

GUWAHATI NEWSLETTER

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Do great things for us, O Lord, for you are mighty, and holy is your name



The Shepherd Speaks...

The months of January and February were really hectic for most priests and religious. The organization and celebration of the parish Sabha, annual retreat for the people of the parish, invitation to preach retreats and conduct classes at Sabha or hear confessions besides taking admissions to the school and boarding, finding teachers for the school, furnishing new class rooms, maintenance of the campus, etc hardly gave parish priests and head of institutions time to breath or relax. Often what two or three persons should do is done by the same person in the case of many priests. We believe that any job well done, like the opportunity to teach and instruct Christians in faith and provide educational facilities to the public, etc not only strengthen us in our appreciation for our vocation but also give glory to God.

I have joys my own to share. There was the priestly ordination of Rev. Jogesh Sangma SDB at Gojapara followed by the ordination of Rev Maya Martin Mochahari at Bijni, the lone priest this year for the Archdiocese of Guwahati at the end of last year. Both these ordinations were conducted with due solemnity. I also ordained three priests for the diocese of Diphu, Fr. Justin Kurian and Fr. Jomet Jacob in Kerala and Fr. Basant Kerketta at Dokmoka in Diphu. Again, Fr. James DOUNGEL SDB was ordained at Haflong in Diphu diocese. We thank God for these priests and ask the Lord of the harvest to send more priests to work in our Archdiocese.

After the ordinations in Kerala I made a retreat at Attapadi in Kerala. This centre organizes five-day retreats for priests starting on first Sunday of every month. I noted several priests from North East in my group attending the retreat. It was indeed a deep spiritual experience for all participants. I would recommend this retreat to every priest though it is a pity that it is conducted only in Malayalam.

In the early part of February the Conference of the Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI) had its plenary meeting at the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Health at Vailankanni in Tamilnadu. This conference consists of 129 dioceses of the Latin rite of India. Its members are 23 Archbishops including two Cardinals, 94 bishops, 10 Apostolic Administrators and two diocesan

Administrators, two auxiliary bishops and 41 bishop emeriti. The year 2013 is the silver jubilee of its establishment. Vailankanni was chosen as the venue as the shrine was celebrating the golden jubilee of its elevation into a minor basilica of the Roman Catholic Church. The occasion saw the presence of Fernando Cardinal Filoni, the President of the Congregation of The Evangelization of People from Rome delegated by the Holy Father to attend the double jubilee.

The main agenda before the conference was the preparation of a “Pastoral Plan for India”. The idea was mooted in the CCBI meeting at Chennai in 2011. It was followed by a nationwide survey on the life and mission of the Church in India and a National Consultation (Colloquium) of nearly 300 participants comprising of the cross section of Bishops, priests, religious and laity from all the 13 regions of CCBI in India. Continuing the processes the 25th Plenary Assembly reflected on the four pillars of the Church’s identity as a BELIEVING, PRAYING, SERVING AND PROCLAIMING Community. At the end of the deliberations a message was issued and the finalization of the Pastoral Plan was left to an expert committee which was at work from 2011. This plan can be the basis for diocesan and parish pastoral plans.

In its ‘MESSAGE’ the Conference noted the signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church such as emergence of many ecclesial movements, celebrations of the Year of Faith, holding of Mission Congress, desire of Christians to grow in holiness of life manifested through large participation in Charismatic conventions and retreats, involvement of the church in the social life of the country through forums for social justice, women empowerment, human right, environmental protection, social justice, child rights, etc. It also noted with concern the division of society on the basis of caste, language, materialism pervading even the sacred precincts of family and religious institutions, harassment of Christians, slow establishment of participatory structures like parish councils, financial committees in the parishes, lack of interest in ecumenism and inter religious dialogue, etc.

The conference insisted on the formation of all groups within the church, including the clergy religious, catechists and people, in liturgical celebrations, proclamation of the Word of God, establishment of SCCs through proper training and empowerment; on family apostolate, marriage preparatory courses, defending the rights of the unborn, sensitivity towards women, preparing the youth intellectually, spiritually and morally to take up leadership roles in the society, etc.

The conference understands its role to be a constructive player in the nation building efforts of the country by promoting peace, justice and national integration, religious harmony, rooting out corruption, communal politics, crimes against women and children and all divisive forces in the society. It urges Christians to elect worthy candidates who will uphold the constitution. The message ends with a prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary to teach us in this year of faith to be faithful disciples of her son Jesus and be ready to say ‘yes’ to God’s will at all circumstances.

The news of the intended resignation of the Pope reached the Bishops after most of them had left the conference. It was unexpected and a sense of disbelief invaded the minds of people, Catholics and non Catholics. As the news sank in there was an instant uplifting of minds and hearts in admiration for the humility and boldness of the Pope to renounce the exalted office of the world wide Church. We thank God who has given us such a great Pope who acted decisively amidst all the turmoil of the age within and outside the church. Meanwhile we pray to God to give us a Pope after the heart of his son Jesus to carry forward his mandate to the ends of the world.

Charismatic Retreat

Nagrijuli: St Jude's Church at Nagrijuli organized a four-day retreat for the parishioners from 9-13 January. It was a time of spiritual renewal for the people. About eight hundred people attended the retreat by Fr George and his five-member team from Patna. Many experienced the healing touch of Jesus.

At the conclusion of the retreat 52 children received first communion, 18 people received baptism, 9 couples were blessed in marriage.

During the Eucharistic Celebration Fr Varghese Kizhakevely, Vicar General of the Archdiocese, told the children "to keep afresh the memories of this First Communion Day which is a day of Joy for you and for your families."

He reminded the parents the importance of accompanying the children in their faith. He said, "You are their first teachers in their life of faith. It is through you that they will come to know God."

The proper planning and the hard work of the Parish Council Members made this event a great success.

Fr Raj Kapoor



Village visits

Goreswar: Archbishop John Moolachira visited three villages belonging to Goreswar parish on December 6. According to Fr Maria Soosai, "this was the first time an Archbishop visited the villages and people were very happy." The villages Bengalipara with Catholic families, Amris with 32 families and Khasi with 15 families are looked Tezpur diocese though to the Archdiocese of Guwahati.



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The World Day of Consecrated Life celebrated

Guwahati: The “World Day of Consecrated Life” was celebrated in Guwahati region with reflections on Porta Dei and Consecrated Life. About 60 Religious and priests participated in the event.

In his welcome address speaking on Consecrated Life Claretian Priest Fr Pius Thuruthiyil said, “February is intended to help the entire church to esteem even more greatly the witness of those persons who have chosen to follow Christ by means of the practice of the evangelical counsels. It is intended to be a suitable occasion for consecrated persons to renew their commitment and rekindle the fervour which should inspire their offering of themselves to the Lord.

“It is also a celebration to return to the sources of our vocation, to take stock of our own lives, to confirm the commitment of our own consecration,” he added. “Thus we will be able to give witness with joy to the men and women of our time that the Lord is the love who is able to fill the heart of the human person.”

Speaking on Faith Salesian priest Fr Joe Almeida appreciated that “in North East many people join our faith because the religious and priests go out to meet them in their life situations. Thus we also win over those who have gone astray.”

He pointed out “We have a tendency of hiding our Christian faith in our mission. Often we religious are seen as mere social workers.”

“Faith is the path of knowledge of our encounter with God,” he reminded and added, “our witness value, the communication of our faith, is very important.”

Speaking on the lack of vocations in our times he pointed out “that the reason may be the lack of religiosity in our Christian families.”

He said, “As consecrated persons we must have communion of hearts in our communities. We can take this celebration to the life of people when we visit them.

Appreciating the effort of the religious who take time to visit the families of their students he said, “The social Ministry we do is very powerful today.”

The day culminated with a meaningful celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

Sr Annie MSMHC

Annual Sabha

Sonapur: St Patrick’s Church’s Annual Sabha was held from 29-31 January at Amguri Catholic Church with the Theme Christian Family Deeply Rooted in Faith.

Archbishop John Moolachira concelebrated the Eucharist with eight priests on the concluding day. He congratulated the people for organising the Annual Sabha which was an occasion for the renewal of their Christian faith.

In his homily he explained the importance of Sacraments in the life of a Christian. He exhorted the people to frequent reception of the Sacraments of Confession and communion. He urged the people to receive the Sacraments of confession once a month.

As we are in the Year of Faith he exhorted the people to read the Bible daily to strengthen their faith.

Fr Joby, Fr Maria Soosai and Fr Moses were the resource persons for the three days. They spoke on the “ Role of Catholic Faith, Faith in the Word of God, Faith in the Sacrament and Faith in the Saints.”

The days were animated with Community morning prayer, and cultural programmes in the evenings. Sr Morum MSMHC and Sr Charan (Madonna Sisters) helped in the success of the entire programme.

The occasion was made memorable as 25 children received first communion and Confirmation.

Fr Joseph Kuttinal

Derapathar: Annual Sabha was organised in St Vincent’s Parish from 8-10 February with the theme “Lord, Increase our Faith”.

In his inaugural address Fr Jackeus Sangma from Damas, Tura exhorted the people to strengthen their faith through their Christian way of living, and the frequent reception of sacraments.

As reflection on the Year of faith Archbishop Thomas exhorted the people to leave the old pattern of life and embrace new experience of faith. He urged the people to share their faith with others as new evangelisers, strengthened and enriched by the Word of God and the Sacraments.

A four-member charismatic Team from Satgaon animated the participants for three days. Several priests and sisters also joined in animating the 1200 participants.

Rosary procession, three days perpetual adoration, and a Year of faith Procession during the three-day programme helped the people to renew their Catholic faith.

Nearly 119 children and adults received sacraments of Baptism, Communion, confirmation and wedding. Two couples were blessed in marriage.

Fr Naresh Naik VC

WDC Celebrated Christmas with the neighbourhood

Joypur: Christmas Celebration at the Women’s Development Centre (WDC) at Joypur brought together leaders from different churches and religions. Baptist Pastor Aziz-Hauque told the gathering the story of Christmas at length. People listened to him with rapt attention as he spoke in Assamese.

A Swamiji from the “Krishna Bhakta” group shared about the activities that they do in Assam to spread the message of God. He said, he appreciates the essence of Christmas which is love. WDC gifted blankets to a group of selected widows, and blankets and mosquito nets to the flood victims of Morigaon District as Christmas gift. Around 2000 people benefited from the programme.

Sr Betsy SCC.

On A Pilgrim Path

Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil

You will be wondering what I have been doing since last January. I have been keeping busy, accepting work as it came: preaching retreats, giving talks, taking classes, writing articles, presenting papers at conferences. For example, I was at a conference in the Sogang University of Korea, a congress on New Evangelization in Manila, an Asian-level convention of Divine Mercy devotees in Bangkok, several FABC programmes in Thailand, a seminar in Ulan Ude University (Siberia), a study on Frs. Krick and Bourry in Paris, conference on Vatican II in Dharmaram College Bangalore, preaching a retreat at Nagpur. In addition, a little peace effort in Kokhrajhar. That is my account.



I attended also some conferences in the Universities of Chandigarh, Benares Hindu University, and Shantiniketan. These were on how to bring VALUES to public life, which I thought was in line with the concepts proposed by New Evangelization, seeking to build COMMON GROUND with people of all persuasions. I presented a paper at these places along with an American OMI priest who has been in this ministry a long time. I noticed that when ideas are proposed with objectivity and relevance, people listen.

But, may be, I should say a little more about my visit to Vietnam for the FABC meeting last December. We saw first hand a Church that had gone through untold sufferings for more than half century. The FABC

Plenary Assembly gave those Christians a chance of bearing witness to their faith for which they had suffered. The early history of this Church records lengthy periods of persecutions. The Vietnamese can boast of many martyrs and much creative accomplishment during that era when their Church was coming into existence: the glorious work of the French missionaries, the creativity of Fr Alexander Rhodes who trained lay people for active Evangelization, and the courage with which first members witnessed to their faith.

The Catholic community in Vietnam is about 8 per cent, in a population of 90 million. The Buddhist proportion is not too far ahead, with just 9 per cent. The Vietnamese Catholic percentage would possibly be the highest in Asia apart from the Philippines and Timor East. The hard work of the early missionaries and sufferings of the first Christians have evidently borne fruit.

This explains the enthusiasm with which the Church of Vietnam came out to welcome the participants of the FABC Plenary Assembly last December, about 100 Bishops and the office-bearers of various commissions. It turned out to be the biggest single event in the living memory of the present generation of Catholics in the country. A community that had been cut off from the rest of the world for a long time came out in all eagerness to make of the Plenary Assembly a memorable event: glamorous receptions, colourful cultural programmes, and most inspiring Eucharistic celebrations. Every day surprised us with something new and unique. It was evident that sufferings generate unbelievable energies.

Even the Communist Government came out with extra effort to show that there was religious freedom in their country. They went out of their way to welcome the Church leaders and delegates, as though to make up for their damaged image. After all, all of Asia was there!



The meeting itself took place at the major seminary at Xuan Loc, some 4 hours journey from Ho Chi Minh City (earlier known as Saigao). The seminary looks after over 400 students. When I visited Vietnam some 20 years ago, the Ho Chi Min seminary had only 50 seminarians, even though it was built for 500. Admissions were controlled, syllabus regulated, and ordinations limited. I met priests who had waited for

16 years and more as deacons to get the Government permission for ordination. Such was their faith. Today all the seminaries are full. Admissions have to be refused for want of space.

Little wonder! The diocese of Xuan Loc has one million Catholics, possibly the highest number for any diocese in Asia. Ho Ch Minh has 8 Lakhs. Many Catholics had fled from the North to the South seeking the protection of the Americans, when the Communists were harassing them during the Vietnam war. This added to the number of Catholics in South Vietnam. The Vietnamese take their faith seriously. The attendance is high even during week days. There are several evening masses for working people. It is not easy for priests to offer pastoral care to so great a number. And when they tell us that more and more people want to join the Church still, we can imagine the pastoral challenge before them.

Some 80 per cent of the Vietnamese belong to their own old indigenous religious traditions. Under the Communists they were described as atheists. In the Northeast we would have described them as 'tribal', though very little of the early traditions are left. However, this situation offers great opportunities for the missionaries of the future. And the Vietnamese Catholics, having suffered much, are ready to do anything for the Church. Their missionaries are already working in Mongolia, Tanzania, Timor and other places. The future is great.

Since I referred to the tribal identity of the Vietnamese as a whole, let me say a word about my visit to the diocese of Kontum where there are many tribes like Jerais, Bahnas, Sedangs, Rngaos, Chams, Res, Mnongs. Soon after the FABC meeting I made a dash to that area, some 400 km away, where I was told there is an evident move towards the Catholic Church. The bishop was very happy to meet me. I could see the dynamism of his team. However, the Government does not allow them to tour the villages. But people come, take instructions, and get baptized. The type of houses that I saw in the villages were similar to those on the Naga hills. I noticed in different parts of Vietnam rubber estates, coffee plantations, and pepper groves. The economy is picking up, though still under strain. We pray that all these communities may grow and prosper.

Meanwhile I am not forgetting the Northeast. Though I have deliberately kept myself from moving within the Archdiocese too much, I have been around in other areas e.g. I visited the Sadiya zone of Dibrugarh and was edified by the amazing growth there. I have visited all the centers of Tirap where I had initiated work earlier and admired the unbelievable expansion through the hard work of Bishop George Palliparambil and his team. I had my Christmas Mass at Lachitgaon, a small village in the present parish of Uriamghat in the diocese, Dibrugarh. Fr. Mathew Chanikuzy had ventured into that place with courage when I was in Dibrugarh. I was happy to meet people there after 20 years. I visited some villages with the fathers, heard confessions, and joined them for the midnight mass. I said the day mass at Sarupathar, visited some families, paid respects to the Naojan community before returning to Guwahati. Pastoral service is paradise.
