

EDITORIAL

La Salette

VISION & MISSION



By Fr. Thomas Vellappallil, ms

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Dear Co-missioners,

India is the 7th largest country in the world with a population of 1.3 billion making it the second most populous country after China. It has more than three times the population of the United States though its area is only about one-third. There are 17 major languages with 844 dialects. India is the birth place for many religions (such as Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism). Two main religions are Hinduism (80%) and Muslim (10%) and Christianity is the 3^d largest religion with more than 30 million followers, constituting 2.6% of India's population. The Christians in India are known as St. Thomas Christians due to their reverence for Saint Thomas the Apostle, who is said to have brought Christianity to India in A.D. 52. A significant portion of the Indian Christian population resides in the state of Kerala. Kerala is known as the cradle of Christianity in South Asia.

It has been 28 years since the La Salette mission was founded in India by the pioneers Frs. Jose Kuzhinjalil, MS, Joseph Punnakkunnel, MS and Andrews Kollannor, MS back in 1988. Today the Province of India is blessed with 53 priests, 11 scholastics, 50 seminarians and 6 houses in three southern states of Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh ministering to the people of God through schools, retreat and counselling centers, parish and shrine ministries.



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Fr. Augustine Cheerakathil, MS, the pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Montclair, CA and I decided to visit the La Salette mission in Andhra Pradesh while we were both on home vacation to India in January. We were equally impressed, inspired and challenged by what we saw. Besides the great hospitality and welcome we received from our missionaries serving there both Frs Jobit and Anil, we were very much touched by the simplicity and poverty of the people they serve. Though poor, the people are very passionate in their love for God and embrace faith with great joy. At a solemn celebration of the Eucharist on a Sunday where we were invited to concelebrate, we saw practically everyone who came to mass, brought their own bibles. They listened carefully to the proclamation of the Word of God and interacted with the homilist who responded to their questions and clarified their doubts. They may be extremely poor and uneducated but their love for God was so evident. Before they returned to their homes on foot, every person came and greeted us priests by bending and touching our feet and blessing themselves as a sign of respect for the priests of God. It was truly a humbling experience for us as it was a reminder that as priests, we should always be a reflection of God inside out.



It's an honor for me to present to you Fr Jobit Thottumkara, MS, who is the second and current pastor of St. Joseph Church. Fr. Jobit was born on October 27, 1982 in Kayyayunni, in the southern state of Kerala, India. Among the five siblings, three boys and two girls, he is the youngest. He recalls that his inspiration and attraction to priesthood and religious life came from his grandmother who took the young Jobit to the parish church for mass every day. He became associated with the priests in the parish since his family lived close to the church. As a young boy, Jobit became very active in church and served as an altar boy for seven years. He knew that he wanted to be a priest and both his parents, Mr. Chacko and Mrs. Annamma wholeheartedly supported their youngest son. At the age of 17, he joined the La Salette Community and took his First Vows on May 1, 2006 and Perpetual Vows on May 1, 2010. He and his older brother were ordained as priests on January 3, 2011 at Fatima Matha Church, Kayyayunni, India. It was good to have him with us in St. Louis, Missouri together with Fr. Jiju Valiyakandathil, another La Salette priest from India to assist me with preaching for the missions this past summer He shared with



Fr. Jobit

me his views and thoughts, joys and struggles regarding the current situation of our mission in Andhra Pradesh. The following is a rephrasing of what he shared.



In 2008, under the guidance of the Provincial, Fr. Andrews Kollannor, MS, Fr. Jenson Chendrapinni, MS, established a mission in Torredu, Andhra Pradesh, India, in the Archdiocese of Visakhapatnam. Most, if not all, the La Salette missionaries in India come from the state of Kerala. Therefore it was quite a challenging experience for Fr. Jenson to venture into learning the new language and culture of the people in Andhra Pradesh. Soon the mission became the parish of St. Joseph and more than 350 people were baptized in the first seven years.

Fr. Jobit Thottumkara, MS followed Fr. Jenson in this ministry. He believes God has helped him to be loyal and faithful to his call to missionary work. He worked in St. Joseph parish during his diaconate year and after ordination in 2011 was appointed associate pastor. Now Fr. Jobit is pastor with the help of Fr. Anil Kochuthazhatth, MS who is now the associate pastor. They serve 350 families in the parish and many others in seven missions. They serve the poorest of the poor. The people do not own land and, though hard workers, the men earn only a couple of dollars a day which must support their whole family. The parents of many households are neither able to send their children to school nor able to meet their basic needs such as food and clothing. They would rather send their children to farms to work and to take care of the cattle.

There is no plumbing in the house or even outdoor toilets. Many contract contagious diseases but cannot afford the medical care available in the cities. The old and the dying are kept on a cot outside because it is believed that if someone dies inside, their souls remain in the house. The houses are constructed of hay and leaves of palm trees. The walls are made of mud and wood. Two or three families live in one house. In summer (March through July) the temperature is around 110 to 120 degrees and many die from the heat. There is hardly any supply of electricity and clean water is scarce throughout the year.



There is daily Mass at the parish and Mass in the evenings in the villages at 8pm after people return from work. Those wanting to receive Holy Communion go to Confession before Mass. They arrive with their bibles so they can follow the readings. It is expected that the homily will last more than an hour as this serves as a catechism lesson. The Mass is lively as everyone sings and claps. They usually conclude the evening with simple food and fellowship.



The parish has started a school that began with 45 students and now has more than 250 children studying up to 5th grade. Fr. Jince Koothodiyil, MS is serving as the director of the school that is free for those who cannot afford to pay.



The Church here is growing. The missionaries try to witness Jesus present in their lives and ministry. They pray in thanksgiving for the generosity and good will of those who in so many ways have made their work at St. Joseph parish possible. They ask for God's continuing blessing and guidance.



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