

# **A SON DROWNED IN MOTHER'S LOVE**

## **Fr Varghese Paul, SJ**

'Ammachi' means for me an image which I could never forget in my life. An image of great love! You may call that great image Mother, Mummy or Amma. My siblings call her Amma. But I am accustomed to call her 'Ammachi' from my childhood. Today I am swimming in that ocean of love.

I recall here an often repeated instance of my early childhood. My mother would take me in front of a picture of Jesus and she would repeat "Iso" (Jesus), "Iso", "Iso". Then she would teach me a small prayer, "Praise be to Jesus Christ" in my mother tongue. I experienced my mother's love and she wisely turned my love to Jesus. After many years I learned that the "Iso" image of love is Jesus. My mother is a pale shadow of that great love of Jesus. Still Ammachi is a true image of love for me. 'Ammachi' is an unfamiliar word for you. So I simply call her mother.

A childhood memory flashes to my mind. Going to an Aashan's (Master's) house in my neighbourhood carrying sand in a coconut shell I learned to read and write the alphabets, to count, and the basics of adding and subtracting, always writing in the sand spread on Aashan's veranda. But I was sent to school at the age of six, as I had to walk five kilometres to my nearest school. On the day of the annual examination my mother told me to pray to Jesus before my examinations. The teacher used to write the question on the black board and we had to write the answer on our slate. I always remembered Jesus before the examinations and I used to get good marks. I used to feel bad that I had Jesus to pray and get good marks but my Hindu friends did not have Jesus to help them. So they got much less marks than me!

After giving my SSLC (then 11th Standard) examinations I told my parents that I would like to go to North India to become a Missionary Priest. They opposed my proposal tooth and nail. They said that if I am really keen on becoming a priest, I could become a priest in the local diocese like my uncle priest, Fr Mathew Vellankal, my mother's brother, who was a great friend of my parents. He was a young and dynamic priest, who built a Church and started a school in the first parish where he was sent. They did not want their eldest son to go far away to North India.

A whole year passed by in their strong opposition to follow my Mission vocation. But to cut a long story short my grand father came to my help. One day my childhood friend, my grand father whom my parents respected much, came home and told my parents, "Varghese wants to go to a North Indian Mission. If he wants let him go. If he does not like it in the mission, let him come back." My parents willy-nilly accepted my grand father's advice.

Ever since I put my feet in Gujarat in June 1963, I have felt happy that I have reached my destination on earth. I may get lost in my studies, my works, my travels or in anything else, but I know for certain that my mother's love and prayers follow me, support me and strengthen me wherever I am and whatever I may be doing.

After spending a year at Ahmedabad in Gujarat, first time I went home in April 1964 for holidays. It was a 3 days long train journey. Coal dust enveloped me darkening my face and my clothes. Then tired from the journey I was looking awful. But seeing the twinkle in my mother's eyes all my tiredness disappeared. While I took bath and dressed presentably my mother prepared warm and tasty food with my favourite dishes.

As I ate, my mother learned all about my one year experience in Ahmedabad. Then, mother told me, "Son, you are tired. Go and sleep"; and she took me to a room kept ready for me. Mother told me to lie down and sleep. But our conversation continued. I do not know when I drowsed off. I opened my eyes after sleeping about two hours. My mother was still there keeping watch over me! My mother's love was simply overwhelming.

I had one month long leave. Before I left in the first week of June 1964 for my two-year long Novitiate at Mt Abu, Rajasthan my mother prepared and made me eat all my favourite dishes and sweets and I enjoyed the unending waves of mother's love. During the novitiate I suffered a severe attack of small pox and I was kept isolated in a far end corner of the novitiate building. Then in spite of the Infirmarian Bro Anthony taking very good care of me, I was yearning for my mother. Perhaps I suffered more for wanting my mother's presence than from small pox.

I used to write very regularly, once in a month, to my parents and getting their replies were my consolation in those days. When my father or mother wrote to me, they made sure every inch space of the Inland letter was used to the maximum! When my father did not write, mother got my sister Aney to write for her. After Aney's marriage, whenever she came home, her first job was to write to me as my mother's secretary. She did the job very faithfully well till the phone facilities came into existence.

Then after 10 long years I went home just for two days in December 1994. In fact, I was on my way to London to do a journalism course from the beginning of January 1975. My mother was upset that I could not reach my brother Vincent's wedding just three days earlier and that my leave was only for two days. I had a hard time to convince mother that usually we get then home leave only after our priestly ordination. But I was privileged to visit home for two days as I was going abroad. When I said good bye to her, kissing both her hands, she requested me to write to her as soon as I reached London. Mother wrote to me often and I made sure that I wrote to her once every month.

After my journalism in London School of Journalism, London, theology in Gregorian University and priestly ordination both at Rome I reached home for my first Holy Mass in October 1977. Mother surprised me with her great show of love. After I greeted her by kissing her hands as our custom she took both my hands and kissed them saying that now both my hands have become holy as they are consecrated to hold and give Jesus.

My parents came to know much about the Gujarat Mission and the Society of Jesus after I joined the mission. In their enlightenment their opposition to their eldest son going to a North Indian mission not only disappeared but they became admirers and promoters of Jesuits in Gujarat. As a result when my sister, Celine wanted to join a Religious Congregation in Gujarat they did not object. But my youngest sister Lissy wanted to follow Celine my parents wanted her to do her

college studies before making such a decision. They could not believe that their pet child could survive the disciplined life of the Religious Sisters. For Lissy led an easy going life and in her school days she had a craze for latest fashion clothes lavished by her brothers Vincent and Thomas.

Besides, as Lissy was lazy in her studies, father had told her that she would be sent to the college of her choice if she gets a first class in SSLC examination. For sure she got a first class and she chose a prestigious and very expensive All Saints Collage at Thiruvananthapuram! In those days one whole day journey was needed to reach the state capital Thiruvananthapuram. In spite of the difficulties like travel and very costly hostel fees, she was sent to study in the All Saints College. All these types of decision were taken by father and mother together. Mother was always prepared to make any sacrifice for the good of her children.

I remember a special occasion. It was the Golden Jubilee of my parents. I was then doing tertianship at Sacred Heart College, Shembhaganur in Tamil Nadu. From there after a night's journey I reached home. After many years since I left home first time we all nine siblings were meeting together at home. With close relatives uncle Msgr Mathew Vellankal came to celebrate Holy Mass at home. In the homily uncle spoke very articulately about our parents' love for their children, their hard works, their prayerful life and their warm hospitality for all their dear and near ones. Tears of joy welled up in our eyes. Agreeing with uncle, my eldest sister Sr. Mary Cicily said, "What uncle said is true. We have never seen our parents quarrelling!"

Responding to the occasion my mother said, "God has blessed each one of us and our family with more blessings than we can ask for!" We all agreed with her.

My loving mother has not only appreciated much God's blessings with an attitude of gratitude. She has also expressed her appreciation by being herself very generous towards the needy people and the many labourers who worked in our farms. For instance, in her childhood Lissy constantly complained that mother often gave her best clothes to the children of labourers to wear on special occasions like temple feasts and marriages. Mother used to make Lissy understand that even poor children have desires to dress well on their special occasions; and when we give, we need to give good things to others.

Since last few years we get permission for home visit once in two-three years. But being an office bearer or otherwise active in three national organizations I have opportunity to travel often to South India. So whenever I have to attend a meeting at Chennai or Bangalore I make it a point to take a night train or bus and visit for two or three days my aged mother and my married brothers and sister practically every year. My brothers make sure that I have a car at my disposal and when I make flying visits to the families of my brother Jose or my sister Aney, my mother always accompanied me after the death of my father in September 1999. But while writing this in Gujarati at 98 years mother's movement is limited in the house.

In January 2015 I made a home visit with my friend Poet Yoseph Macwan. I spent most of the time with my mother in her room except when I was travelling and visiting with Yoseph a few interesting tourist places like the back waters and the shrine of St SrAlphonsa. I am glad that my mother is specially blessed by God with three caring daughters-in-law. My

brother Vincent and his wife Anice look after her in the family house leaving nothing to desire. Thanks to the close inter-personal relationships and love among my three married brothers and one married sister and their families, we five religious missionaries in far away places have nothing to worry about the care of our mother. I agree with my mother that God has blessed our family more than we can ask for.

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