

FR TED BOWLING AS I KNOW HIM
(The Patriarch of Bible Correspondence Courses)
Fr Varghese Paul, SJ

I first met the Jesuit priest, Fr Theodore Bowling as my professor of basic science in the class room of Jnana Deepa Vidyapeth (JDV) in June 1972. As the days, weeks and months advanced Fr Ted (as he is lovingly called) revealed himself more outside the classroom as a lover of garden and nature. Every day after tea in the evening he would be working on the barren rocky ground of De Nobili College.

Together with a few Jesuit seminary students like me Fr Ted would dig pits in the rocky ground fill them with new mud and manure and then he would plant trees. Thanks to Fr Ted's love of trees and nature today the sprawling De Nobili College ground is green as well as colourful with a variety of trees and flowers. Fr Ted still continues to work in the compound and nurturing the trees.

Fr Bowling, with his teaching profession and with his hobby of nurturing trees, is a versatile person with many other loves and commitments. His first love is the proclamation of Jesus Christ to the people of other faiths. Fr Bowling was born in Loursville, USA on May 4, 1924 as the fifth child of two sisters and 3 brothers in a pious Catholic family. After graduation he entered the Society of Jesus of Chicago Province. His zeal for evangelization brought him to Patna, India in 1951 with M.Sc in Chemistry. He studied theology and got ordained a priest on March 4, 1955 at De Nobili College Pune.

Fr Ted came to India to be a missionary. But he got only a few months to work as a missionary in the traditional sense. He worked as a missionary with youthful energy at Chuhari in Northern Bihar in the beginning months of 1958 and of 1959. In between he did his tertianship.

Then, being a bright student of science with a postgraduate degree Fr Ted was appointed to teach natural sciences at De Nobili College, Pune in 1959. He taught the subject for a record number of 44 years till his retirement from teaching in 2003.

From the beginning of his stay at De Nobili College Fr Bowling has been associated with direct proclamation ministry of Fr Peter Sontag who started the correspondence course on Jesus Christ and the Bible in 1948 and later founded the Institute for Home Study (IHS) at Pune. The correspondence courses were run from the premises of De Nobili College.

In early 1960 Fr Bowling took over the direction of the correspondence courses when Fr Sontag suffered a heart attack. The entire responsibility for IHS Pune and the correspondence course ministry fell on Fr Bowling's shoulders when Fr Sontag died in 1963.

Fr Bowling's zeal for evangelization and love for the correspondence course ministry led him to organize the first National Meeting of all people in correspondence course ministry during the

Eucharistic Congress at Mumbai in 1964. Then onwards there was no looking back for Fr Bowling as correspondence course works were concerned.

Travelling extensively in India whenever he was free from teaching Fr Bowling met Directors of Catholic Enquiry Centres at their places, guided and encouraged them in the ministry. Over the years he organized six national meetings of the Directors of the CECs. Then in 1986 he founded the Association of Catholic Enquiry Centres India (ACECI) during a national meeting of CECs at Goa and he was elected as the first (Founder) President of the Association.

From the Goa meeting onwards I got the opportunity to work closely with Fr Bowling as I was the Secretary of the Association for two terms and then its Treasurer while he continued to be the President of the Association.

Fr Bowling believes in a democratic way of functioning and delegates responsibilities of the office bearers of the Association with complete trust in the people who work with him. Fr Bowling gave me 3 principles to follow in my works as Treasurer and the Executive Secretary of the ACECI National Office at New Delhi : Responsibility, Accountability and Transparency. These principles have helped me immensely in my works and I followed them scrupulously as I handled lakhs of rupees of the Association in setting up and running the National Office for 8 years.

While directing IHS, Pune and carrying the responsibilities of ACECI as its President, Fr Bowling's evangelical zeal led him to other fields. He started the Family Welfare Centre of Pune Diocese in 1973. The Centre promoted the Natural Family Planning and taught the Billings Ovulation Method as viable substitute to family people when there was a government sponsored mass sterilization drive. He continued to direct the Centre till 2001.

Fr Bowling was also one of the founding members of National Family Planning Association of India in 1970 together with Fr Gallagher, SJ of Patna, Dr Fr Joe Menezes of Mumbai and Dr Sr Catherine Bernard of Trichi. He was the Treasurer of the Association from 1975 to 1991.

A mild heart attack and surgery some 12 years back have slightly slowed down Fr Bowling. But he has continued most of his engagements as before like running IHS Pune, editing "Prem Marg" monthly, etc. He continued as the President of ACECI till his voluntary resignation in 2004. But the Association, appreciating his zeal and long service for correspondence course works in India, has made him life-time Patron of ACECI.

Recently when De Nobili College celebrated Fr Bowling's Golden Jubilee in the Priesthood, I was privileged to be invited and attend the celebrations. I was not surprised when the staff, students of De Nobili College and a few select invitees from Pune City poured out their hearts in words of love and appreciation for Fr Bowling and his services.

"Fr Bowling is a person of convictions and commitment and is hardworking," said a student of philosophy, Bro. Chinnappa. Prof. Geroje Karuvelil of JDV described Fr Bowling as "a person who really made God his destiny and his whole life is a witness to it."

For me Fr Bowling is an inspiring model of a person for others with hard work and deep spirituality. He is a person close to God, close to his fellow men and women and close to the nature. Fr Bowling sees his whole life as that of a teacher. "My life as a priest for the past 50 years has been primarily that of a teacher of one kind or another..." said Fr Bowling in his Jubilee Mass. Then quoting Jesus' instruction to Peter to "feed my lamps...", Fr Bowling said, "In general to feed means here to care for, to instruct, to teach, to lead, on the material as well as the spiritual level. That spells out the role of a priest, out of love to serve all God's people.. but perhaps in a special way the weakest and the most vulnerable."

These words of Fr Bowling reveals his life as a Jesuit Priest - his values, his convictions and above all his deep spirituality. I am enriched by my association with this simple and at the same time a great Jesuit, Fr Theodore Bowling.