Australia and Ireland, as well as from St. Joseph's Training College. The speed of recovery throughout the District at this critical period will always be seen as a sign of divine intervention. It was greatly assisted by the goodwill of the parents and the general public. Within a few years the schools returned to new life and to former glory in studies, in athletics, games and cultural pursuits.

Brother Michael was posted 20 October 1945 to St. Michael's Institution in Ipoh, some 200 km south of Penang. He was happy at last to have a posting to an actual school community. He took his place among the senior teachers and played his part in the planning and the reorganizing of this large school. Because the Japanese had occupied the building, there was no classroom furniture, no books or other essentials. However there was the priceless asset of a body of dedicated teachers and Brothers who were only too eager to be back in the classroom and restore the school they had known and loved so well. Another asset was the sheer thirst for education with crowds seeking admission. At this time the Brothers constituted 20% to 30% of the teaching staff in most Brothers' Schools.

Both teachers and Brothers had suffered much during the war and many were in poor health. When others had vanished at the approach of the Japanese forces in 1941, the

Brothers without exception had chosen to remain at their posts and share the sufferings of the people. Their courage and dedication were never forgotten.

Brother Michael together with a team of senior teachers processed the vast numbers seeking admission; they re-established the classes with syllabuses and timetables. It would be quite some time before textbooks and other essentials could be procured. At the same time society at large was going through a period of stress arising from the Communist insurgency which sought to end British colonial presence and set up a Communist state.

It was a happy moment when he got his first class, the senior class in the school. Many were overage; all had lost four years of normal schooling as well as personal habits of study. Typical of the Brothers' schools, the pupils came from different races: Chinese, Indian, Malay and Eurasian, and from different faith traditions: Christian, Buddhist, Taoist, Hindu and Muslim. Brother Michael worked hard, his lessons were well prepared and he expected the best from his pupils, whose hearts he won, and these became the celebrated Class of 1946 which achieved such stunning results in the Cambridge School Certificate Examination at the end of that year. Br Michael came to be regarded as a teacher of ability. The pupils never forgot their indebtedness to him and held regular class reunions in his honor right into his old age. Looking back he attributed much of his success to careful planning and even more to the daily reflection. For Brother Michael it was the moment of the day when it was possible to disengage from usual stresses, and speak to the students in a more personal way, and reflect on the larger picture, what life was really about, and the importance of personal

faith and a good conscience. Above all he spoke of God's love and plan for each of them. He writes:

A very powerful influence on their thinking and conduct was the daily reflection I gave. This was an Institute tradition and an exercise at which we had been trained and made to practice in the House of Formation. It consisted of a pep talk that followed immediately on morning prayer which began the class.

Brother Michael spent four years at St. Michael's and in his memoirs he notes that this was his only experience as a formal classroom teacher. In 1949 he went on leave to Singapore to resume his tertiary studies which had been interrupted by his frequent migraine attacks in 1933. The attacks continued but he managed to live with the problem.

5. Study leave

In 1949 he was posted to St. Patrick's School in Singapore to continue his studies for his London BA. This he obtained in 1950, following which he was directed to proceed to Rome for the Second Novitiate. He often spoke warmly of his experience of Rome, and of his encounter with the larger Lasallian world, getting to know Brothers from many countries. His companions included such Brothers as Brother Maurice August and others who were destined later to play a major role in the development of Lasallian studies.

Following the Second Novitiate he went to London where he obtained the Postgraduate Certificate in Education from London University.

6. School Administration

On his return to Malaysia Brother Michael was seen to be a much changed person, more confident and visionary, with dreams to be pursued. He was posted to St. Francis' Institution in Malacca as Director and Principal. The school population included a strong mix of Portuguese Eurasians, and in fact Malacca still cherished many memories of a long and colorful history. The school presented several challenges for Br Michael in terms of upgrading morale, discipline and academic standards. His three years in Malacca made for a dramatic change. They were to be long remembered for his personal interest in all aspects of school life and his schemes for a better school. The Boarders in particular wept at his departure. His disappointment was that he was called elsewhere at the end of three years when he felt his efforts were just beginning to bear results. He wanted to do so much more.

He was posted as Director to St. Joseph's Scholasticate in Pulau Tikus with a mandate to have St. Joseph's recognized by the Ministry of Education as an official training college for teachers. This was achieved in due course and laymen were then admitted as well as scholastics. Thanks to this timely project several Catholic young men were given the same training as the scholastics, and these were then posted to the various Brothers' schools. They were destined to play a key role in the post-war decades, when Brothers' schools were rapidly expanding and several new schools were being opened.

However Brother Michael's association with St. Joseph's Training College was to be brief as his services were urgent-

ly required as Director and Principal of St. Xavier's Institution in Penang. Returning to his Alma Mater he felt he was on familiar ground and his Malacca experience had given him the assurance that he could do a good job.

He knew a number of the staff from his school days 1931-1933. The gracious old building had been demolished during the war, but the new building had much to recommend it in terms of better planning and capacity. In his first address to the assembled staff and students he stressed the importance of developing a culture of service, of reaching out to those in need.

The Brothers community was among the largest in the District, with a range of nationalities, including several gifted young Brothers, local as well as missionary. These were to the forefront for the many functions, stage productions, and celebrations that characterized these years, notably the celebration of Malaysia's independence 31 August 1957 when the school building was beautifully decorated and floodlit. Important dignitaries paid official visits, some of these were by past students of the school, such as the first Chief Minister of Penang Mr Wong Pow Nee, who had been Br Michael's former classmate. Another was Mr Leong Yew Koh, the first Chief Minister of Malacca, also a past student of the school. Both gave distinguished public service.

Brother Michael attached great importance to the uniformed units. He writes:

I never had any doubts about the value and prestige uniformed units provided for the school. The discipline and training apart, their smart appearance impressed visitors and parents alike and instilled a sense of pride

and loyalty even among those who could not join. .. Nothing gave more solemnity and splendor during official visits by dignitaries than the sight of a colorful, steady and disciplined parade of the guard of honor and all other ranks.

At this time the Brothers took charge of a number of Diocesan schools and a Brother was appointed to visit them on a daily basis to see to their proper administration. These were regarded as 'feeder schools' as those completing primary school could apply for admission to St. Xavier's. At the same time boards of managers/governors were established in all schools and Brother Michael was required to attend all Board meetings. He writes:

Administering such a large school, a boarding department, responsibility also for the so-called 'feeder schools' ... was a very heavy burden all told, to which had to be added the welfare, spiritual and temporal of the Brothers' Community, not to speak of the private afternoon school and the various duties with outside bodies: boards, councils, committees and so on. All this made this period of my life about the busiest and most demanding.

The numbers applying for admission kept escalating and existing space could no longer cope. With the increased number of secondary classes, St. Xavier's itself had to find separate accommodation for the primary classes. Other schools depending on St. Xavier's faced similar problems. This led to a major building program.

It was in the midst of these busiest times that word was received 22 October 1961 that the Visitor, the much loved

Brother Fintan Blake, had had a serious heart attack and was lying in hospital. Brother Michael rushed to his side and was distressed to learn that there was little hope of recovery. He passed away soon afterwards. Brother Fintan had been the inspiring Director and Principal of St. Xavier's in the difficult post-war years, when classes were conducted in primitive huts for some six years pending the erection of a new building. Brother Michael always found him particularly supportive. Brother Barnitus, former visitor, was asked to take charge of the District till a new Visitor was appointed. On a visit to Brother Barnitus Brother Michael learned that his name had been forwarded to Rome as the new Brother Visitor of the District of Penang. Brother Barnitus had known Brother Michael since he first arrived at the juniorate in 1933, had selected him for the Second Novitiate and then appointed him as Director and Principal in Malacca. He had every confidence he would prove an excellent choice. The appointment was soon confirmed – the first Asian to hold the post of Visitor in Asia's oldest District.

7. Visitor of the District of Penang 1961-1966

Brother Michael at 45 succeeded to an office associated with elderly Brothers for as long as most Brothers could remember, and so he was seen as a breath of fresh air. His first priority was a thorough fact-finding visitation of all communities and schools throughout the District, to meet each Brother individually and assess the strengths and weaknesses. He was much impressed by what he saw, and in turn the Brothers were much encouraged by his personal interest and his affability. Following on this visitation he held a meeting of all Directors, and mentioned as a first priority to give local Brothers better access to university education, even though this would entail some inconvenience in finding replacements. [Missionary Brothers had already been taking advantage of home leave after the war to complete their university studies]. Few university places were available locally, and so Br Michael arranged for local Brothers to enter overseas universities in various countries.

It was soon after his appointment as Visitor, that Brother Superior General Nicet-Joseph together with Brother Lawrence O'Toole, Assistant, paid an official visit to the District – the first ever by a Superior-General to the Penang District. It was a major event for the Brothers and their associates as Brother Nicet-Joseph made his way from community to community and saw for himself the good work in progress. He had been Brother Michael's Director at the Second Novitiate, and they would meet again in later years and Brother Nicet would recall this historic visit and how deeply impressed he had been.

From his own experience in running a school, Br Michael explored possibilities for improving aspects of school life as he moved throughout the District. He chose one aspect each year for special study, such as how to make the extra-curricular program more effective. Another was the need for an updated moral education program for students of other faiths attending our schools. Each year a team of Brothers was designated to study the particular topic and present recommendations to the Brothers during the long vacation. He himself would then summarize the responses and issue a masterful circular which was welcome and practical.

His regular visits to the communities were much appreciated, as well as his helpful suggestions. His visits to Kuching were usually more extended to allow him to reconnect with his family and spend some time visiting various members, now located in different parts of Borneo.

Having the traditional headquarters of the District in Penang inspired a certain aura, even reverence. But Brother Michael was a realist and saw a need to adjust to the fact of Independence and the emergence of Kuala Lumpur as the national capital. Hence he made plans to transfer the provincialate to Petaling Jaya which was then a rapidly developing satellite township of Kuala Lumpur.

As his three-year term came to a close, there was no delay on the part of the Superiors in extending it for another three years. He was now getting a better feel for the job, and had plans for further development. These were to be short lived.

8. General Chapter and new Asian Assistency

The 39th General Chapter of 1966 took place in the aftermath of Vatican II [1962-1965] and as was to be expected the Chapter would reflect some fresh new thinking and orientations. However many Brothers in the Penang District did not anticipate major changes. Life was so orderly, regimented and traditional; however the winds of change were slowly being felt. The District was known for its regularity and fidelity to all the practices and traditions of the Institute. The disappearance of the somewhat unbending style of Superior of the pre-war days, and the milder regime that followed did bring considerable relief. As Brother Michael writes:

... I would be going to the General Chapter schooled in the traditional frame of mind and outlook, not at all prepared for the radical changes the 39th General Chapter of the Institute would initiate. I did feel confident that I knew the District well after more than four years in office. We did not have any assembly of the Brothers to prepare for the General Chapter. Such things were quite unknown in our part of the world. The Visitor was both authority and spokesman. This is not to give the impression that it was all a bed of roses in the District of Penang.

Brother Michael followed the Chapter proceedings with keen interest and participated actively, in particular in the commissions dealing with the missions and with administration. He was gratified to see a resurgence of interest in the missions. However he felt uneasy with the Commission on Administration and the new emphasis on 'subsidiarity' which meant that lower authorities such as community Directors

and visitors would be given the freedom to make all decisions proper to their particular level. As a result the authority of the Assistant was being diminished to a mere supervisory role and to maintaining lines of communication with the Centre of the Institute.

As he arrived for the Chapter he brought with him a strong proposal for the Asian region to have its own Assistant, in view of the growing importance of the Institute in Asia and the urgent problems that needed to be addressed. His proposal was adopted, but he was taken by much surprise when he learned he would be the person to pioneer the new Assistantcy. His new responsibilities as Assistant for Asia would encompass four districts: Colombo [Sri Lanka, Pakistan & India], Rangoon, Saigon [South Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand] and Penang [Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong] – in all ten countries.

Asia which has two-thirds of the world's population is still just one per cent Christian after five hundred years of evangelization, with the result that apart from the Philippines, the Church is still a small minority presence in most countries. However it often enjoys a high moral profile because of its many services, chiefly in education and social welfare, and its concern for the poor and marginalised. Ever since their first arrival in Asia in April 1852, the Brothers' schools were open to students of many faiths, and lay teachers who belonged to these traditions were often among the most respected, sharing in the Lasallian mission with exemplary devotion and loyalty – but without becoming Christian. Brothers elsewhere had difficulty understanding this multi-faith situation, but Brother Michael had the advantage of being fully familiar with it.

During the post-war decades, Asia was undergoing some massive changes, which Br Michael would experience very directly as Assistant. The tide of colonialism had recently receded, and now in country after country nationalist forces were busy shaping a new order. Fights for independence, wars and nationalization of schools in Sri Lanka, Burma and Vietnam produced both challenges for the Brothers and opportunities to go to new places to continue the Lasallian Mission in Asia. In some places, even those schools the Brothers managed to retain were not allowed to collect fees, consequently the Brothers entered a long period of struggle for survival. One happy result was that those Brothers who could no longer teach in Sri Lanka found a new mission field in Pakistan [1960]. Others were able to restore a Lasallian presence in India [1961] after an absence of 77 years.

The Church in Asia was also undergoing many changes following Vatican II. It gradually shed its association with colonialism, local leaders emerged and Latin as the language of worship was replaced by a wide range of vernacular languages. Br Michael was acutely aware of this in his travels, but he was even more affected by the number of Brothers who began to question their vocation at this time and leave the Institute, some with proven leadership qualities or potential. The number seeking admission began to dwindle. All this contributed greatly to his anxiety for the future.

The positive approach to other faith traditions adopted by Vatican II brought an overdue sense of liberation from a theology that consistently denied the many elements of truth and goodness in these traditions, and inter-faith dialogue now became a key focus for the Asian church. This impacted

greatly on the Brothers' schools where inter-faith collaboration had been a norm of school life for so long.

It was Br Michael's task to relate separately with these critical challenges, and this he did with considerable success despite his diminished powers as Assistant. His first concern was the welfare of the Brothers, especially those who were displaced, notably in Burma which till recently was a prosperous District with several well run schools. As Brother Michael expresses it:

The secret take-over of all their schools was as sudden as it was unexpected and left them poor and homeless overnight. It was a devastating blow for their morale.

Br Michael became their voice to the Institute at large. For this they were lastingly grateful. His visits were frequent but reaching individual communities and meeting the Brothers was highly problematic, especially in the early years. This was because he was given a 24 hour visa for each visit, and his movements often came under official scrutiny. After some years procedures were relaxed and he was able to travel to the more distant communities. Meeting the Brothers individually and in groups he sought to help them make necessary adjustments to ensure they had proper accommodation and meaningful apostolates. It was to be expected that younger Brothers were able to adapt more readily, while elderly Brothers began to feel relegated and lost. Outside help was critical and Brother Michael found the recently formed SECOLI in Rome a source of ready assistance. Getting money into Burma was not easy as the exchange rate was minimal. But as the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu says: *when government becomes oppressive, people become devious!* Ways and

means were found to circumvent this problem, much to Brother Michael's satisfaction.

The Brothers in Sri Lanka also called for attention, especially their new venture into South India where they were struggling to establish a boys' town at Madurai. This would eventually become a major success, but the pioneering years were long and difficult, despite the heroic efforts of the early Brothers. It was a long saga of successes and failures. Brother Michael gave the project every support and encouragement and was happy to see it finally stabilize.

Other Districts also called for special attention. Vietnam was a country at war and this affected the Brothers, though they still managed to continue their normal work. As elsewhere Brother Michael's visits were much appreciated, especially by the more distant communities. He made it a point, as elsewhere, to preside at the annual retreat and meet the Brothers individually. Together with Vietnam there were schools in Cambodia and Laos. Here the Brothers worked under increasingly impossible conditions and eventually Brother Michael felt it was time to return the schools to the bishop and to withdraw. Another offshoot from Vietnam was in Thailand. Here conditions were more favorable, and Brother Michael took close interest in the growth of the Lasallian presence in Thailand where already they had a splendid college in Nakhon Sawan. Thailand also had a community of Lasallian Sisters founded by Brother Joseph Van Khoi, then head of the Thai sector. Brother Michael showed much wisdom in helping to guide these Sisters through the early stages of their foundation, such that the Sisters always saw him as their co-founder. He was insistent that while working closely with the Brothers and sharing their spirituality they should be independent as a

community with their own projects and sources of income. Brother Michael continued to visit them even in retirement as long as he could travel.

The 1966 General Chapter promoted the formation of 'Regions' - grouping of districts for the purpose of pooling resources and achieving common objectives. From the beginning Brother Michael sought to establish closer rapport among the Visitors of the Asia-Pacific region. Australia and the Philippines which were outside his jurisdiction were also invited to attend, and these Districts played a key role in the evolution and success of the Regional Conference of Visitors. Burma was not represented as yet because of severe travel restrictions.

Brother Michael sought through these early conferences to focus on matters such as regional retreats for directors, meetings of formators, seminars to promote Lasallian studies, catechetics and formation. Resource persons were invited from abroad. These programs led also to a local pooling of precious resources, human and material and brought about closer bonding among the different sectors. It was Brother Michael's hope that better established districts would assist those in crisis. For this a fund was established which was operated by Brother Michael personally.

The biggest crisis Brother Michael had to deal with was the plight of the Vietnamese Brothers following the fall of Saigon to the Communists in April 1975. He had come to know the Brothers quite well while attending the annual retreats and District chapters, and meeting them individually from time to time. While attending the District Chapter at the end of 1974 there was general anxiety as no one had any illusions about their fate in the event of a Communist advance. It was in April 1975 while the conference of visitors

was in session in Manila that the tragic news was received. The Vietnamese Visitor and his deputy rushed home at once.

Br Michael made his way to Rome in the hope of getting more information, but in fact there was a black-out of all news and this went on for agonising weeks, even months. A first breakthrough was a request for instructions from a group of Scholastics and their director who managed to escape by boat to Guam. After consulting with the Brother Superior and the French Assistant it was arranged to fly them all to France where they could continue their formation. This operation was instantly facilitated by Brother Hillary Gilmartin, for whom Brother Michael had much praise. Hillary had been appointed by the American Visitors to deal with matters affecting the refugee Brothers from Vietnam. Brother Michael took their tragic predicament to heart and went full stretch to explore ways and means to help. He received the fullest support from Brother Superior and Council who were also monitoring events closely.

Br Michael's task was to find ways and means to locate the Brothers among the refugees and arrange for them to find a new home where they could continue their formation or mission as necessary. This entailed frequent travel to south-east Asia, Australia, Canada, USA and France, where these Brothers eventually found a new home. His letters and visits were much appreciated, he was familiar with their feelings and sympathetic to their needs, and was best placed to represent their aspirations to higher levels.

The crisis continued long after his term as Assistant ended. He had then to limit himself to maintaining contact where possible, mostly by letter.

9. Visitor of the District of Penang

Brother Michael returned to Malaysia where he attended the District Chapter in December 1976. Here he played a pivotal role in guiding the process of implementing the decisions of the recent General Chapter. The Brothers were much impressed with his expertise and his ready responses to all issues raised. When it came to nominating the new visitor, he became the top favourite.

But it was a very different District from the one he had left ten years earlier. The number of Brothers had fallen from 206 to 120 and many of the well qualified young local Brothers had left the Institute. This latter was a special disappointment for him considering his policy to send numbers of local Brothers to overseas universities. Another factor was the lack of vocations, local or from overseas, and many were aging. These were not his happiest years. Much tension was generated, for example, in the effort to alter the structure of the District. It was decided at the District Chapter to give greater autonomy to each of the three sectors: Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. Even in the case of Malaysia separate area councils were set up in the East Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah. Brother Michael feared this would fragment the District irreparably and diminish the role of the Visitor in dealing with certain situations. But he went along with their wishes despite his private misgivings.

In implementing the decisions of the General Chapter he saw the great value of the annual community plan. It was a struggle to get the Brothers interested. Many did not see the necessity for it and felt they preferred the traditional coutumi-

er which was simpler. It was another disappointment for Brother Michael.

When his term ended in 1985 he was now 69 and he made it clear at the District Chapter that he wished to be free of all further responsibility. His wishes were respected. The Brothers paid him several warm tributes, indicating that they did indeed appreciate his long years of service to the District and the Institute. This was confirmed later that year when his Golden Jubilee was celebrated in Kuala Lumpur with an impressive presence of Brothers, alumni, former teachers and friends from all three sectors of the District.

10. Official Retirement

He was succeeded as visitor by Brother Matthew Liew who persuaded him to remain in residence at the Provinciate where his advice and wide experience would be much appreciated. Succeeding visitors were also to find in him an excellent mentor, for example in matters affecting canon law. He would live for another 26 years, a constant feature of which would be a voluminous correspondence which he kept up to perhaps a year before he passed away.

Shortly after retiring he was invited to Rome to join the Preparatory Commission for the General Chapter. He was happy to be back in familiar surroundings and enjoyed the work which went on for quite some months. Afterwards he traveled to England and Ireland to meet up with Brothers associated with the Penang District or with his term as Assistant, and later to France where he visited the Vietnamese community. He also made it a point to meet former Superior-General Br Nicet-Joseph, who still recalled his glorious visit to the Penang District in 1962.

Back in Malaysia the Provinciate became his home and base for a new set of interests. He writes:

Education has, of course, been a lifelong passion. In every post during my long career I attempted to ensure that the Institute's educational capacity grew from strength to strength. My efforts were directed at a range of initiatives: the development of the physical infrastructure and the environment of our educational establishments; the creation of opportunities for further studies and training for the Brothers; and a gener-

al defence of the ethos of education in the Lasallian tradition. It was most gratifying, therefore, that I was to have the opportunity to further my commitment to education in a number of capacities in the years after my formal retirement as Brother Visitor. Most notably these included my involvement with the Malaysian Catholic Education Council and the Malaysian Christian Schools Council as well as with a number of individual schools.

Catholic schools in Malaysia were traditionally integrated into the government system, while maintaining a limited autonomy which allowed them to develop and preserve their distinctive Christian ethos. With changing times this autonomy became more restricted, partly through a growing Islamisation of national life and perhaps it got somewhat blurred too with the gradual disappearance of religious from Catholic schools. The Malaysian Catholic Education Council [MCEC] was now set up to ensure basic contact with the schools. It was a timely move on the part of the hierarchy and the Provincials of the different teaching congregations. Brother Michael became its main architect working closely with the Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur. He drew up the Constitution to spell out the aims and objectives, and the appointment of office bearers to carry on the Council's work through regular meetings and the appointment of an executive committee. Traditionally the hierarchy left education completely to the teaching Congregations. The time had now come for the Bishops to take a main responsibility; it was not going to be easy. Brother Michael's frequent complaint was their absence from meetings, and crucial matters requiring their approval were delayed for months. But the MCEC went

on to become a major player in Catholic education especially when it came to maintaining contact with schools, meeting ministry officials and appointing school heads. Even more complex was the administration of school properties held by each Congregation. In all this Brother Michael was an important player and his experience and advice were invaluable.

He was deeply involved with the long established Christian Education Council [CEC] where he worked closely with other churches involved in education. For some years he held the top CEC post and was much respected for his strong commitment to Christian education.

A move was made to bring together the various Lasallian alumni associations, whose loyalties tended to be exclusively focused on their particular alma mater. A national body known as the Federation of Lasallian Associations was set up thanks to Brother Michael's initiative. This Federation came to play an important role in running seminars and conferences, local and regional, and among its projects was the setting up of a Lasallian Foundation to fund projects for the marginalized.

Another key commitment was the Signum Fidei which he nurtured carefully over several years through regular meetings and retreats. The members remained dedicated and loyal to Brother Michael to the end. The members were among his closest associates in his declining years.

Of his many travels in his later years, Brother Michael writes:

I was able to make a number of overseas trips – to Hong Kong, Perth and most notably to Vietnam after an absence of many years – all of which enabled me to keep abreast of international developments in the

work of the Institute and the wider Catholic community. These visits were of special interest not only for what they taught me but also because of what I perceived as good practices and initiatives that I thought we might learn from them.

One of these trips had special significance. It was in response to an invitation letter from the visitor of Vietnam Brother Gregoire in which he wrote:

After long 'underground' activities and apostolates, this year we received at last, for the first time, an official authorisation for opening a vocational centre in one of our communities. We will celebrate it officially and we intend to have the inauguration this 12 July 2005; this looks like a new start for our District after thirty years of faith and zeal amid doubts and unceasing adversities. For this celebration we think that we will not have a better guest and friend than our beloved Brother Assistant Michael. So our District would like to invite you to be with us

At 89 Brother Michael was beginning to feel his travel days were over, but this invitation was too special to be dismissed. He decided to go. Of this visit he wrote:

Highlight of the visit was the admission of 5 Brothers to Perpetual Profession at Maithon. This is an FSC complex consisting of the Holy Family Community and the scholasticate. I had occasion to go and meet some old friends, such as were alive but most of them could not remember me. One of them, blind and bedridden was over 100 years old. Most of my friends were lying in the cemetery on the grounds where there was also a

sort of columbarium with the names of every Brother who had served the Saigon District in one way or another.

The most joyous and most colourful visit was that to the La Salle Sisters Mother House, also at Maithon. First a very warm welcome at the entrance by Sr. Madelein, the Superior, a lovely kindly person if ever there was one. She could not do enough for me. The programme consisted of a visit to the whole house which contained the main community, that of the scholastics and that of the novices and aspirants, counting in all about 50 persons. This was a very welcome feature to show that the Congregation was doing well with a steady flow of new recruits forthcoming. The premises included a kindergarten run by the Sisters.

Early in his retirement Brother Michael began composing the story of his life, a task that he pursued faithfully for his remaining years. The result was a most fascinating and highly readable book that ran close to 400 pages. It suggested a masterful mind that was fully alert and alive to the end. He said it was mainly in response to several Brothers, past students, and friends who kept asking him to write. In his preface he writes:

If I have at last decided to put pen on paper, it is not solely to oblige those that are curious to know. It is principally to recall through the various stages of my life the wonderful working of Divine Providence and to render thanks for His manifold bounties which have accompanied me all through. My story is one that

would be impossible to create or to imagine if it did not really happen.

He continued even through the final years when his health had seriously deteriorated. By then his text was complete and it was a matter of some final editing. The publication of his autobiography was handled and financed by the Xaverian Old Boys. Meanwhile he had to spend periods in the high dependency unit at Assunta Hospital, and he was there when he finally received the glad news that a first copy of THE MAN FROM BORNEO was on the way. There was an official launch, but he was much too weak in hospital to attend. Brother Visitor Thomas Lavin remarked: *It is an important contribution to the heritage of our District.*

In August 2010 he was greatly cheered when Brother Matthew Liew came by with Sr. Anne Sunantha and Sr. Mary Chinchandamrong from Bangkok to visit him in the hospital. Although Sr. Mary was in a wheelchair due to a recent fall, they still came to visit him as they were very close to him.

11. The End

Brother Michael Jacques passed away on Thursday 31st March 2011 at the Assunta Hospital in Petaling Jaya. The Requiem Mass was held at St. Francis Xavier Church (Jesuit Parish) near the Provincialate with Archbishop Pakiam Murphy as the chief celebrant and homilist. Brother Michael had left clear instructions on the readings and hymns he would like to have at the Mass.

The Church was packed as all the major papers had carried news of his death and published obituaries. A large group of Brothers and Lasallian Sisters came all the way from Vietnam and from Thailand making it a special point of attending the funeral and paying their final respects.

At the end of the service Brother Thomas Lavin, Visitor, gave the Eulogy recalling Brother Michael's strong belief in how Providence had shaped his life. They then proceeded to the Crematorium for the cremation service which concluded with the singing of the Salve Regina.

Among the last lines Brother Michael wrote were the following:

Life still goes on till such time as the Lord has predestined that it should end. The latter years are probably less important as they proceed relentlessly towards the sunset. Would to Christ I can at the end say as did St Paul: *I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith.* May I be blessed with the grace of welcome from the Lord when it is time to go forth and meet Him. Let Him put AMEN to that.

May his great soul rest in peace and rise in glory.