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SEPTEMBER 12, 1999

"DID YOU SEE POVERTY?"

by Father Paul Turner

The question I've heard most often since my return from India is "Did you see any poverty?" It's a question that reveals a lot about our collective image of India. It also reveals our compassion.

The Indians in charge of our conference knew about this perception. Two years ago at the meeting of Societas Liturgica in Finland, the Indians who would host the next gathering presented a video of the facilities in Kottayam. I felt embarrassed watching it. The camera showed a bathroom, a toilet, a shower, a bed, a fax machine, a photocopier, telephone, etc. Our hosts knew attendance would be low out of fears about staying in India. They had to reassure us we were going to a civilized place.

The meeting itself was reason enough to make the trip. Societas Liturgica is an international and ecumenical organization of liturgists. They meet every other summer. I joined the group a few years ago. This was my second meeting. Most of these people teach at universities, write books and articles, and/or administer a liturgical office. For example, we had a representative from the Swiss office of the World Council of Churches, several Anglican bishops, diocesan staff from Australia, and professors from the liturgical institutes in Paris and Rome. A few of us (like me) are pastors who have expertise in liturgy but prefer to exercise it in parishes. The principal languages are English, French, and German. The conference offers simultaneous translation for the main talks.

A highlight for me was the talk by an Indian professor of liturgy who spoke about the need for inculturation of the Roman liturgy in Asian settings. He also presided for the conference eucharist, using the adaptations for the mass approved by Rome for use in India in 1969. It was a beautiful experience involving incense, flowers, fire, water, indigenous music, and the use of prayerful body postures.

My hotel was adequate, but simple. No air conditioning (at my request), no toilet paper (you're supposed to provide your own), no hot water, but the bed was firm, the room was clean, a daily paper slid beneath the door, and the staff was pleasant. It cost about \$4.75 a night.

My most vivid memories, though, are from the time I spent with Alex Menamparambil. Alex is the uncle of Jomy Puthamana here at St. Regis. Jomy and his wife Mia have a child in our early childhood center. They are from Kerala, the southernmost state of India, where Kottayam is located. Jomy put me in touch with his uncle Alex. It turns out I'd met another of Jomy's uncles at an international meeting in France back in 1993. That uncle, Thomas, is now a Roman Catholic bishop in India.

Alex took me on a boat ride through the canals and backwaters near the Indian Ocean. Three college students from his neighborhood came along for the day. Together we relaxed on the water, visited a bird sanctuary, sang songs, drank fresh coconut juice, ate clams, and watched life along the water. I also drank a couple glasses of doti, the local moonshine made from the coconut tree. Kerala is a lush, green area of India with rice paddies and rubber, coconut mango, and pineapple trees. I saw more of it a few days later when Alex drove me to his home for Sunday lunch. His wife Anamma prepared a delicious meal, largely from food she had grown at their property. Alex also showed me the house where he grew up with his eleven brothers and sisters, a large home that has been in the family for 300 years.

He also took me to see Maria Sadanam, a home for the mentally ill. It was a scene a lot of us imagine when we think of poverty in India. Over 150 men and women live under one roof in a converted cattle shed. If you saw pictures of it, you'd probably think it was dirty, dangerous, overcrowded and poor. But you have to be there to believe it. The man who manages the place believes he is on a mission from God. Several years ago he made a charismatic retreat, then saw a homeless mentally ill person. He took him in, then took in some more, and the ministry grew and grew. In this home the mentally ill are receiving food, medical care, shelter, and—most of all—love. Alex wouldn't take my money to thank him for his trouble, but he recommended contributions to Maria Sadanam. I've sent him some money since I got home.

Did I see poverty? Yes, I did. But I also saw happiness, a slower pace of life, an uncluttered vision of family life, and a place rich in vegetation, work, and love.

