

WITH GUJARATI FRIENDS IN LOS ANGELOS, USA
Fr. Varghese Paul, S.J.

This has been an exceptional year for me; and what more, I am happy about it. I usually celebrate my birthday with my Jesuit community and friends at Ahmedabad. But this year, thanks to the insistence of my niece Mini and her husband and my friend Ajay, I celebrated my birthday in their house at Bridgeport, Connecticut, USA. I was on my way to attend the World Congress of the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) at Sherbrooke, Canada in June 2007.

The birthday celebrations were special this year because it was celebrated not only on May 31 but also on the following Saturday and Sunday with friends who could not come on May 31, a working day. The memory of my 65th birthday will linger long with me with the beautiful gift of a digital Sony camera and a beautiful shirt from Mini and Ajay.

This year was also exceptional for me because I was able to visit USA again after the UCIP World Congress and meet first time my Gujarati friends who knew me as the editor of DOOT or the author of many books.

At Fremont after UCIP World Congress, I enjoyed the love and hospitality of my first cousin Fr. Mathew Vellankal. He introduced me to his Gujarati friend, Mr. Bharat Shah, a businessman. He came from San Francisco to see me. Mr. Shah is an ardent follower and promoter of Swadhyay Parivar and Mrs. Dhanashree Shreenivas Talwalkar, the present head of the Parivar. He wanted me to take to San Francisco and meet many Gujarati friends there but there was no time as I was leaving later that day to Los Angeles.

In conversation with Bharatbhai I told him about Swadhyay's services and activities in India and I also mentioned about the clubbing to death Mr. Pankaj Trivedi at Ahmedabad, who was a follower of Swadhyay but asked for financial accountability of the movement. He knew about it and said that Swadhyay has been wrongly implicated in the case. I gifted him a copy of my book 'Jeevan Sangeet'.

My stay with Fr. Mathew gave me the opportunity to participate in the parish ministry including celebrating the Eucharist and preaching in all six Masses on one Saturday and Sunday! Participating in other parish activities and visiting and having dinner with two families of the parish gave me some experiences of parish life. Then, as part of the parish 'Bible Week' the two talks by biblical scholar Fr. Thomas P. Bonacci, C.P., from Pittsburgh were very enlightening.

My next destination was Los Angeles. Fr Ashok Vaghela, S.J. of my community back at Ahmedabad, studying at Loyola Marymount University, had arranged for his friend Mr. Jonathan Vasaiwala to pick me up from the airport.

During the two days spent with Jonathan, Pushpaben and their son Robin I enjoyed not only the Gujarati meals prepared by Pushpaben and the use of Robin's computer but also their many friends who came to see us. In all the phone calls, which Jonathan and Pushpaben made or received, one news item was that the author of many books and former editor of DOOT was in the house.

The couples' warm, loving nature and hospitality welcomed many people in their house and gave me the opportunity to meet and make many Gujarati friends. Jonathan also took me in his car, in spite of his knee trouble to visit a few Christian families like the house of Ushaben E Christi in Anaheim Village. In one such visit in the house of Floraben, Rajnikant, Indira and their child Mary, Floraben also invited Fr (Dr.) Jacob Kattackal of St. Thomas Apostle Syro-Malabar Catholic Church at Santa Anna, CA 92703 so that I could meet him as we both originally hailed from Kerala.

Jonathan also took me to visit Crystel Cathedral, an architectural marvel in steel and glass works. John Macwan, a retired teacher from Petlad accompanied us in the visit. Then, Jonathan took us to a Chinese restaurant and ordered the Management's special dish and none of us could finish the food. After lunch we visited Light House, a Christian bookshop also at Long Beach. The shop has not only bibles and books but also a lot of items as a gift-shop. Jonathan told me to pick up anything I wanted. But I was happy that I was able to get out of a bookshop without picking up a book! In my suitcase I had more literature than I could carry!

In the evening while I finished answering e-mail letters on Robin's computer, Fr. Ashok came from his tour of La Viegas and Grant Crain. Jonathan drove us with his wife Pushpaben to Amrut Macwan's house for a short gathering and Holy Mass. While I led the Eucharist in Amrut's family recalling the first Christians who gathered in families for Eucharist, Fr Ashok read the Sunday Gospel and preached a beautiful homily on John the Baptist saying that today we need to live like John in a forthright and humble way.

After the Mass we all relished a good Gujarati meal prepared by Amrut's wife (name ?). Then Amrut drove Ashok and me to Loyola Marymount University (LMU) campus in Los Angeles where Ashok had already arranged a room for me for the night. Exhausted from a long day I slept soundly.

On Sunday morning Ashok introduced me to the fellow Jesuits of LMU community and we took breakfast in the community refectory. Then, Ashok took me for a tour of LMU by foot and then in a car to reach different areas and institutions of the sprawling campus.

LMU is beautifully situated on a mount overlooking the Pacific Ocean not far from the Los Angeles Airport. From LMU Ashok drove me to Shantilal and Alice Jadav's house where Fr. Vinayak, Jadav, Induben Rao and others were waiting for us.

I found Alice and the visitors from Ahmedabad very busy cooking and preparing a sumptuous Gujarati lunch. Shantilal enquired about my writing and books. He was happy to know that I have written 26 books and published them through secular publishers. We all enjoyed the Gujarati meal like a family lunch with old friends.

In the evening Ashok had arranged to visit Mrs. Jenine Veraldi, a friend and benefactor of Gurjarvani. We met her on a wheel-chair in the nursing home Singing Oaks Retirement Community at Monrovia in the suburb of Los Angeles. To me the nursing home has good facilities and nursing care. But to Jenine who has led an independent and active life, the place was a 'hell hole' from where she wants to escape to freedom! But confined either to wheel-chair

or to bed where can she go? So she philosophizes, I am making reparations for my sins joining myself to Christ's suffering on the Cross.

Fr. Ashok as a close friend of Jenine treated her with kindness and firmness, telling her indirectly that her happiness lies in accepting the situation without crying and grumbling. I heard her confession and we left Jenine in a very good mood.

Our last programme on the day was a prayer meeting and blessing of the new house of Michael and Sheelaben and family. It was a new experience for me and I was very happy to see different Christian denominations coming together and singing psalms and other devotional hymns, old and new. At their request I spoke a few words about Jesus as the host of John the Baptist's two disciples and one of them brought his brother Peter to Jesus. I also recalled that Jesus was the guest of Lazarus and his two sisters and also in the house of Simon the Pharisee.

My message was that, a true house is a house of love and hospitality, a house where the members filled with the values and attitudes of Jesus help one-another to grow closer to Jesus and well coming other people with love to the awareness of Christ in their midst.

Fr Ashok read the parable of a house built on solid rock and preached a beautiful sermon in the context of the new house and blessed the house with holy water. The house was filled with many Christians. To my surprise there were no neighbours or any non-Gujaratis!

Sheelaben had prepared a number of tasty dishes for a feast-day dinner, which we all enjoyed. While the guests were still having the dinner Fr. Ashok and I said good-bye to them all and Ashok drove me straight Los Angelos airport for me to catch a night flight to Philadelphia.(Contact: ciss@satyam.net.in)

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