

## MY NEW JERSEY VISIT Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ

Visit to New Jersey was not in my original plan. But the loving and insistent invitations from friends like Victor and Albina, Ketan and Ila, Jagdish Christian were more than tempting. Then, there was also the opportunity to meet many others friends whom I have known during my editorship of DOOT. I am very happy that I was able to spend 3 days with friends at New Jersey and nearby places.

After spending an enjoyable evening with Victor and family including a visit to nearby Hudson river front park I insisted on sleeping in the living room of Victor's house in stead of going to the motel where Mayur had reserved a room for me. Victor and family thought that their home accommodation would not suit me!

On the next day after a pleasant morning walk with Victor and breakfast, Mayur drove me to Ila and Ketan's house at South Plainfield. I was delighted to meet Ila, Ketan and their three children as I have not met them after blessing their marriage. Still it was like walking into the house of close friends as we kept up yearly Christmas correspondence and Ila sending me her family photos and often recalling the year she spent with me in CISS Office as an in-service trainee before her marriage.

Ila prepared a tasteful lunch including a delicious dish of shrimps. After lunch Ila drove me with Ketan and children to meet the families of Ketan's younger brother Kalpesh and elder brother Jagadish.

Early in that morning I had phoned Joseph Parmar whom I was eager to meet. Thinking that the well known social worker Joseph Parmar, whom I have read in Gujarat Times published form New York, was staying with Ketan and Ila, I told him on the phone that I would meet him late that morning. But I could meet him only in the evening as Joseph and his wife Susheela were staying with his eldest son Jagadish and family in Colonia, a little away from Ketan's house at South Plainfield.

I was happy to know that Joseph Parmar has received not less than four times the Award for Social Service from the Mayor of Jersey City. He was also the Sheriff of Hudson County for four years. But Joseph Parmar is best known for his services through Indo-American Senior Citizens Association of Hudson County as its secretary. Joseph gifted me his book "Social Darpan" which gives very elaborately the benefits by Federal Government and other agencies for the senior citizens in USA.

A highlight of my visit was the Gujarati Mass celebrated in Holy Family Church at Union City, New Jersey. Jagadish Christian had announced the Gujarati Mass in his website and informed all Gujarati Catholics in New Jersey and nearby areas about the Gujarati Mass. So nearly a hundred people participated in the Mass. On the eve Ketan had called the Gujarati choir for singing practice in his house. The choir was still practicing singing with gusto when I went to bed at mid night. Ketan also prepared on his lap top six pages of multi-colour brochure with chosen hymns,

three readings of the Sunday Mass, the address of the Holy Family Church, my photo and a short write up about me on the front page.

For the homily I took the theme of forgiveness and Jesus as the model of forgiving and finding ways in difficult situations. I have written three or four articles on forgiveness. My article on the importance of forgiveness in my book "Tamaru Hrudaya Gashe" came to my mind. In the article I gave the example of an educationalist and journalist, Titus Bradma who, inspired by Jesus' forgiveness from the cross, forgave his persecutors and tormentors in the Nazi concentration camp. So I had enough and more ideas for a homily on the importance of forgiveness in daily lives to lead a happy and peaceful life as Jesus did amidst detractors and growing opposition to his way of life and teaching.

After Mass we had a social gathering in a parish hall. While enjoying snacks and cool drinks the friends shared with me about their two concerns. They said that there are plenty of job opportunities in nursing and teaching of Maths and Science subjects as well as in the world of computer technology. They wanted the Church in Gujarat to prepare the youth for jobs in these fields. I told them that the biggest difficulty for the people in Gujarat is the English language. Now the Church has started more English medium schools and summer coaching classes in English.

The second concern, which they shared with me, is about the need for a priest there to conduct Church services in Gujarati and also to conduct retreat and seminaries for youth. They felt that immersed in American culture the Gujarati Christian youth lacked religious and moral guidance. I told them that I would convey their concerns to the Bishop of Ahmedabad, Bishop Thomas Macwan. But what is more importance is to think that what they themselves can do in the areas of their concerns.

After the sharing Ms Phyllishben Christian drove me to her house at Bloomfield. There her brother Mr. Shantilal Parmar and family were waiting for me. They have a beautiful two storied bungalow in the suburb with ample space in the backyard. They family have cultivated there a kitchen garden with a variety of vegetables. Shantilal, being farm technologist, has been experimenting there even with some variety of Indian plants and vegetables.

Shantilal drove me back to Jersey City for a dinner appointment in the house of Kirit and Rita and their child Kimberly. I was happy that they persuaded Shantilal to stay and share the dinner. Kimberly has recently received First Holy Communion. In the invitation they had informed their friends that Kimberly would receive gifts only in cash and that the cash would go for scholarships for poor students in the schools of Surya street (Anand) Jesus Nagar, Vadod and Khambholaj in Gujarat. Accordingly they had given me a cheque of US \$ 4000/- for the Diocese of Ahmedabad which I faithfully handed over to Bishop Thomas on my return to Ahmedabad. After a delicious Gujarati dinner Shantilal told Kirit that he would be happy to reach me to Victor and Albina's house for the night. Earlier the arrangement was that Kirit would drive me to Victor's house for my last day in USA.

Back at Victor's place, he told me that some friends have tentatively arranged for two press interviews for me for the next day. Victor and family had also planned to take me in the morning to ground zero where the World Trade Centre was destroyed by terrorists' attack on 9/11/2001.

I told my hosts that I am not much interested in the press interviews as I am purely on a private visit. Finally it was settled that they would arrange a telephone interview with "Gujarat Times" a weekly newspaper published from New York and that my host would take me to ground zero on the next day.

It was a moving experience for me to visit the site of world Trade Centre with Victor and his wife Albina and their children Mayur and Megha. I had visited the World Trade Centre during my first visit to USA in 1977 when I spent a month in a Parish Church at Brones. It was an exhilarating experience then to climb up to the 100th floor – a kilo meter into space - in a matter of three minutes and then change the lift to the top floor and viewing gallery.

Most ground zero area is fenced with grills and aluminum sheets as the authorities with a never-die spirit of America have started rebuilding the World Trade Center. We had taken from New Jersey the PATH Metro train, which terminates at ground zero and we could see the construction works in progress.

Our visit was like encountering history of 9/11 as different galleries with photographs, a perpetual scrolling of names of the victims and other information were prominently displayed paying tribute to the victims. After visiting the ground zero area communicating with history first-hand, we visited closely St. Paul's Chapel built in the 1760s. It is the only pre-Revolutionary Church in continuous use. A private pew used by George Washington is seen on one side of the church. A prayer service for peace was in progress when we entered the chapel. A volunteer gave me prayer cards with printed prayers for peace from different religious like Jainism, Buddhism, Jewish and Christian religions. I spent a few minutes joining the congregation in the prayer for peace with people around the world who yearn and pray for peace.

The visit to ground zero was celebrated with a huge pizza, which Mayur ordered, and we enjoyed it back at home.

Back at Victor's place, it was time for the telephone interview with a journalist, Rameshbhai of "Gujarat Times". Victor, who listened to my responses on the phone, told me that he was quite satisfied with the thing I spoke on the phone. But I felt that I could have been better prepared if the interviewer had given me some idea of the wide ranging questions he asked me.

After lunch with Victor and family on my way to the airport we visited Albina's parents and her sister's houses. It was nice meeting Albina's parents who were pioneers among Gujarati Catholics migrating into USA in the middle of last century.

Then, we had an experience of heavy traffic in New York on the way to New York airport. Since we started about 4 pm to catch my flight of 9 pm, we had ample of time to relax in the heavy traffic. Mayur at the wheel as a seasoned driver drove Victor, Megha and me with ease in the

traffic. My hosts accompanied me till I checked in. In short, I can say sincerely that my Gujarati friends in New Jersey made my visit memorable with their love, friendship and generosity.