

WITH FRIENDS AND NATURE

Fr. Varghese Paul, S.J.

Albert Einstein once said? Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better. I experienced the truth of Einstein's saying when I visited Yosemite National Park in California State, USA with three friends. The visit took me not only close to the nature but also to the past and even to pre-history in the company of Frs. Mathew Vellankal, Joseph Parekkatt and Shaji Jose!

In the beginning of June 2007 I participated in the World Congress of the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) at Sherbrooke, Canada. Then, at the invitation of Fr. Mathew Vellankal, my first cousin brother, I traveled to USA.

Fr. Mathew picked me up from San Francisco airport at 3.30 PM on June 14 and drove me to his Holy Spirit Church at Fremont. I knew that my cousin brother as the Parochial Administrator of one of the biggest parishes of Diocese of Oakland, is a very busy Pastor. Yet he told that he has planned a long trip for me to Fresno to meet his friends Mathew and family on Sunday evening. His plans for me included a visit to Yosemite National Park on the next day.

As I am always eager to meet new people, visit new places and learn new things, I eagerly endorsed Mathew's plans for me. So after all Sunday services in the Parish Church on June 17 we set out in Mathew's car with two friends: Fr. Joseph Parekkatt and Fr. Shaji Jose. After a three hour-long drive through free ways often crossing orchids and green farm lands we reached the house of our hosts Mathew and Soly at Clovis close to Fresno.

Our hosts were eagerly waiting for us with their two kids Tomy and Tojo and other friends including Mary, a senior nurse and benefactor of many priests. The two-storied bungalow had more than enough space to accommodate four of us, priests. But apart from the company of friends, our main attraction was the specious backyard with a large swimming pool and lawn surrounded by fruit trees like cherries, plums and banana as well as a vegetable garden.

After tea we swam in the swimming pool and played basketball in the pool with a water-ball trying to throw it in to the basket fixed on a tall pole on the edge of the swimming pool. Meanwhile our hosts and Mary fixed sumptuous dinner and carried eatables and cold drinks to the pool-side so that we could take a break from swimming and water games.

We all enjoyed the evening thoroughly with long chat and delicious dinner at the pool-side prepared and served by our generous hosts and Mary. It was great to have Kerala type of meal including tapioca and fish, rice, sambhar and vegetable dishes. Spending a few hours with them I was happy to see that while maintaining their family values, our hosts were also well integrated in the American way of life and culture.

After retiring at 11 pm I was up early in the next morning and I was surprised that when I came to the dining room, coffee and breakfast were ready on the table.

Soly was already busy cooking. It was a great surprise for me to see that Soly together with Mary has also prepared lunch packets for us. They neatly made four silver foil packets and draped in newspaper and put them in a thermo-cool box.

At 6.30 we said good-bye to our hosts and headed for Yosemite National Park. Yosemite is about 65 miles from Fresno. The National Park is amazing for me for a number of reasons. First, as we drove up to the Yosemite National Park from Freeway 14 we could see most varied and scenic panoramas of pine trees on both side of the road. The park authorities claim that? Over 1000 species of wildflowers and 37 kinds of trees are native to Yosemite.

Second, as we reached Mariposa Grove we saw close to the parking area giant sequoia trees. They were the biggest trees I have ever seen. A guard told us that the organized Tram Tours through the wild forest would begin only by 9.30 or 10 am when large number of tourists arrives in the park. So we decided to take a walk through the trek-path of the pine forest.

Through the mile long trekking we saw numerous gigantic sequoia trees. At different points of trekking path there are information boards indicating grizzly sequoia trees of even 500 to 3000 years old! With some sequoias with 20 to 30 or more feet base and with more than 400 feet height, the information claimed that they are the largest existing trees in the world! It was enchanting nature at its best!

One sequoia tree fallen across the trekking path is cut and removed the width of the path. The fallen tree trunk's circumference is so very big, in fact, much higher than a man's height that Fr. Shaji said. With one sawed round piece we can make a one-piece dining table for a big family!

In the case of another gigantic sequoia tree, the dead part of the base is cut and removed that trekking path goes through it. The gap is so big that even a car can pass through it. Yet the tree is alive on both sides and it stands majestic some 350 feet high! The trek reminds me of John Muir, the first protector of the Yosemite region who said, the clearest way into the universe is through a forest of wilderness.

A third amazing sight is the fantastic view of rocks and water falls which we watched from the glacier point of the Park. We could see the Vernal Fall and Novada Fall at a distance. The giant rocks like Sentinal Dome and El Capitan reveal the story of Yosemite's geological past. The polished domes and jagged peaks of the higher country tell the story of not only past history but also pre-history of millions of years of glaciers and rock formation!

After feasting our eyes with gigantic rocks and waterfalls from drizzling heights and experiencing a sense of awe, Mathew drove us to Yosemite Valley. It was formed by glacial erosion over hundreds of thousands of years. The scenic valley is 7 miles long and 1 mile wide at its widest part.

Today the valley is covered with pine and black oak trees. The Valley has an (American) Indian Village of Ahwahnee. The history says that the Indians populated the valley some 6000 years before European and American explorers and entrepreneurs drove them away from their habitat during the mid 19th century!

From a parking area of the valley we walked a few minutes to the bottom of Bridalveil Fall. We could see the water flowing out at a height of 620 feet. But very little water flowed down as the water hitting the rocks on the way got scattered in the air and the wind drove the tiny water-particles like snow-flakes and mists. No wonder people call it Spirit of the Puffing Wind?.

Our last and a very enjoyable item was our packed lunch from our generous hosts Mathew and Soly, and also a choice bottle of wine from Mathew our tour host and guide. We took the lunch on a beautiful spot on Merced River which runs through the valley. We sat on small rocks touching the river water that I could wash my hands in the water without getting up from the rock!

The noise of the running water together with chirping of birds provided us with background music. In the midst of entralling scenic beauty of the place we all enjoyed the meal. So I was not surprised when Fr. Parekatt said that, it was the most tasty and enjoyable picnic lunch which I have relished in my life.

Perhaps it was life-changing moments like this in the lap of nature John Muir wrote, as long as I live, I'll hear waterfalls and birds and wind sing. I'll interpret the rocks, learn the language of flood, storm and the avalanche. I'll acquaint myself with the glaciers and wild gardens, and get as near the heart of the world as I can.(Contact: ciss@satyam.net.in)