

**5<sup>th</sup> May 2013**

**A few Reflections on my Priesthood during 50 years**

**(Bishop Thomas Thiruthalil, C.M.)**

On this joyous occasion of the Golden Jubilee of my Priesthood, I have the opportunity to recount the joys and blessings of the last 50 years. This is a time to take stock of the graces I received, the kindness I have shared and grateful for the God given bounty that enriches my life. I am reminded of the indelible spirit of goodwill, cooperation and friendship that was received since my earliest days.

This Jubilee has offered opportunities to value and celebrate my Priesthood. Catholic Priesthood is divinely instituted and it is the Lord's call. I have grown in appreciating it ever increasingly as I introspect my own limitations for this gratuitous gift. My Catholic upbringing and the encouragement of parents made it irresistibly attracting.

**Vincentian Heritage**

My soul's desire to serve Jesus in the poor was matched in the charism of the Congregation of the Mission in its undiluted zeal for the souls. The Congregation when I joined was like a house on fire with pre Vatican missionary thrust for evangelization. The Spanish missionaries who lived in the remote mission areas were self embodiment of what St. Vincent said *"My idea was that men who are called to continue Christ's mission, which is mainly preaching the Good News to the poor, should see things from his point of view and want what he wanted. They should have the same spirit he had and follow in his footsteps"* (Prologue of the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission).

As I reflect on my rich heritage in the Vincentian family, let me also give thanks to those who honour it by giving back. May the hundreds of our missionaries from the past, the unsung heroes of faith in frugal clock, may sit with the Lord in his agape in heaven. I honour their service and sacrifice and I owe a great deal of my ministry to them. They were much loved and appreciated by the people. They fulfilled what Saint Vincent said, *"Do what you will, people will never believe in us if we do not show love and compassion to those whom we wish to believe in us"* (CCD I, 276f).

I also show my appreciation to my Formators who used to affirm the words of St. Francis Assisi that *"always preach the Gospel and if needed use words"*. The time I could spend with them reconfirmed my belief that we are a people who draw our deepest strength not from intelligence, influence or wealth, but from our Divine Master who came *"not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many"* (Mk: 10:45).

I lift up my cup of thanksgiving together with my confreres, this missionary inheritance, grateful for the blessings of individuals, the community and the Congregation. I see everywhere the grace bestowed upon me by God and by all who have made my life richer with their presence.

### **My stay in Spain from 1959-1965:**

I would like to begin to offer some thoughts on the time I spent in Spain.

Why start a conversation about my own formation way past half a century now? I do not mean in any way to undermine the modalities of various formation centres worldwide. But Salamanca of that time was a miniature of all what meant by universal Church. It was a seat of scholarship. There were seminarians from East and West, from both hemispheres of the earth. This was sufficient to groom a worldwide vision and broadness of approach. Availability of saintly Professors with calibre was our true blessing. We still cherish all what we gained in and out of our classes in those days. Seminary as the cradle to foster vocation was true in its letter and spirit within those walls of learning. The lasting bonds of relationship and inspiration we gained, still fresh in those who passed through its majestic Gothic- Baroque styled corridors.

The best formation I could receive and chance to complete my Licentiate in Canon Law increased the longing of my heart – to be in Odisha. At Bhanjanagar Seminary, I received the opportunity to involve in the formation of the seminarians. It helped me to fine tune my conviction about the essential need for cultivating genuine vocation for mission work.

### **Berhampur Diocese:**

Then came the call within the call to take the mantle of the newly erected Diocese of Berhampur, carved out from the vast and virgin heart land of Cuttack Mission. The great legacy of missionaries was my backbone though infrastructural requirements were a great challenge. Initial hiccups set aside; the enormous possibilities and rich missionary harvest were my reward. It helped me to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favour. I owe much to my co-workers – Priests, Religious and Catechists- for the great degree of tranquility and missionary plentitude, which we have since enjoyed and for the peaceful and rational manner in which we have been enabled to grow as a mission diocese. God helped me to perform my several and relative duties properly and punctually—to make the Church a blessing to all the people around, by the promotion of universal education and health.

## **Balasore Diocese:**

Balasore had already inherited a rich legacy and good foundation, thanks to the farsightedness of late Msgr. Jacob Vadakeveetil, C.M. My pastoral experience in Berhampur came handy when I took up the charge of this youngest Diocese in Odisha. Though education and health were the main concerns in the secular realm, faith and laity leadership formation were the needs in the Church level.

Malaria, Tuberculosis and Malnutrition were the major problems faced in the districts of Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar. Preventive health care by awareness programmes were the need of the time. Thus we started the training of health workers who could serve in the remote areas of the diocese. Health Centres and health - outreach programmes were given a face lift which has benefited ordinary village flock. In a later stage, seeing the good works of the Church, the general public requested us to start a general Hospital specially for the poor and needy. Thus in 1999 Jyothi Hospital was established as a referral hospital to cater to the needs of the common people. Patients as far as West Bengal avail its facilities and much appreciate our nursing care. It has managed to form a network with all our remote health centres. In recent years, it could branch out into a College of Nursing and Community Care Centre for HIV/AIDS patients.

Promotion of universal education received fairly well enough impetus by our numerous schools and hostels. It is gladdening to note that most of our local vocation to priesthood and religious life emerge from our hostels.

Good will and enthusiasm of the Priests and the Religious were my strength. I have a unique satisfaction that most of the priests working with me were ordained by me and they are young. I could easily establish a personal rapport with them which immensely helped me for the promotion of ministry. Their cooperation and joy of working in partnership were the rich rewards which I cherish here. When I remember the diocesan family, I raise my heart with the words of St. Paul *"How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?(1Thes:3:9)*

## **The Church in Odisha:**

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Vatican Council could read the signs of the times and envisaged an outward looking church with centripetal movement. The young churches in the East especially that of India has the compelling reason to promote *'triple dialogue with cultures, religions and the poor'* (FABC: 197, no: 11). The history of Odisha substantiates this need as the genuine means of establishing her identity. As I complete my pilgrim journey in this land of high religiosity and rich traditions, I am more and more convinced about the need for all embracing openness from the part of the Church. Church in Odisha is undergoing the birth pangs to become the *'light and leaven'* (Mtt: 5:14, 13:33) for the world around. I see the need for a united stand by the regional Church in

matters of justice and the promotion of peace. Very often the various denominations look upon the Catholic Church for inspiration and leadership. As the *'little flock'* (Lk: 12:32) of the Lord, we have to learn to adapt an inclusive approach which could gain a lot of good will for the Church.

We have to strive to attain a united approach for the welfare of our people especially with regard to the burning issues of Dalits & Tribals, Minorities, Poverty, Land Alienation, Migration and Unemployment. Establishment of a functional Regional Centre at Bhubaneswar is a small step towards this. By the help of the Spirit, the steps we have adopted were in right direction. I am sure this timely movement of the local church as the sign of Kingdom and beacon of Good News will be strengthened in the coming years.

My optimism for this Church in Odisha has doubled after the recent trials we faced as a community. We are counted among the privileged few who could openly suffer for our faith. We have the sure proof from the history that *"trials and tribulations have only strengthened our faith"* (1Pt:1:6-7). Let us remember that our faith can only be purified by perseverance under pressure, and can only be strengthened when we learn to rely on God in times of crisis. I foresee a bright future for this Church, with the foundation of saints and martyrs grow in quality and vitality. But we have miles to go actualizing the Church as the communion of communities where gifts and charism of our religious traditions and lay people receive sufficient chance for flowering.

This year, as I said, was the year of introspection. I had several meaningful celebrations of my golden jubilee. Ultimately my priesthood was the celebration of the bounty of God's goodness, shared with gratitude. I am warmed by Lord's presence, kept by his grace, empowered by his faith in me, and strengthened by his patience. When I take time to stop and think about what God has done for me, I find my heart overjoyed. I find my love for Him growing. I find my desire to be with him increasing. Gratitude, when I let it pervade my heart, leads to intimacy with the Lord.

### **Many Thanks:**

Thank you, for moving me while I was wonder stuck about the changes you made in me and my surroundings. And thanks for the unconditional love and protection which you have bestowed on me. Thanks for the hurdles you sent to give me a chance to deepen my faith. You exposed me beyond my limitations and *'protected me by your wings'* (Ps: 17), and *'my cup overflows'* (Ps: 23). So I thank *'My Lord and My God'* (Jn: 20:28) that I have known love better, tasted goodness and have not had to live life without His presence. God bless you.

Balasore  
5<sup>th</sup> May 2013

Thomas Thiruthalil, CM.,  
Bishop of Balasore, Odisha

