



BEHIND THE COLLAR

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Attending: Universita Urbaniana – Rome – Italy
Licentiate in Missiology (the study of mission theology)

Nationality: India

Diocese: Sultanpet, Palakkad, Kerala

Date of ordination: May 18th, 2014

Languages Spoken: Tamil, Malayalam, English, Italian



Priesthood Motto **"With love today" 1 Cor 13**

Father Antony was born one of four boys in the mountainous region of northern Kerala. Kerala is a state on the southwestern, Malabar Coast of India and is the thirteenth-largest Indian state by population. It is divided into 14 districts with the capital being Thiruvananthapuram. Malayalam is the most widely spoken language and is also the official language of the state.

Tradition holds that Kerala was evangelized originally by Saint Thomas the Apostle and later by Saint Francis Xavier. Saint Thomas is said to have travelled outside the Roman Empire in A.D. 52 to baptize their ancestors and preach the Gospel, travelling as far as Tamilakam which are the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala in present-day India. Tradition holds that in 72 A.D. Saint Thomas was martyred by a jealous Hindu priest of Kali.

There are over 19.9 million Catholics in India, which represents around 1.55% of the total population. The Catholic Church is the largest Christian church within India. There are 174 dioceses in India organized into 30 provinces. Of these, 132 are Latin Catholic Church, 31 Syro-Malabar Catholic Church. Masses are said in the language of the area and sometimes bi-lingual. There are 23 official languages with each state having its own language, culture and food.

Father Antony stated that the region of Kerala where he grew up is predominately Catholic in comparison to the rest of India. In fact going back as far as three generations in his family they were all Catholic. Father Antony went on to say “that even though the number of Catholics in India is relatively small compared to other religions the Catholics dominate the culture in terms of influence. When a Catholic Bishop speaks the country listens to his input because the people believe that Catholics stand for peace and justice”. Father Antony pointed out the main differences between the Muslims, Hindu and Catholics are that the Catholics are unified in theology and organization. However he states “there are challenges with some politicians who even though they had received a Catholic education they find it politically expedient to be antagonistic to the church.

Father Antony comes from a poor modest family, his father worked in the sugar factory and his mother was a homemaker. His journey to the Priesthood is quite a remarkable one and as I was about to find out nothing short a miracle itself could have made it happen. Father Antony graciously granted me an interview on August 31st 2018. Here is his story:

When Father Antony’s oldest brother died at the age of 7 months his grandmother prayed a novena to Saint Anthony that if God would bless their family with another son, that son would be dedicated to God and become a Priest. Not too long after that on November 2nd 1983 Father Antony was born.

His road to the Priesthood did not get off to a very good start. Since the family was poor he could not afford to go to a Catholic school. He went to a sub-standard government school to the grade of 10 where English was not taught. This as it turns out would come back to haunt him later in life. Although he enjoys good health today he was in very poor health as a child and was near death on several occasions. His family thought he would not live very long. His parents were strict and devout Catholics and he followed their direction as he still does today. He remembers that they would always say family prayers with rosary before their night meals. He reflected on his observations while he has been visiting here that he gets the sense that younger people are not particularly deferential to their parents or authority in general nor do they show a willingness to be submissive to their guidance.

As a child growing up Father Antony developed a passion for poetry, played soccer but was not very interested in sports in general and he was an altar server at his Parish Holy Cross Church Menonpara, Palakkad, Kerala, India. It is here where he met one of the two major influences in his discernment to becoming a Priest, the Rev. Fr. Michael. The other major influence was his family.

At age 15 he had an opportunity to go to the seminary. Originally he did not want to go. He did not want to leave his family and he felt that given his very poor education he would struggle with reading and spelling because he did not speak any English. But at his father's insistence he relented and went to the seminary. He felt a bit out of place as the others in the seminary were educated in English speaking schools so he then transferred and went to live in a seminary in another state.

After his first year in the seminary his director told him that since he was not very good in speaking English he should leave the seminary. He thought very seriously of leaving and joining another congregation because it was humiliating to him to be the only one in his class who would not be promoted. However the Rector of the seminary gave him another alternative; to be demoted back to the first year and focus on improving his English. He swallowed his pride, took that advice and persevered to the point that:

He was the first in his family to graduate from school, his parent's only attained a 5th or 6th grade education. He had 3 years of college and earned a Business Management degree while at the seminary. Funding for his education came from the Vatican and benefactors in India.

He had one year of spiritual formation which includes a one month retreat. Two years studying philosophy and introductory scripture. One year assisting in a parish for pastoral experience. Three years in the seminary First - Initiation, Second - Lector, Third - Acolyte and 6 months of pastoral courses. As a Deacon he was assigned the honor to be the Secretary to Bishop Most Rev. Peter Abir Antonysamy in the new Diocese called Sulthanpet for 2 years 6 months. The Sulthanpet diocese has 29 Parishes and 50 sub-stations with 27 Priest serving 30,000 to 40,000 people.

His first Parish, St. Antony the Hermit Church, In Attupathy, Palakkad serves more than 76 families which rely on the Church for assistance. He told me that "in general the theology of the people is poor but their faith is strong". Priest there will make frequent visits to their homes and know the people very well. He noted that this was a difference he observed while visiting here where things are done mostly by appointment.

He is continuing his education and has one more year after which he will attain a Master's Degree in Missiology. His Thesis is "Mission Through Popular Devotion".

He has traveled to Belgium, Netherlands, Portugal, Italy and the United States. He became the first of his class to make the trip to the United States even though he was demoted one year behind them.

Everyday Father Antony wakes up he renews his priestly commitment to God praying that he will fulfill his ministry. He feels his best asset is his ability to preach practically not abstractly. His advice to others who may be considering a vocation "If you are considering the priesthood go and explore it, if it is right you will stay, if not you will continue on another path."

Father Antony has a soft but passionate demeanor with a heavy dose of humility. He does not want to be viewed above people by virtue of his being an ordained priest. He feels his faith level is not more than his fathers' or anyone else's. He asks us to pray for him. Oh and if it isn't obvious by now Saint Anthony is his patron saint. You may be asking what of his paternal grandmother who prayed the Novena to Saint Anthony, she was watching from heaven as she had passed away before he was ordained. His maternal grandmother did get to see him ordained.

By Randy Pagnotta

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