

AND HE WAS A MUSLIM...

Fr Varghese Paul, S.J.

I remember that day very well. It was the night of March 31, 2002, Easter Sunday. I had reached Patan late the previous night where I went to see my friend Fr. Tonny Munnu, who was staying alone in Patan, and to celebrate with him the big feast, Jesus' resurrection, on the next day, Sunday.

In the late evening of Resurrection Sunday Fr Tony and I met some Christian families of Siddhpur and close by places. We celebrated the resurrection feast with them. Fr. Munnu tired from the morning and evening liturgies of the resurrection gave me the keys of his jeep on our return journey. Leaving the Siddhpur–Mehsana highway we came about five km on the Patan road and the accelerator of the jeep suddenly gave way. As it was a very dark March night, I took the jeep to the extreme left of the road. The place was desolate. Neither Fr. Munnu nor I could understand why the accelerator stopped functioning. What was to be done now?

We were very far from our Patan residence. We had gone more than five km from the highway where some help could be possible. It was so late in the night that the Patan-Siddhpur bus services had also stopped. Occasionally a motorcycle or a car passed by. Once a tractor full of labours also passed us by. We tried to stop every vehicle passing by waving our hands but not a single vehicle stopped, because it was a bad time.

The communal riots and massacres of thousands had taken places in the whole of Gujarat after the train burning on 27 February at Godhara, in which 59 Hindu pilgrims were burnt alive in a compartment of the “ Sabarmati Express”. Everywhere thousands of homeless Muslims were residing in relief camps to save their lives from the massacre around. More than 2000 Muslims had been killed in the communal massacre. The ruins and destruction worth crores were scattered all over Gujarat.

At last, Fr Munnu told me that he would go back about five km towards the highway and look for some mechanic to help us. While he walked towards the highway, I tried to stop all the passing vehicles. About ten or twelve vehicles must have passed in an hour. At last a motorcyclist came close to me and stopped.

I explained to him about the non-functioning of the accelerator. He put the light close to the jeep's engine and examined it. Then he said that the string of the accelerator was broken.

“Sir, don't worry. My farm is close by. I am going there to start the pump to irrigate the paddy fields. The three-phase electricity is available at night only in our farms. My farm-workers are there. Perhaps they may fall asleep without starting the pump. I will go there and bring a torch-light and my tractor's mechanic. We shall get your jeep repaired,” the Good Samaritan comforted me. Then he went on his motorcycle and returned with his mechanic in about 10 minutes.

Both of them worked about half an hour a connected that broken string, and then said assuringly that temporarily I would have no problem in driving. They also advised me to take the jeep to a garage the next day.

I opened my briefcase and took out a Rs.100/- note and held it to him, thanking him profusely for helping me in a time of crisis. But he refused to take the money from me. There was a satisfaction on his face of helping a needy person in a crisis. My heart was also rejoicing on meeting a sympathetic man.

“Sir, you start the jeep and go without any worry.” The Samaritan said once more.

“I am Fr Varghese Paul and am coming from a Christian institution of Patan.” I said and, for the first time I shook hands with him and also introduced myself to him.

“My companion, Fr Tony Munnu has gone to the Mehsana Highway in search of a mechanic. He must be coming now. I will wait for him. But you can go, there is no need now to wait for me.” I added and thanked him once more.

He informed me that his name was “Yusufbhai”. Before knowing his name I was sure that he was a Muslim by his appearance. His attire along with his cap and beard were that of a typical Muslim. I told him, “You can go. I am OK now.” But he waited with me talking with sympathy.

We must have waited about 30 minutes when, Fr Munnu returned with a mechanic on his motorcycle. The mechanic saw that the work was done properly on a temporary basis. The disrupted string was tied tightly, so while driving I noticed that it was not possible to drive the jeep in slow speed without using the brake. Fortunately, I had not to drive slowly because there was hardly any traffic on the road nor any animals at night on the road.

While talking to the people I sometimes hear very negative remarks about the Muslim men and women after the Godhra massacre and the communal holocaust that followed. Many people hate Muslims and their religion, Islam. But after my experience of the 31st March 2002 night on the Siddhpur-Patan road, if I had any prejudices against Muslims and their religion, it had vanished totally. Not only that, but now I have more love and respect than before towards Muslims and their religion.

Why was it that no other traveller who passed by on that road dared to stop his vehicle to help me at that time in Gujarat except that Muslim brother? At that time the communal riots had spread all over the state. The incidents of attacking and killing people of other faiths even by friends and neighbours also took place. So the people were afraid of unacquainted people and followers of different religions.

So a person like me in real trouble at night was left without help on the road. No one came to my help, but that brave Muslim brother. I believe that his religion had inspired him to help an unknown person like me. Islam has made an earnest request in the Koran to help other people like one's own brother especially if the person is in trouble. The Prophet Mohammad says, “The lives which are created by Allah

are His own family". So all the people (irrespective of religions) are brothers and sisters.

[Muslims consider themselves as heirs of Abraham's son Ismael whose story is there in the Bible and the Koran. The Bible narrates the story of throwing out Ismael from his own house along with his mother Hagar. At that time Ismael and Hagar went to the desert Bersheba. There she saw her child Ismael crying for water. Hagar put the child under the shade of a tree and went a little further saying, "I don't want to see the child dying." She was sitting there crying.

[The Bible says, "The Lord heard the voice of the child, and the messenger of God shouted and said from the sky, "What has happened to you, Hagar? Do not be afraid. The Lord has heard the voice of your son from where he is. Arise, take your son and protect him in your hands, because I am going to create a great people from him." Then the Lord opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went there and filled water in the leather bag and made her son drink. The Lord helped the boy and he grew up."

As the Christians consider themselves the heirs of Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah; the Muslims consider themselves the heirs of Ismael, the son of Abraham and Hagar. In the same way that the road had helped Hagar and her son Ismael in a time of crisis sending messengers in the Bersheba desert, the Koran orders Muslims to help people in need. I am happy to confess that Islam came to my help. Today Muslims and their religion are hated by many people. Sometimes, not a religion but the prejudices and misunderstandings about it detain us from building relationships with the followers of other religion.

I was aware that the feeling of brotherhood among Muslims is more than in any followers of other religions. I experienced the brotherhood of Muslims and profited from the feelings of brotherhood on that memorable day.

I feel happy that a Muslim brother had helped me as a human being. When he stopped his motorcycle near me in that time of trouble, there was nothing in my appearance that to show I was a Christian. Even my jeep did not have any sign of being a vehicle of a Christian institution. Neither did he ask me my name, surname, community or address before or after helping me. He only helped me as a human being. If there was a Hindu brother or a person who considers Muslims as his deadly opponent, that Muslim brother would have helped him whole-heartedly. There is humaneness in the common people. There is love and humaneness in common people but not hate.