

Around Half the World in One Month

Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ

In my life I have traveled by air long enough to go around the world several times. I think that I have been air born more than a hundred times. I have visited 35 countries first to study journalism at London in 1975 and then to do further studies and to attend international meetings and to conduct journalism workshops and seminars.

But my longest single journey was to Panama City of Panama Canal fame in October 26-27, 2013, which took me 42 hours to reach Panama from my home city Ahmedabad (India) and I was about 24 hours in the air, changed planes at Mumbai, Zurich (Switzerland) Newark (USA) and landing at Panama City.

I was going first time to Panama and I did not know anyone in the city. But my claim proved true that in most cities of the world I will find a friend or a friend of a friend. I was reaching Panama a day ahead of the World Congress of the International Christian Organization of the Media (ICOM). During my preparation for the journey not knowing anyone in Panama I had asked for direction and Joseph Chittilappilly at ICOM headquarters in Geneva informed me by e-mail me that someone from the local organizing committee will come to receive me at the airport.

Then, one day while chatting with my friend (and a famous author in English) Hedwig Lewis he told me about his fan and friend Mrs. Gisel Chang of Panama City and he gave me her e-mail id. Replying promptly to my e-mail letter Gisel told me that she would come to Panama airport to receive me. So I immediately e-mailed ICOM Secretariat informing Joseph there that there is no need for the local organizer to come to the airport as I have found a friend to receive me at Panama airport.

Though Gisel had stayed two days in my residence Gurjarvani some years back I was not able to remember her face. But Gisel assured me on e-mail that I need not worry as she would certainly recognize me. At the arrival gate she waved and called out my name 'Fr. Paul' and she welcomed me with a warm friendly embrace.

Unknown to me the local coordinator of the ICOM World Congress Luis Alberto Diaz also came to the airport to receive me. As he told me the next day he saw a lady welcoming me at the exit. So he did not suspect me as Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ! So after waiting till the last person to come out he went to the hotel Panama looking for me late at night! Meanwhile since I or Gisel did not know about my exact accommodation she called her Jesuit friends near her residence and took me there. There were two Jesuits to receive me at the door at 11.30 PM when she rang the bell.

In spite of telling my two Jesuit hosts they took me to the refectory and I did enjoy a dish of papaya, my favorite fruit. Then I enjoyed a sound sleep after my long journey. On the next day on Oct. 28 morning after Mass and breakfast I called the ICOM Congress Coordinator Mr. Luis Alberto Diaz and he told me that he would come at about 2 PM to take me to my place of accommodation. But he came 12.45 while I was finishing lunch. He told me that he could wait for me till 2 PM or if I am ready then he can take me to show some tourist interest places on the

way. I told him that I was sleepy. So I will take a nap for 15 minutes. While Luis talked with his Jesuit friends I slept till the Jesuit came to call me after half an hour! I got ready promptly and got into Luis' car. He drove me first to Pope John Paul II statue mounted at the place from where he had addressed lakhs of people from Panama and from neighbouring countries in 1983 just outside of the domestic airport which closed just for the day. The runway was turned as a ground for the large crowds of people who came to see and listen to Pope John Paul II.

From there Luis Alberto Diaz drove me through the oldest part of the city where he grew up. It was almost like driving through the poles of the walled city of Ahmedabad. The narrow streets were very clean and tidy. Then, without stopping Luis drove me through the most modern down town area of the city full of sky scrapers of 4 and 5 star hotels and international banks. They proclaimed that Panama is predominantly a tourist-driven economy.

The National Shrine of Our Lady was situated in the heart of the down town amidst skyscrapers. It is a very big ancient Church. It must have been the biggest structure when it was built. But now the huge church is dwarfed by sky scraper hotels and banks and other commercial buildings all around it.

Adjoining the Shrine is the Claritian Fathers' three storey-building. Luis took me there, where he had arranged accommodation for me and two other Congress delegates from India. Fr. Samuel Cruz, CMF the Superior of the house opened the door for us as Luis parked his car and called the superior on his phone.

Fr. Samuel greeted Luis as a close friend and welcomed me warmly in Spanish. He was delighted that I responded to him in Spanish. But I told him that I know only a little Spanish and my Spanish is very much coloured by Italian which I knew well some 40 years back.

Fr. Samuel as a very gracious host took me and Luis to a room in the second floor after showing me first the house chapel in the first floor. The small room with a table, chair and a bed was self-contained with an attached both room. After putting on the light Fr. Samuel was going on to put on the air condition, which I told him not to start as I did want AC.

Fr. Samuel then took both of us to the refectory on the ground floor. As there was no cook or servant he himself made 3 cups of coffee and brought out snacks. He told me that supper will be ready at 7 pm in the refectory. After a long chat in the refectory Fr. Samuel went out for his ministry and Luis took me to my room to make sure that, I do not get lost in the house before reaching to my 2nd floor room.

Before leaving me in the room Luis told me that late that night he would bring the other two Indian delegates to the house Fr. Francis Arackal and Mr. Anton Akkara. But I can go to sleep after supper as I am still tired of long journey and that he would come on the next day morning at 9.30 AM to take the 3 of us for Sunday Mass in his parish, lunch and exposure programme.

The next day October 29th was cold and raining. Light cold shower was enough to dampen one's spirit. But I was excited because as announced that Sunday and Monday were kept for exposure programme for interested foreign delegates. So Luis came at 9.30 AM and took the 3 Indian

delegates to an ancient Church first for Sunday Solemn Mass in Spanish. I could follow the mass prayers in Spanish but not much of the homily except the references to the Gospel of the day. Then we visited the Church museum. The museum had Mass vestments, statue, crosses and other materials from the time of Spanish migration to Panama in the 16th century onwards.

From the Museum Luis drove us to a hotel for lunch. We entered in one hotel in a crowded area. But it was not the Restaurant reserved for us as others in the exposure programme had reached another hotel and were waiting for us. It was about 2 PM when we reached the restaurant reserved for our lunch with other foreign delegates.

The food was okay though some of like me were not able to connect the name and the food served at table. It was more a time for getting introduced to one another and knowing and sharing one another's interest. After the meal our guide drove us through some land marks of the city. There were some yearly celebration of singing and playing a plethora of musical instruments by school children in their uniform and many others. At the end of the day, I was dead tired and slept well immediately after supper.

October 30th was another day of exposure. Luis came at 9 AM sharp and drove the three of us from India to Panama University department of communication. I was amazed to observe the interaction between the professors and the students almost like pals. While a few students continued doing what they were doing seriously others joined their professors in exposing to us their activities and studies at the department of media communications. The staff personnel and students together conduct radio programme, broadcast news and produce and publish a weekly newspaper for wide distribution.

The afternoon meal was in University mess. We joined that staff personnel-queue and could choose vegetarian or non-vegetarian dishes. I choose sea food and other items. Since often I am not able to connect the food and its name. I usually choose those dishes which most people take. After lunch we went to visit a popular daily newspaper at Panama. One of the most interest part of the day was the visit the office of the highest circulated daily at Panama "La Prensa" meaning "The Press" and meeting with the Chief Editor Mr. Ronaldo Rodriguez.

The third and last day of exposure was reserved for visiting museums and getting acquainted with Panamian culture and history. The delegates staying in 3 different hotels decided to meet at one hotel and go in a tourist bus to visit museum and other interested places including a typical Panamian village outside Panama city. My companion Anto Akkara and I decided to walk to the hotel. But instead of walking to the hotel straight Anto, a good photographer, took time to short magnificent buildings and other scenarios on the way that by the time we reached the hotel the group has also left the place after waiting 10-15 minutes extra!

On contacting the group leader we were told to take a taxi and reach a museum. We could not communicate well with the first taxi driver. So he brought us back to the hotel from where we started! Then we took a second taxi and negotiating through traffic jams we reached a city museum. But we found that our party was not there! After more phone calls between Anto and the group leader who did not know much English we took a third taxi and after about an hour journey we reached at Panama Canal and discovered that our party was not there but reached a

Panama village far away from the Mira Flores!

Instead of trying to catch up with the group Anto and I decided to visit there the world famous canal. We missed visiting a Panama village. But we were able to have a close look at the functioning of the canal from the visitors' gallery very close to Mira Flores locks. It was a treat that we could see 3 ships being lowered down through 3 locks from 26 meter high canal to the sea level. Two canals are there operating 24 hours a day facilitating about 40 ships a day to pass through Panama Canal between Atlantic Sea and Pacific sea. The unscheduled visit of the Panama Canal on October 30th remains etched in my memory.

The World Congress was solemnly inaugurated in the Auditorium of Panama University on October 2nd morning. The bulk of the audience was the university students and professors. This was clear on the second day morning when I gave the keynote address. There were less than 200 participants of the World Congress in a huge auditorium. I was participating in 12th World Congress of the Press at Panama. There was no World Congress earlier with less than 500 participants! The World Congress at New Delhi in 1986 and at Bangkok in 2007 saw more than 1000 Congress delegates from around the world.

The organizers counted at least 200 participants from Panama itself as two associations of journalists were part of the local organizing committee. But the organizers told us that there were serious difference and tension between the Panamanian President and the journalists' unions as the President wants to continue in the office even after his term gets over while the journalists' union opposed it. Anyway, with less than expected participants the congress continued as scheduled. But on the 3rd day onwards at our request the congress sessions were shifted to a seminar hall. It was interesting to listen to speakers from around the world on the congress theme: "Challenges and Responsibilities Amidst Globalization and Digitalization".

One of the most enriching parts of the congress was interacting with the local people. I think that all the races and cultures are present at Panama and they all co-exist without any problem of colour or creed, languages. The two prominent and leaders of the congress Luis Alberto Diaz and David Lindo were from totally different races and background. But as the World Congress was concerned they were one mind and one heart. They were also loyal and proud citizens of Panama Republic.

On the last day of the Congress interested participants were taken to Panama in two buses by Panama Canal Authority. In the buses we were given miners coats and caps as we were taken to the restricted place to see the new (third and much bigger) canal being built at place from where we could see ships passing through the canal far away at Mira Flores. The Panama Canal Authority invited us for the opening of the 3rd Canal in 2014 together with centenary of Panama Canal operation.

The Award giving function was held in the afternoon of the penultimate day of the Congress. It was the last programme in the Panama University Auditorium. It was a glittering function, thanks to the flash cameras and colourful dresses of ladies in the function. In the whole audiences were composed of three group of people: The awardees, the Award givers and cameramen and women. Even those who did not carry a camera, took photos on their mobiles!

My return journey was very interesting with many stops and meeting a lot of people. Going to Panama non-stop I had changed planes 4 times. On the return trip I changed flights 8 times breaking my journey at 6 places to meet people-friends and relatives. My first stop was at Newark where Ajay, my niece' husband, received me and took me to his house.

In USA first I spend three delightful and restful days with Ajay, Mini and the kids Archana, Navya & Ahana in their spacious home at Kentucky. Mini was at her best as a host and a cook that Ajay requested: "Uncle, please stay a few days more..." Thanks to Ajay I was able to visit famous Fordham University and spent an hour in the University library while Ajay was giving his lecture there. At the end of my journey I found some unaccounted money in me and I traced it back to a Casino where Mini had taken me to give me an experience of gambling. I stopped the game when my small investment was doubled. Mini did not want neither the money which she gave me for gambling nor my gain.

From Kentucky Ajay & Mini drove me to New York and there my friend Victor Macwan took me to meet Mr Hasmukh Shah in his 'Gujarat Times' office. Mr Shah asked me to send my articles to him directly. Then, Victor took me to New Jersey by Metro and then drove me to Newark Airport where we met his wife Albina at work in the airport. We reached their home for a warm cup of tea and snacks. Late that Friday evening my friend Joseph Parmar came and took me to his son's house. Unknown to me Ketan and Ilaben (my student) prepared and I and another special invitee Sr. Ruth enjoyed a homely party with many delicious dishes in the company of their close family people.

On the next day October 12 Joseph Parmar came again and took me to meet Subhash Shah, Editor of 'Gujarat Darpan' magazine in his office. There, again unknown to me Mr Shah had called the members of Gujarat Darpan Sahitya Sabha (literary organization) for a lunch-on meeting with me and I enjoyed sharing about the development of Gujarat with the group. On the way back Joseph took me to visit Thomas Edison's home at Edison to see an exhibition of his life and of many inventions.

That evening as previously announced the Gujarati Catholic Samaj (GCS) of USA organized a Holy Mass at Our Lady of Mt Carmel Church, Woodbridge followed by a meeting and dinner. The GCS of USA meets once in a month. I was very happy to lead the Holy Mass and meet more than 200 Gujarati friends. My friend of 'Jagadishchristian.com' fame subsequently uploaded a two-page report and many photos of the Mass and the meeting. Unfortunately I could not stay for the dinner and a friend and his family also sacrificed the dinner in order to drive me to the airport for my flight to Toronto, which Victor Macwan had generously booked for me.

I was pleasantly surprised to see three friends: Rajnikant, Sunil and Pravin with bouquet of flowers from Gujarati Catholic Parivar of Toronto (GCPT) to welcome me at Toronto airport! Rajnikant called Madhuram Macwan who came immediately as I was to stay with him that night and go to "Shabda Setu" meeting on the next day, Sunday. Another surprise to me was Snehal Makwana joining me and Madhuram to go to Shabda Setu, a literary organization of Gujarati writers in Canada. I had met Snehal in India before my trip to Panama and I did not know that he had reached Canada a few days before me.

In the meeting of just 12 people I spoke about Gujarati Lakhak Mandal (GLM). I also shared with the participants about the Gujarati literature and political situation and also about my Panama talk and experience. Sharing about my writing I showed them my booklet on Jesus, which is in Gujarati and English. The Hindi version then was in the press. At the request of some I dictated the id of my two web sites: www.vpaulsj.org & www.biblegujarat.org. A lady writer Rasheeda A Damani of Toronto immediately gave me Canadian \$ 25 as her life membership fee in GLM.

Back at Madhuras's home I celebrated Holy Mass with his family and close friends involved in the publication of the internet magazine Gujarati Catholic Diaspora (GCD) and Sr Anne John, RJM. In the friendly gathering after the Mass and dinner, I told the friends that I am not a "SJ" (Sub Jananewala, meaning an all knowing person) as they have given me a long list of questions to answer. All the same, our discussions went on past midnight and I enjoyed the sharing.

On the next day afternoon Fr Justin sent a friend to take me to his place for a "Thanksgiving Day Mass with Gujarati Catholics of Toronto in his St David's Parish Church, Maple and a meeting and dinner. I was delighted to meet about 28 Gujarati Catholic families and a few students and enjoyed the whole evening with them. Oct.15 was a free day for me without any programme. But Justin took me to meet some Gujarati friends in their families and took dinner with the family of Paresh & Luisa.

On the next day morning Justin took me to visit and pray in the famous Shrine of Our Lady of Grace at Mary Lake. On the way back we visited Fr Peter in his 'new Rectory' bungalow. Peter is in the process of establishing a new parish and building a new Church. On the way Tony (Arthur Cyril) joined us. Rajnikant & Gaura served a delicious lunch for all in their house, where we also met Munnuben. Then Justin drove me to catch my flight to San Francisco.

My cousin brother, Mathew (Fr Vellankal, Pastor, Holy Spirit Church, Fremont, CA) was at the airport to take me to his parish. Next day he took me first to visit a newly built Cathedral of Christ the Light at Oakland. The Cathedral is unique for its architecture in glass reflecting light and its art works. Then we went to the Jesuit Berkeley University, San Francisco where we met among others Fr John Chathanatt of Vidya Jyoti, Delhi and Fr Binoy of Kerala Province. John showed me his MS of a book on Pope Francis. Mathew took all three of us for homely lunch in an India restaurant.

On the 18th morning I got up at 4 am and while I got ready Mathew prepared coffee and toast at 4.50 for me. Mathew had a Mass that morning. So at 5 am my nephew Joe came from Sunny Valley to drive me to San Francisco airport and gave me a ticket for 7.40 flight to Orange County Airport, Los Angeles and a return ticket for Oct 20th from Long Beach airport to San Francisco; because, as Joe said, "Uncle, Selvan & Shiji (my niece) have high-jacked you for two days". Our earlier arrangement was that Selvan & Shiji would come to Joe's place where I could meet them.

Selvan picked me at the airport. On the way we met Shiji in her office. Selvan prepared a good breakfast and then he drove me to San Diego. There our visit to the exhibition of USS Midway,

the decommissioned aircraft carrier, was memorable experience like my visit to Panama Canal at Panama. USS Midway is like a floating city which had 4,500 navy personnel when it took part in Gulf war. On the deck were 29 restored war planes of different size. While we were there helicopters landed and took off the deck. Self guided audio tour of some 60 exhibits inside the ship was an unforgettable adventure for me.

On the way back we picked up Shiji from her office and at home Shiji and Selvan together prepared a grant dinner in no time. After dinner as Shiji suggested we went for ice cream in famous shopping mall. On the 19th Selvan and Shiji took me to Los Angeles. I was surprised that they knew my friend, Peter Jadav. They have met him in their prayer meetings. In Peter Jadav's house we met his businessman friend, a Malayali Tom Tharayil and his non-Malayali wife. Then we went down town Los Angels where we took lunch from a subway eatery.

Our next stop was at Holy Wood's Walk of Fame. There we walked and mingled with many look-alike heroes and stars of fame. We also visited a Chinese Theatre. Back at home Shiji & Selvan prepared a grant dinner in no time while their friends Joe with his wife and I chatted. We had a delightful evening, sharing and comparing life in India and in USA while enjoying a delicious dinner.

On Sunday 20th morning we went for Mass in a Syro Malabar Church and I joined the priest at the Altar for Con-celebration. My 'two day-long high jacking' happily ended when after an early lunch Selvan and Shiji drove me to Long Beach airport and put me in a 2.30 pm JetBlue flight to San Francisco.

Joe and Soniya came with Johan in baby-sitter to receive me at the airport. At their home, as I told Joe & Soniya, I wanted to rest. I had four restful days playing with Johan or with Soniya's laptop with internet facilities. It was a welcome relief after constant traveling and attending several meetings. The outings were limited to Joe driving me to go for Mass and one day also to Soniya's birthday party with their close family friends in an Indian Hotel.

Then on 24th I left San Francisco, USA for Switzerland to reach Zurich on the 25th. It was my longest single flight of about 14 hours in the air. At Zurich I followed the direction taking even an underground train to go to luggage collection place! Then I took a train to Liestal. Sunny came to pick me up & took me straight to his parish church where a group of Malayali people including my host Reena were saying the Rosary in Malayalam! Reena and Sunny came in two cars to the church so that, if I was tired, Sunny could drive me straight to their home. But I was fresh and happy to join them in their prayer and meet their Malayali friends.

At Sunny & Reena's home they had for me not only a self-contained room but also Sunny's office room with computer and internet facilities for my use. But I did not have much time there as on 26th they took me for Malayalam Mass followed by a graduation celebration of a young man turning 18 years-old, who is a friend of their son, Rinson. Late that evening they were all going for a dance programme at Zurich in which their daughter Reeja was also a dancer. Since I was tired I opted out and they drove me back home and they proceeded to Zurich. On Sunday and Monday Sunny drove me to the famous Marian Shrine at Mariastein for Mass and I concelebrated the Eucharist with the monks in German! On Monday after Mass we met Abbot

Lucas whom I have met on previous visits and he remembered it.

After the meeting on that sunny day we went for a long walk against strong wind through a small road between fields and returned home for lunch. On 28th, after all have gone out after breakfast, Reena and I went for a walk in a nearby park. Reena's nurse-friend joined us in the park. After a few rounds on the track I went to try to exercise with various gym equipments in the park while Reena and her friend continued walking more rounds. Back home I worked on the computer writing a few letters and putting down some points for articles in Gujarati. I also finished reading Joseph Parmar's manuscript on Bible and drafted a long letter to him. Reerja prepared a good meal and we chatted at lunch as the other three in the house were out at their jobs.

Got up early on 29th morning and got ready to go to the airport. Reena prepared coffee and breakfast for me and Sunny too joined me with a cup of coffee as he has offered me to drive all the way to Zurich so that carrying my luggage I need not take the train which needs to be changed half-way to Zurich airport. I had an eventless journey to Mumbai and then a night flight to Ahmedabad reaching Gurjarvani very early morning on 30th. As arranged, Snehal came to pick me up from the airport.

Back in CISS Office in the morning on 30th as usual I plunged into clearing my table of pending materials. My body being accustomed to long travels I could work whole day in the office. There was also pressure of urgent work like pending postal mails to attend and preparing articles about my Panama experience. Eventually I wrote 4 articles on my Panama experiences in Gujarati and published them in literary magazines like 'Kumar'.

I also needed urgently two articles on Christmas 2013 and New Year 2014. Usually three times a year on occasions like Diwali, Good Friday and Christmas I write special letters & timely articles and send them to some 400 students, friends, well-wishers and to some newspapers. I am happy that the biggest daily in Gujarati, Divya Bhaskar, with more than ten thousand circulation, publishes my articles on Good Friday, Diwali and Christmas every year.

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