

DR. JOHN VALLANATTAM – A VERSATILE PERSONALITY
REMINISCES OF A FRIEND
Fr Varghese Paul, SJ

I have known Fr. (Dr.) John Vallamattam for more than 30 years. As friends and colleagues in print media ministry I have known Fr John as the most versatile personality. When I met him last in April 2005, he was hale and hearty except for his forgetfulness. So it was a big shock for me to hear that he passed away on September 19 at the age of 74.

I remember my first meeting with him in the Bishop's House at Kothamangalam in December 1974. I had gone there to meet my uncle Msgr. Mathew Vellankal who was then the Vicar General. I was going to study journalism in London and my uncle had done his doctoral studies in Rome. So I had gone to seek his guidance. It was getting dark when I got out of uncle's room. I was going to walk more than a kilometer to the bus stand to catch a bus home. Fr John was then the Chancellor of the Diocese of Kothamangalam. I do not remember if my uncle asked him or John himself volunteered to drive me to the bus stand. Anyway, I was deeply impressed by a high official of the diocese taking me in his jeep. He was then also a Professor of Newman College, Thodupuzha and the Secretary of Kerala College Management Association as well as the Secretary of Kerala School Managers' Association.

Later I came to know that Fr. John Vallamattam was also then the Founder-Editor of Deivarajyam – a Malayalam monthly of the Diocese. As a versatile priest, he always held a number of different portfolios. When John was Principal of Nirmala College, Muvattupuzha he was also the Senate Member of Kerala University, Trivandrum first and later of Gandhiji University, Kottayam.

Our friendship began to blossom in 1979 when both of us reached New Delhi, he as the Additional Deputy Secretary General of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) and I as the Executive Director of South Asian Religious News (SAR News).

I was a novice in the field in New Delhi, hiring an office for SAR News first at Janakpuri and then at Greater Kailash II in the barsatti of St Paul's House. But John was well acquainted with the Church people as well as the politicians in New Delhi.

He was one of the three people who helped me most in setting up and launching SAR News as its Executive Director and Chief Editor in February 1981. The other two were the then Jesuit Provincial of India, Fr. Ambrose D'Mello who gave me accommodation in the Jesuit community at Jor Bagh and Fr. James Tong, SJ who was the Founder-Secretary of Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI) and also the President of Catholic News of India (CNI) and of Communication for Social Development. He introduced me to many Catholic media practitioners in the capital.

With the help of John and the other two I organized a number of social gathering of Catholic Journalists and writers in the capital city.

I left SAR News and New Delhi in April 1983 but John continued holding many important posts there. While John was the Additional Deputy Secretary General of CBCI, he founded “Catholic India” in 1980 and continued editing it till 1983. While he was editor, I invited him and he readily joined the Indian Catholic Press Association (ICPA).

In whatever post John was appointed or in whatever job John took upon himself he plunged himself totally in it that he always did an excellent job. His versatile personality and his knowledge like a walking encyclopedia made him a tremendous asset to any association he joined. No wonder that shortly after joining ICPA John was twice elected as its President in 1983 and again 1986 for three-year terms.

In 1987 my successor as Executive Director and Chief Editor of SAR News, Fr. M. J. Edwin of Kottar Diocese left, the burden fell on John’s shoulders as he was then the President of ICPA under which SAR News functioned.

Fr. Edwin was a good Editor but not a man for organization and administration. Apart from his editorial experience John brought those two qualities to SAR News and the News agency shook off its stagnancy and began to grow under John’s stewardship.

During those years I was very close to John as I was a field correspondent for SAR News and also an Executive Body member of ICPA. John recognized that the reporters in the field formed the artery of SAR News and boldly raised the remuneration to the reporters for their published stories to Rs.8/- a line.

In 1987-88 the CBCI and National Advisory Council (NAC) asked ICPA to conduct a feasibility study of a national daily or a weekly by the Catholic Church. John and I were in the committee. We submitted the report that a daily is not feasible because of enormous expenses and because the Catholics are scattered all over India. But the committee unanimously agreed that a national secular weekly run by the Catholic Church is feasible and is the need of the hour. The committee submitted its feasibility study to NAC and CBCI but the two national level Church bodies did nothing about it.

But, what CBCI and NAC could not do, John did single-handedly! He was a go-getter. He launched the Indian Currents weekly from New Delhi as its Founder–Editor in 1988 and run it for a number of years spending from his pockets and from his patrimony.

As Editor of Indian Currents John was awarded the Best Editor of Small and Medium Newspaper Award in 1990. Then, in 1993 John also received AIACHE Award for Eminent Ecumenist Educator. John’s versatile personality is also seen in that 1997 he was awarded the Dalit Sahitya Academy Fellowship.

But John’s financial resources were limited. When he realized that the CBCI and NAC were not interested except in extending their moral support to Indian Currents, and that he could not continue it without adequate finance, he found Dr. Xavier Vadakkekara and his Capuchin Congregation who were willing to take up the challenges of running Indian Currents. John generously gave Indian Currents to the Capuchins without any compensation of the lakhs of rupees he spent on founding and nourishing Indian Currents for several years.

In 1994 John joined CBCI again as its first Public Relation Secretary. As a Public Relation officer he gave CBCI the much needed exposure to the secular world and he also put the political leaders in touch with CBCI officials.

While John was P. R. Secretary, I was visiting Delhi for 10 days every month as the Executive Secretary in-charge of the National Office of the Association of Catholic Enquiry Centres India (ACECI). So we used to meet once or twice every month. I often consulted him for a weekly newspaper column articles I used to write for a Gujarati daily. John as a walking encyclopedia always knew the information I wanted or knew the source from where I could get it.

As we were both council members of the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) we had opportunities to travel together and even share same hotel accommodations.

I remember vividly a trip we made together to Poland in 1996 to attend a UCIP Council Meeting at Crakov. From Delhi we flew to Frankfurt and then we travelled by train as we had taken Euro rail passes. I had known the simple life-style of John. But on the trip he impressed me more than ever as he hardly spent any money on food nor did he allow me to spend for him. His luggage was the smallest of all the council participants and yet he dressed well in simple Khadi pants and shirts or in clerical suit.

I believe that John was one of the most internationally travelled Indian. For studies, meetings and conferences and also for tourist purposes John has visited 75 countries in all continents except Australia.

His last trip abroad was to Germany. Years ago he had done his doctoral studies at Wilhelm's University Muenster in Germany. From March 4, 1999 John worked as Assistant Parish Priest at Speckhorn in Germany till he found that his forgetfulness was giving him problems to carry on his pastoral ministry. So he returned to India.

Back in India in 2001 John continued his active ministry as Chaplin at Sacred Heart Rehabilitation Centre, Madakathanam in Kothamangalam Diocese till the day of his death.

Today I gratefully remember one day we spent together in my home at Kerala in 2002. The occasion was the celebration my priestly silver jubilee. On the eve I went to S. H. Rehabilitation Centre and took John home. I shared my room with him as we have shared hotel rooms during international meetings of UCIP. The next day after the Jubilee Mass in the parish some 100 priests and nuns and many more relatives and friends came home. Fr. John as the Chief Guest during a short felicitation function gave a beautiful speech about our long association. I could not believe that a person handicapped with forgetfulness and memory problems could make such an enlightening and inspiring speech!

Sr. Joviet, the in-charge of S. H. Rehabilitation Centre told me on phone that Fr. John had a normal morning on September 19. At 10 AM he came to the chapel in the centre to expose the Blessed Sacrament, but returned to his room without going up to the altar. Then, she heard some loud and strange noises from his self-contained room, close to the chapel. She and some inmates found him sitting on the commode unable to get up or speak. They made him sleep on his bed and called for ambulance from their hospital at Mylacompu close by. But John as a man in a

hurry did not wait for the ambulance but flew to his final destination and eternal bliss. He died in his shoes.

My brother Vincent told me that there were hundreds of priests and nuns and nearly a thousand bereaved relatives and friends for John's burial service at his home parish at Thottakara on September 21.

At the death of Dr. John Vallamattam the Church in India has lost a pioneer on many fronts and a great print media communicator. I have lost a friend, a philosopher and a guide. May he rest in peace.