

Father Otto Hopfenmüller: Missionary of the Divine Savior

by Father Scott Jones, SDS

Introduction

A theme often found in the writings of Father Francis Jordan, Founder of the Society of the Divine Savior, is that of participating in the Mystery of the Cross. For Father Jordan, it is the Cross of Christ that redeems and sanctifies humanity. Each person called by Christ has his or her share in the Cross and in the Resurrection. The true disciple responds by embracing both of them fully, in whatever form they come. In his *Spiritual Diary* Jordan wrote: “Persevere in suffering and in the Cross. Oh, persevere firmly and heroically. Courage, my child; look upon Me on the Cross! ... Embrace the Cross and kiss it. Easter morning is coming soon!” (I/175). Both for Jordan personally and for his early followers, the Cross was indeed fully embraced, but not in vain. From it came new life: a Salvatorian community of priests, brothers, sisters and laity that circles the globe, seeking to make the love of the Divine Savior known through all the ways and means which love inspires.

One of Father Jordan’s early collaborators experienced the Cross of Christ in a particularly fervent way. Father Otto Hopfenmüller, SDS, was no stranger to the Cross when he entered the Society in 1887. Already he had served as a priest of the Archdiocese of Bamberg for over twenty years, during which time he was twice imprisoned at the hands of the enforcers of the *Kulturkampf*. Yet for Hopfenmüller, his entry into the Society only served to deepen his experience of the mystery of the Cross. During his short Salvatorian life he made many contributions to the Society, especially in the area of formation, and he volunteered to begin a new mission in Assam, India, where he paid the ultimate price: death in a foreign land, a death he offered freely for the sake of the Gospel.

If Hopfenmüller’s heroic death were the only significant aspect of his devotion to Christ, that would be enough; however, there is far more to his story than the last months of his life. The purpose of this short biography is to tell the story of this servant of Christ, whom many regard as a

saint. During his 47 years Hopfenmüller promoted the rights of the Church at great personal expense. He educated the uncatechized and fed the poor. He organized cooperatives that ensured a better way of life for his parishioners. In short, his life was a living out of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. It is our hope that through this short biography, many more will come to know this man who manifested the goodness and kindness of Christ our Savior. May his witness inspire others to follow his example.

For those who would like a more in-depth treatment of Father Otto Hopfenmüller's life, the author refers them to Father Christophorus Becker's 1923 biography. Published originally in German under the title *P. Otto Hopfenmüller aus der Gesellschaft des Göttlichen Heilandes: Ein Deutscher Pionier einer Indischen Mission*, in 2008, it was translated into English and published in India as part of the Salvatorian Spirituality and Charism Series, Number 12. At the present time, this is the most complete biography available in English, and the author made extensive use of it in the preparation of this work. Other English language sources include sections from Father Timotheus Edwein's *The Life of Johann Baptist Jordan, Known in Religious Life as Francis Mary of the Cross* (DSS XVI); Father Christopher Becker's *The Catholic Church in Northeast India 1890-1915* (Becker Institute, Shillong, 2007); and Michael Kleiner's article "Lorenz Hopfenmüller, From *Kulturkämpfer* to Indian Missionary," published in *Unterm Sternenmantel, 1000 Jahre Bistum Bamberg, Die Geschichte in Lebensbildern* (2006). Kleiner's article is especially helpful in providing an understanding of the political and theological currents that shaped Hopfenmüller's vision of Church and society. Finally, the extensive collection of mission letters from Father Otto Hopfenmüller to the Motherhouse of the Society of the Divine Savior is located in the Society's General Archives in Rome. Works in other languages that include information on Father Otto Hopfenmüller are provided in the bibliography at the end of this short biography.

Early Years

Lorenz Hopfenmüller was born on May 29, 1844 in the town of Weismain (located in Frankish Switzerland) to Friedrich and Marianna Hopfenmüller. He was one of twelve children.

While his farming family was of modest means, they were able to sustain themselves. Lorenz attended the local elementary school. With the intervention of the local pastor, Father Bartheimüller, his father permitted him to continue his studies at the gymnasium in Bamberg. Lorenz did well in school and rose to the top of his class, placing second and then third out of a class of twenty-four students during his last two years of study at the gymnasium. He graduated in 1862.

During this time, Lorenz recognized within himself a desire to serve God as a priest. His deep faith was already evident in his life: he made his First Communion at the (then) exceptionally early age of eleven; furthermore, he attended Mass on a daily basis, even during his vacations. Following his graduation from the gymnasium, he completed a year of philosophy at the lyceum after which he went on to study for three more years at the seminary in Bamberg. He was ordained to the diaconate on August 15, 1866, and to the priesthood two months later on October 6 by Archbishop Michael von Deinlein. He celebrated his First Mass in his home parish in Weismain.

Early Pastoral Ministry and the Founding of the *Bamberger Volksblatt*

As a newly ordained priest, Hopfenmüller was sent by Archbishop von Deinlein to pursue advanced theological studies at the University of Würzburg. There he earned a doctorate, writing his dissertation on Saint Irenaeus and focusing specifically on Irenaeus' theology of the Eucharist as the True Presence and as the sacrifice of the New Covenant. According to Michael Kleiner, it was at this university that Hopfenmüller received a thorough grounding in both Neo-scholasticism and in firm and unyielding loyalty to Rome (which detractors at the time labeled "ultra-montanism"). This theological vision stood in marked contrast both to those who supported a more modern, critical approach to theology, as well as to the opponents of papal infallibility (declared a dogma of the Church at the First Vatican Council in 1870, three years after Hopfenmüller had completed his studies).

In October 1867, Hopfenmüller's archbishop assigned him to serve as an assistant parish priest at Saint Martin Church in Bamberg. He spent these early years engaging in various pastoral ministries, as well as organizing charitable relief. Following the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), the Catholic Church of Germany found itself in a tenuous position. Liberalism was on the upswing in Germany. Prince Otto von Bismarck launched a movement known as the *Kulturkampf*, which sought to secularize and modernize Germany on the model of a unified state. As a result, the Catholic Church suffered terrible oppression. Bismarck believed that a single, Liberal, Protestant, German national church would help in achieving his goal of the unification of all German people, and so a major goal of the *Kulturkampf* was to destroy every trace of Catholic influence on German culture. While the worst effects were experienced in Prussia, all of Germany felt the force of Bismarck's programs. Numerous religious orders were expelled from the German states, and in 1873, the May Laws further restricted Catholic influence. The Liberal media enjoyed the favor of the state, while Catholic periodicals were attacked and suppressed.

Early on Hopfenmüller had foreseen the danger Liberalism posed for the Church. In January 1872, at the invitation of archdiocesan leadership, Hopfenmüller became a founding member of a new Catholic newspaper known as the *Bamberger Volksblatt* (BV), with Hopfenmüller himself serving as editor-in-chief. From the beginning, Hopfenmüller challenged the forces of Liberalism and the threat they posed to the Church. In the first edition, published on January 3 of that year, he wrote:

It appears as if the leader of the new state wants to rise just like Assyria against Zion and Jerusalem, against God's sanctuary---against the Catholic Church. Oh, if only one had the power to stop the German Reich from taking this false path! Oh, if only one could open the eyes of all the princes and cabinet ministers in the German Reich! ... But if Germany, in its imitation of French Liberalism, lets itself be forced onto these false paths against Christ and his Church, then it will surely not be the Church that will be the first to be destroyed! (BV, January 3, 1872, No. 1, reprinted in Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 16-17.)

As persecution of the Church intensified, so did Hopfenmüller's response. In successive issues he reported on the persecution in Prussia: the suspension of priests and bishops, the closing of parishes

and seminaries, and the prohibition against administering the sacraments. In the September 16, 1874 edition, he described the suppression of religious orders:

Religious orders have always been hated by the Liberals as they continually try to figure out how to suppress them. Violence and malice conspire to achieve this. Jesuits, Redemptorists, Lazarists, Brothers of the Holy Spirit, Madams of the Sacred Heart of Jesus have been forced into exile. What can be done about the remaining ones? It would be too spectacular to send them all away at once... In Hesse, all religious orders are set for extinction according to the latest draft church law! This means they cannot accept new members... New orders can no longer be founded... And what about Bavaria? Alas, poor Bavaria will have to endure this fate as well, whether it wants to or not (BV, September 16, 1874, Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 23).

It must be noted that the situation in Bavaria, where Hopfenmüller worked, never reached the extremes it did in Prussia. Nevertheless, the Church there also experienced persecution. In October 1875, the Church hierarchy of Bavaria wrote a letter to King Ludwig II protesting the treatment of the Church. They focused especially on the fact that the state was allowing members of the “Old Catholic Church” (which had separated from Rome following the First Vatican Council) to retain the rights and the properties that had formerly belonged to the Roman Catholic Church. Secondly, all Catholic influence was in the process of being removed from the school systems of Bavaria. Finally, the bishops expressed their concern over the expulsion of the Jesuits and the fear that the expulsion of other orders would follow. Their protests were ignored, however, and the persecution of the Church continued.

The *Bamberger Volksblatt* increasingly found itself under attack in the Liberal media.

Various Liberal papers referred to it as “the clean paper with sooty goods,” “a cloven-hoofed Jesuit paper,” and “a newborn piglet, a sanctimonious paper, a feudal sanctimonious paper” (Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 29). Hopfenmüller himself was labeled a “beardless, stripling editor” (ibid, 49) and as a “gunpowder and kerosene priest” (Kleiner, 222). Despite these attacks, readership of the *Bamberger Volksblatt* continued to grow, and on July 1, 1874, it became a daily paper, except for Sundays and feast days. Furthermore, the political influence of the paper was felt in elections. In November 1872, Hopfenmüller encouraged the Catholics of Bamberg only to vote for officials who were fair-minded, who understood the importance of charitable institutions, and who would reflect

the overall makeup of the population (meaning that Catholics would hold a majority over the Liberal minority). Immediately prior to the Reichstag elections in January 1874, Hopfenmüller urged all Catholics to vote for members of the Centre Party, which represented the rights and concerns of the Catholic Church and defended the influence of Christianity in the public forum. He highlighted the urgency of Catholic political participation in an article published on December 5, 1873:

... Unfortunately, too many of these sleepers exist among us. And when they hear the building is burning and the flames are near, they continue to sleep and even get angry when others disturb their reveries. They continue sleeping even when they hear that it concerns the existence of our Catholic Church, the survival of our Catholic-Christian religion, and when they hear that the world is playing dice with what is dearest and holiest to us---our religion and our faith (BV, December 5, 1873, Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 39).

The writing campaign was successful, and in Bamberg the Center Party candidate defeated the Liberal candidate by a ratio of 2-1. While the *Kulturkampf* didn't end with this election, it showed that the Catholic voting block was a force with which to be reckoned.

Trial and Imprisonment

Hopfenmüller was to pay a price for his political reporting. Having frequently and publicly challenged politicians who tried to manipulate the electoral process, he was often summoned to appear in court to answer charges that he had violated the Press Law. Several editions of the *Bamberger Volksblatt* were confiscated in November 1875, and Hopfenmüller was ultimately charged with *lèse-majesté* (offending King Ludwig II, who had defended his ministers when they were accused of illegally dividing up electoral boundaries in the Bavarian State Parliamentary elections that same year). Two articles in particular were considered the basis for the charge. In issue 254, the newspaper had stated: "They [the Catholic delegates in Parliament] regret that His Majesty, the King, has not done justice to the complaints of the majority of his people, but this shall not change anything about the justifiably expressed mistrust of the Ministry... May His Majesty soon listen to reason and grant these rights according to the wishes and complaints of the Catholic people! God shall prevail!" (November 9, 1875, reprinted in Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 62.) The

following day, in issue 255, the *Bamberger Volksblatt* reported that in the newspaper *Germania*, someone had written: “One shrugs his shoulders with frosty regret and says, ‘The king has put himself on the side of the Liberals.’... The political readings of our monarch are entirely dominated by Liberalism. The king does not hear about what should be unmasked” (November 10, 1875, Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 63).

On November 16, 1875, Hopfenmüller appeared in court to answer these charges. He was indicted. But before he could stand trial, in February 1876, he was charged again with slander against the former district president of Swabia, Winfried von Hörman, whom the *Bamberger Volksblatt* had accused of falsely denying the existence of a confidential decree to district presidents meant to unfairly influence the election of state officials. After two postponements, the trial finally commenced on October 11, 1876, at the court of assizes in Bayreuth. According to the *Bamberger Volksblatt*, all twelve of the jurors were Protestants and members of the Liberal Party (BV, October 13, 1876, No. 232, Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 66). By all accounts, Hopfenmüller, acting in his own defense, maintained a steady poise as he answered the charges. Whenever the articles from issues 254 and 255 from the *Bamberger Volksblatt* were cited as being insulting to the king, Hopfenmüller pointed to Liberal papers that reported in essence the same thing with no repercussion. For example, when the passage from issue 255 which contained the statement: “The king has put himself on the side of the Liberals,” was given as an example of the insult to the king, Hopfenmüller responded: “This states nothing else than what was written in all of the Liberal newspapers at the time and what was said to the whole world in thank-you addresses, congratulations telegrams and celebrations by the Liberals” (BV, October 14, 1876, No. 233, Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 69). The basis of Hopfenmüller’s defense was that the king had chosen in good conscience to agree with the principles of the Liberal Party based upon misinformation from his Liberal advisors. What the *Bamberger Volksblatt* had repeatedly stated was that his advisors were at fault and that the king should take heed of the hopes of his subjects for justice. Thus, there was nothing personally insulting to the king in the articles quoted from the *Bamberger Volksblatt*. Regarding the charge of

making slanderous accusations against von Hörman, Hopfenmüller defended the reports printed in the *Bamberger Volksblatt* as accurate, although the witnesses who were summoned avoided direct responses to Hopfenmüller's questions. In the end, Hopfenmüller was convicted of insulting the king in issue 254 (but not in 255, which only included the quote from *Germania*). He was also convicted of simple slander against von Hörman, but acquitted on the charge of slanderous libel. His sentence was three months of fortress detention in the Oberhaus (in Passau) for insulting the king, and fourteen days imprisonment in Bamberg for slander against von Hörman. The Liberal newspaper *Kölner Zeitung* celebrated the punishments, stating: "...Where a mentality hostile to the Fatherland and clerical hatred break through, the Bavarian jurors cannot tolerate jokes, and Jesuitical attempts at excuses do not go well with them" (*Kölner Zeitung*, undated, reprinted in Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 89).

Hopfenmüller accepted the sentences graciously. He also took the opportunity to resign as editor-in-chief from the *Bamberger Volksblatt*. He did so not out of any sense of disgrace or disappointment, but because he felt that after five years the newspaper was doing well, and that it was time for him to return to full-time pastoral ministry. He wrote his final article as editor on November 11, 1876, stating:

Slightly wounded, I must now part company with you, but as I believe in honour I hereby bid goodbye to the readers of the *Volksblatt*. I depart forever, but a more than capable replacement has been found. I do not part out of despondency or despair or with a bruised or broken heart. I depart because to hold my position as chaplain of the busiest parish was only possible by using all my physical and spiritual strength, next to my work at the editorial office, which has made me physically exhausted (VB, November 11, 1876, Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 93).

On November 13, Hopfenmüller began his fortress detention in the Oberhaus, followed by his prison sentence in Bamberg. He was released on March 5, 1877, and returned to Saint Martin to resume his pastoral duties.

Unfortunately, Hopfenmüller still faced more legal battles. In the autumn of 1876, while he was still in the midst of defending himself against the accusation of *lèse-majesté* and slander against von Hörman, more issues of the *Bamberger Volksblatt* had been seized. This time the grounds were

that the newspaper had re-printed previously confiscated articles and had also published articles that were slanderous toward Chancellor Bismarck. Hopfenmüller did not attend the trial, which was held at the jury court in Bayreuth on June 26, 1877. He was convicted and sentenced to five months in prison. He appealed the sentence, but it was upheld. And so on November 22, 1877, Hopfenmüller began another five-month prison sentence in Nuremberg.

While Hopfenmüller had passed his first detention with relative ease, his second imprisonment proved to be more difficult for him. At Nuremberg, he spent most of his time in solitary confinement and was not permitted to celebrate the Eucharist. While attending the liturgy that was held for the other prisoners, he was mocked by them. The conditions of the prison were poor, with little heat, and the food was not good. The five months of imprisonment took their toll on him, and he returned to Bamberg in frail condition in April 1878. Yet for Hopfenmüller, this was one more opportunity to participate in the mystery of the Cross. Always having sought penance and mortification, he found it aplenty in the prison cell at Nuremberg.

Transfer and Further Pastoral Ministries

After his release from prison, Hopfenmüller's archbishop transferred him to the position of curate at Reichmannsdorf in Steigerwald. Archbishop Friedrich von Schreiber had become Archbishop of Bamberg in 1875. Von Schreiber was far less tolerant of Hopfenmüller's political activism than Archbishop Deinlein had been. Intending to exile Hopfenmüller to a desolate region of the archdiocese, this assignment proved to be a place where Hopfenmüller could exercise his pastoral gifts in new ways. Reichmannsdorf was a poor village where begging was a common and accepted practice. Parents frequently encouraged their children to visit nearby towns to beg alms for their support. Hopfenmüller found this to be an intolerable state of affairs, and so he quickly took the matter in hand and established a Society for the Christian Care of the Poor. This association, with Hopfenmüller serving as chairman, gathered alms and basic essentials from neighboring communities and doled them out to families on the basis of need. With the consent of village

authorities, the Society for the Christian Care of the Poor provided an alternative to begging. In fact, Hopfenmüller almost completely eradicated the practice by caring for the needs of the truly poor and by reporting recalcitrant beggars to the police. He also established programs and found apprenticeships to help children of the village learn skills that would prepare them for work. To help disadvantaged families during the coldest months of the year, he developed cottage industries in basket weaving and the production of shoes and other products.

While the poorer members of his community initially disliked Hopfenmüller for his interference in their alms begging, in time, he won them over out of his sheer love and devotion to them. He himself lived simply and shared what he had with others. He also established various devotions in the parish church and improved its physical condition. He was particularly devoted to the sick, often journeying many miles to administer the sacraments. Because of his dedication he became a much-loved curate, and the people came to regard him as a deeply holy priest. While he had planned to remain as curate at Reichmannsdorf, this was not to be. At the urging of district authorities, Hopfenmüller applied for the position of pastor at Seussling, which had similar problems to those in Reichmannsdorf. Hopfenmüller was granted the appointment on January 31, 1882. It was with great sadness that the citizens of Reichmannsdorf bade farewell to their curate.

According to an article in the *Bamberger Volksblatt*:

He was highly-appreciated for the great sacrifices he made for the temporal and eternal well-being of the souls entrusted to him ... a large part of the citizens — young and old— gathered around his house on the morning of his departure to pay a last farewell to their beloved pastor. Not a single eye remained dry. Loud crying accompanied his beautifully garlanded coach, which took the noble philanthropist and pious priest from the grieving community. May God repay him for what men are not able to do! (BV, February 11, 1882, No. 34, Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 126).

What he had done to address the needs of the poor of Reichmannsdorf, Hopfenmüller now set about doing at Seussling. He established a Society for the Christian Care of the Poor, and worked to eliminate begging in his community. He also received the same initial hostile response from the poor that he had received at Reichmannsdorf, but the majority of them were won over in

time by his selfless example. He even wrote an article for the *Bamberger Volksblatt* asking for assistance and requesting that no one give alms to any beggars from his territory:

I now sincerely and urgently ask the neighboring villages to give your alms to this Society ... and in the future to send away all beggars from Sassanfahrt, Köttmannsdorf, and Trailsdorf [three villages particularly known for begging], and to report them to the Society. This way, the Society will be able to help those really in need, prevent the abuse of alms, and eradicate the devastating consequences of begging. Whoever still continues to give alms to beggars ... will not be doing a good deed for these people, as Saint Basil says, but will be supporting and encouraging their decay (BV, December 14, 1882, Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 131).

Hopfenmüller's concern for the well-being of his parishioners is evident in the way he allowed even his own rectory to be used as a storage space for the goods that had been gathered for the poor.

Hopfenmüller's parents, who had lived with him at Reichmannsdorf, now lived with him at Seussling, and they assisted him in the care of the disadvantaged. His niece likewise participated in his charity work. In order to ensure that the local basket-makers received a greater profit for their goods, Hopfenmüller organized cooperatives. To assist farmers, he founded a loan society that lent money at reasonable interest rates. Hopfenmüller's ministries produced good fruit, and, in time, the villages around Seussling experienced marked improvement in their overall social and economic conditions.

Far from limiting his activities to that of social work, Hopfenmüller showed even greater fervor in his pastoral initiatives. He founded a local chapter of the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary, as well as a confraternity devoted to the Blessed Sacrament, a Holy Childhood Society, and the Angel Sodality of the Catholic Teaching Society. He also taught religious education classes to the children in his territory and personally trained the altar boys for their liturgical duties. He took great delight in preparing children to receive their First Communion and he was as devoted to the sick of his new parish as he had been at Reichmannsdorf. One parishioner later described his tireless efforts: "Once I saw him rushing into the deepest snow to a sick young man living in Köttmannsdorf, about forty-five minutes away from Seussling, without an umbrella and bareheaded" (Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 139). Hopfenmüller gave everything he had for the benefit of his people, and they loved him for it.

The Catholic Teaching Society

Despite his great zeal for parish ministry, Hopfenmüller found his heart turning in a different direction. For some time he had been reflecting on the missions, wondering if God might be calling him to life as a missionary. During a pilgrimage to Rome in 1886, his discernment intensified, and he decided that upon the death of his mother (his father had already died in 1884) he would join a religious community that served in the missions. His mother died in January 1887, and shortly thereafter, Hopfenmüller contacted Father Bonaventure (previously Bernard) Lüthen, a member of the Catholic Teaching Society to inquire about admittance.

The Catholic Teaching Society, originally called the Apostolic Teaching Society and now known as the Society of the Divine Savior, had been founded by Father Francis Mary of the Cross (formerly John Baptist) Jordan on December 8, 1881. While Jordan had originally envisioned a Society consisting of priests, brothers, sisters, and laity whose degree of membership would be determined by the intensity of their involvement, by the time Hopfenmüller contacted Lüthen, it had become an institute of religious life headquartered in Rome. Hopfenmüller wrote Lüthen two days after his mother's death:

For a long time I have been having inner promptings to enter a missionary order. Following the death of my beloved mother on January 1 of this year, I no longer need to take care of anyone in this world. So I feel an even greater compulsion than before to meet this inner urge and to rigorously examine my vocation. In this examination, I recognize that I feel a preference and an incentive to go into the field as a missionary to pagans. Our European Christians are degenerate; the soil no longer absorbs the heavenly dew (January 3, 1887, Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 144).

Hopfenmüller had explored other missionary possibilities: the Trappists in South Africa, the German missionary house in Steyl, and the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in Tilburg and Antwerp. But he was already familiar with the Catholic Teaching Society through his contact with Lüthen, who edited the Society's periodical *Der Missionär*, and through his own promotion of the Angel Sodality in his parish. Lüthen encouraged Hopfenmüller to apply to the Catholic Teaching Society, and so he wrote to Father Jordan to seek admission. He was accepted, but due to the

lengthy time it took to find a suitable successor to replace him at Seussling, Hopfenmüller was not able to enter the Society until September 13, 1887.

Upon receiving the habit, Hopfenmüller was given the religious name “Otto” at his own request (Saint Otto had been the bishop of Bamberg and was a special patron of Hopfenmüller). He was now forty-three years old and had been a priest for twenty-one years, yet he found himself a novice among men much younger than himself. Despite this, Hopfenmüller proved to be an ideal novice, never expecting (or receiving) special treatment due to his priesthood, advanced education, or extensive pastoral experience. But even in novitiate his gifts were put to use by the Society. He delivered conferences at the novitiate retreat and sent out an appeal to the clergy of the Archdiocese of Bamberg requesting donations to assist with the purchase and development of the Society’s motherhouse. Because of his unique qualities, the length of his novitiate was shortened, and Hopfenmüller professed his vows as a member of the Catholic Teaching Society on May 20, 1888 (the Feast of Pentecost), just eight months after entering novitiate.

While Hopfenmüller longed for the missions, the Catholic Teaching Society as yet had no mission to which they could send him. Due to his previous work at the *Bamberger Volksblatt*, he was made the editor of *Der Missionär*. He was also placed in charge of the pre-novitiate program and was appointed instructor of languages for the students. He even found time to write the Society’s first manual of piety for men in formation entitled *Manna Religiosum*. Hopfenmüller’s pupils viewed him as an especially devout religious. In his biography of Hopfenmüller, Christophorus Becker wrote:

We young boys watched this man in holy shyness when he walked through the hallways of the house engrossed in deep meditation and at times so unworldly that he bumped into the corners of the walls or doorposts. None of this disturbed him. His mind was occupied with God and paid no attention to such things. “This is a saint,” we whispered to each other. Father Otto’s patience and gentleness set an outstanding example to his pupils. Never was he seen anxious or angry even if something that happened was extremely reproachable. In such a case, he cast a painful glance at the person and reprimanded him gently (Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 163).

According to Becker, Hopfenmüller continued with the spirit of mortification he had practiced all of his life as a priest, doing menial tasks, eating only the minimum of food and drink allowed, and promptly obeying his superiors. By all accounts he was a model member of the Catholic Teaching Society.

Hopfenmüller the Missionary to Assam

In time, Hopfenmüller's dream of becoming a missionary came to fruition. On November 24, 1889, Pope Leo XIII approved the recommendation of the *Propaganda Fide* (the Vatican department responsible for foreign missions) that the newly created apostolic prefecture of the province of Assam, India, be entrusted to the pastoral care of the Catholic Teaching Society. It is noteworthy that the *Propaganda Fide* was willing to take this step, despite the youth and small size of the Society. While there were 154 professed men, novices, and candidates in the community, at the time of the approval the Society only had six priests, three deacons, four sub-deacons, and seventeen brothers. Furthermore, it had just been founded in 1881 (eight years prior) and had not yet received final approbation from the Pope. Nevertheless, the Society received its first mission and preparations began to send the first group of missionaries out into the field.

The Society couldn't have requested a more daunting mission assignment than the province of Assam. Located in the northern part of India, according to an 1881 census it was comprised of 47,000 square miles and contained nearly five million inhabitants, only 351 of whom were Catholic (Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 169). The province consisted of a mountain range that divided two valleys, Assam in the north and Surma in the south. The main river was the Brahmaputra, and the capital was Shillong. The climate ranged from freezing cold to swelteringly hot, depending on the location and time of day, and the direct sunlight proved to be especially difficult for Europeans to bear, as the missionaries would discover.

Despite the challenges that awaited them, the members of the Catholic Teaching Society celebrated the upcoming departure of their first missionaries. Hopfenmüller was designated as the

mission superior. Newly-ordained Father Angelus Münzloher would serve as his assistant, along with two brothers: Brother Marianus Schumm (a young farmhand from Bamberg who had entered the Society after being inspired by Hopfenmüller) and Brother Joseph Bächle. In December 1889, Hopfenmüller traveled back to his home diocese of Bamberg, as well as to Munich, to collect funds for the journey and early months in Assam. His trip was successful and when he returned to Rome in January 1890, the final preparations were made. At the missioning ceremony on January 17, Father Francis Jordan preached to the departing missionaries:

Two feelings fill our hearts today: pain and joy. It is painful when we think of our dear confreres leaving us. But we are filled with joy when we remember that they are leaving to announce in Asia, the cradle of civilization, Christ crucified. Through our confreres, the first to be sent on mission by our Society, the peace, the good news of the gospel will be brought to these people. This joy must far outweigh our pain! ... You, too will be victorious through the cross and suffering! Yes, you will have to endure much. Don't expect anything else... God's work flourishes in the shadow of the cross (Jordan, "Address of our Reverend Father at the Departure of the First Missionaries," January 17, 1890, *Talks of Father Francis Mary of the Cross Jordan*).

The four Missionaries boarded the steamer *Oceana* on January 19, 1890, and departed the following morning. The voyage took forty days. During this time, they dedicated themselves to learning English from two passengers: an Irishman who served as an officer in India, and an Irish priest who was a professor of theology there. They also attempted as much as possible to follow the schedule of prayer observed at the Motherhouse, including the celebration of Mass. Hopfenmüller wrote in his travel report: "The eternal God shall be paid his due tribute not only in the vast areas of the earth, but also on the depths of the sea. The two-thirds of the earth that is ocean shall likewise bear the mysterious sacrifice of Jesus Christ..." (*Der Missionär*, 1890, No. 6, Becker, Hopfenmüller, 188).

On February 2, the missionaries finally arrived in India, at the port city of Bombay. They first visited the house of the German Jesuits, where they toured their college. Following their time with the Jesuits, they journeyed by train to Calcutta, arriving on February 5. There they spent time visiting with the Belgian Jesuits and familiarizing themselves with Indian culture. Hopfenmüller made short trips to the newly erected dioceses that had been separated from Assam when the new

prefecture had been established. The four missionaries then took the train to Goalundo and traveled by ship along the Brahmaputra River to Dhubri in Assam. After a brief landing, they re-boarded the ship and arrived at Gauhati on February 21. There they were met by the Venetian missionary Father Broy, who to that point had been the only priest ministering to the few scattered Catholics of Assam. Father Broy took them to the mission station, which consisted of a small chapel and a few rooms. After a few days, they headed into the Khasi Hills to the city of Shillong, walking most of the way with their luggage carried by ox-cart. They finally arrived at their destination four days later, on the evening of February 27.

The mission they discovered waiting for them was quite simple. There were only two rooms to the house, which had been vandalized. Because very few Catholics lived in the vicinity, Father Broy had only visited the mission once a year so there had been no need for a larger facility. The next morning, the missionaries set about creating a livable space. The work was slow in part because there were no trained carpenters in the area familiar with simple European furniture. Hopfenmüller and his confreres were satisfied with the situation, however:

We are cheerful and happy in our poverty particularly as God has already begun to show His mercy through it. This evening, two young Khasi men ... who had graduated from the local governmental school here and have been studying Latin for three years, inquired about being taught the Catholic Faith. In exchange they offered to teach us Khasi and Bengalese. The older one in particular showed a great desire and repeatedly expressed how glad he was to have found Catholic missionaries. Seeing our poverty, he said: "You now want to be poor without any pomp or luxury so that you will be rich in the other life!" (Letter from Shillong to Jordan, March 6, 1890, Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 202.)

Hopfenmüller immediately began the missionary work he had for so long desired to do. That first Sunday, he celebrated Mass for the people, but only three came. At that time, there were no more than twenty Catholics in the Shillong mission, mainly European and Eurasians. So Hopfenmüller visited the Catholics of the area and invited them to return to the full practice of their faith. In those early days, he and his fellow missionaries felt the first pangs of living in an un-Christianized territory:

When one lives in a pagan country without any public church celebrations, with no churches, no bells, no altar, no candlesticks ... reading a low Mass in front of three or four

participants --then one understands what people possess in Christian countries. What a joy it is to be Christian, to possess the holy faith and the entire fullness of church graces and ceremonies! (BV, April 28, 1890, No. 95, Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 209)

Hopfenmüller decided that Father Angelus would learn Bengali and minister to Bengalis living in the southern part of the mission, while he himself would learn Khasi and minister to the mountain Khasi tribe (some of whom had already been exposed to Christianity via Methodist missionaries). Learning the language was difficult for Hopfenmüller, then in his late forties, but in only a few months he was able to write a catechism in Khasi and translate the lives of Jesus and Mary, a book of Bible stories, and the Old Testament. His lifestyle was quite austere. According to Father Angelus, Hopfenmüller arose at five in the morning, prayed and celebrated Mass, and then spent most of the day studying the Khasi language. At ten he visited the Blessed Sacrament and then continued his studies until the midday meal. Following lunch and recreation, he engaged in spiritual reading, and studied until evening devotions. After dinner, he wrote letters, during which time Father Angelus reported that he sometimes fell asleep while writing due to exhaustion (Letter from Father Angelus to Father Jordan, October 15, 1890, Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 216-17).

The process of winning converts was slow, however. In an article published in the *Bamberger Volksblatt*, Hopfenmüller wrote: “Whoever believes that one can immediately take big steps as a missionary and make a display of a large number of baptized after only a few weeks should come here and try” (BV, August 29, 1890, No. 36, Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 226). Yet Hopfenmüller remained hopeful that the mission would meet with success, as found in his letter to the *Propaganda Fide*: “I find the Khasi people in good form. Many youth and adult men have come to visit us and to see the new missionaries. They ... seem to be well-disposed toward our cause, giving us hope for good fruit” (March 31, 1890, Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 225). Hopfenmüller knew that the current mission building could not serve as a permanent location for the missionaries, since it was located in the section of Shillong reserved for Europeans. So he began a lengthy search for a site that would be more suitable, one that would be located among the Khasi people. It would need to include a church and mission house, as well as a school, orphanage and convent to be staffed by

the Sisters of the Catholic Teaching Society. (Among the Sisters who came to Assam was his niece, Sister Scholastica Hopfenmüller, who served as mother superior until 1915). He also went about the business of soliciting funds from various missionary societies and from his friends in Bamberg to help with the future building projects. It was not until 1891 that a suitable property was purchased by Father Angelus near the Khasi village of Laitumkhra, but sadly, this came only after the death of Father Otto.

The Final Journey

As described earlier, Hopfenmüller had spent his priestly life living in self-mortification and simplicity. In Assam he continued the practice. He insisted that he and his confreres live frugally, spending as little money as possible on their own needs. Only four days a week did he permit meat to be served, and then only once a day. He reduced the bread ration, and omitted breakfast on fast days. Even Father Jordan expressed his concern in a letter to Hopfenmüller that these practices should be mitigated somewhat given the demands of living in a mission climate. Father Angelus began to experience health problems (which may have been exacerbated by a heart condition). After Pentecost 1890, upon a doctor's recommendation, Hopfenmüller sent Father Angelus to the valley of Gauhati, where the lower altitude might improve his condition. He was also advised to improve his diet. Brother Joseph joined Father Angelus in Gauhati, while Hopfenmüller and Brother Marianus remained at the mission house in Shillong.

In Shillong, both Hopfenmüller and Brother Marianus continued their austere lifestyle. Marianus experienced swelling of the feet, which was alleviated with the use of rubbing alcohol. Both men suffered the effects of the climate, which was very cold at night due to the altitude. During the day, the sunlight was direct and could be dangerous even in cool weather. Hopfenmüller did not wear a hat while walking in the sunlight, and he frequently prayed or studied outdoors. While celebrating Sunday Mass on August 17, 1890, he grew weak and was barely able to finish the liturgy. Refusing a doctor, he continued his duties, but two days later, he collapsed and fell

unconscious. He died on Thursday, August 21, 1890 due to meningitis brought on by sunstroke. Father Angelus rushed from Gauhati to the mission house in Shillong but arrived too late even to administer the last sacraments. They buried Hopfenmüller at the Anglican European cemetery in Shillong. Nine days later, on August 30, 1890, Brother Marianus succumbed to an attack of dysentery and died at the local hospital. The mission had claimed its first casualties.

Father Angelus communicated the tragic news of Hopfenmüller's death first in a brief telegram to the Motherhouse, and then in a letter to Father Jordan:

Something I never dreamed has occurred. Our sincerely beloved Reverend Fr. Superior has died. If I had not seen it with my own eyes, I would think it was a bad dream. You can imagine our pain. Tears are in my eyes. We are orphans. Oh my dear Reverend Father, how painful this is for us! (Letter from Father Angelus Münzloher to Father Jordan, August 22, 1890, Becker, *Hopfenmüller*, 244.)

Despite the loss, the work begun by Hopfenmüller continued. Father Angelus was appointed the second superior of the Assam mission, and on December 12, 1890, three more priests, one brother, and the first three sisters were sent to join the two surviving missionaries. From its difficult beginnings, the Assam mission grew to be a great success with schools, churches, and a large number of Catholics among the Khasi people. Although all of the Salvatorian missionaries were expelled from Assam following the outbreak of the First World War and the mission was turned over to the care of the Salesians, the "birth" of the Catholic faith among the people of Assam can be attributed in a large part to the work of Father Otto Hopfenmüller, who worked so tirelessly and accomplished so much during his short time in the mission field.

Conclusion

As stated in the Introduction, Father Jordan believed that only through participating in the mystery of the Cross could one fully realize one's baptismal call. In Father Otto Hopfenmüller, Jordan found a disciple in whom this conviction fully resonated. During Hopfenmüller's forty-seven years of life, he never avoided the Cross, whether it came from political enemies, fellow clergymen, or from his own deep desire for penance and mortification. His embrace of the Cross

didn't originate from any morbid desire to suffer; rather, Hopfenmüller believed fully Father Jordan's words to the departing missionaries: "God's work blossoms in the shadow of the Cross." Through the work of Father Otto Hopfenmüller, a work that frequently included humiliation, imprisonment, and finally death at an early age, many people came to a deep knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, Savior of the World. His participation in the Cross gave birth to new life.

More than one hundred years after his death, there are many who still experience the fruit of Hopfenmüller's tireless sacrifices. The Salesian missionaries kept the memory of the German Fathers alive among the people of Northeast India. It was with great joy that they were able to welcome Salvatorian missionaries back into the region, first at Bangalore in 1990, and then at Shillong in 2000. In 2001, Father Hopfenmüller's remains were exhumed and venerated for thirty days at the Salvatorian Otto Hopfenmüller House of Studies in Shillong. On July 1, they were solemnly interred at the Cathedral of Shillong. Thousands of people attended this ceremony, and each year on the anniversary of Hopfenmüller's death, the people of Northeast India hold major celebrations in Shillong to commemorate it. These Christians believe him to be among the blessed in Heaven, and it is only a matter of time before the cause for his beatification is formally opened. May it happen soon, for the life of Father Otto Hopfenmüller serves as an example for all who desire to give their lives to Christ, whatever the price. In Father Otto, we find an echo of the words the Savior addressed to all who would follow Him: "There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

Quotes of Father Otto Hopfenmüller

(Taken from *Father Otto Hopfenmüller*, by Father Christophorus Becker, SDS)

“My God, I am amazed and astonished at what You did to make us happy! Your love shall be praised in eternity! It is not an empty delusion or a forbidden desire when I enjoy life and am happy. Yes, God Himself created this desire in my soul that I can’t do anything else but long for happiness and bliss” (177).

“Even though we celebrated Easter with scant festivity, my soul was filled with cheerful Easter rejoicing. Christ has risen from the dead, my salvation has been completed, the world of the flesh has been defeated, and I can become glorious like my Jesus...” (208).

“One needs to see God’s hands in the little things because not even a sparrow falls from the sky without the will of the Heavenly Father” (240).

“We need to follow Christ’s law: To preach the Gospel to the poor” (255).

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