

# **DELIGHTFUL VISIT TO NEW ZEALAND**

## **Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ**

I have been privileged to visit 37 countries covering five continents during the last 41 years. But the purpose of visiting New Zealand was totally different from all other visits. My first visit to Europe and USA were for my higher studies. But most of my visits were to participate in international meetings, and world congresses of the press media. I have also visited neighboring countries to conduct seminars and workshops in journalism and creative writing. As a journalist I have been a member of the Governing Council of International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP). But my last journey was to New Zealand honoring a long standing and persistent invitation for holidays with my nephew Shaju and family.

Usually it is impossible for me as a Jesuit to go for holidays abroad. I have told this to Shaju umpteen times. His argument was: Uncle, you travel a lot abroad to attend meetings. Then, why don't you once come and spend a few days with me and my family and give us your company. While he was working in Ahmedabad he used to come to my office after his office work and help me a lot with my articles and correspondences in English.

But this time the situation was different. I had been invited as a resource person to the world congress of International Christian Organization of Media (ICOM) at Tagaytay, Philippines, almost half the way to New Zealand. Shaju immediately offered me to pay for my to and fro tickets via Manila to Auckland and back. Shaju claims that I am in his mentor in the very beginning of his works in cultivating in him the values of life like discipline, responsibility, loyalty, dependability and trust.

Once I remember heartily congratulating Shaju for his honesty and loyalty to his company. He has gone to a printing press to pay a big bill. The press manager asked Shaju "Sir, what amount should be written in the bill? "Why, Manager Sir? We have approved your quotation and you have done our job well!" Shaju could not understand the question of the press manager.

"The quotation is okay, sir. But in making the final bill, there is a give and take possible". The manager said.

Shaju was confused as he did not still understand the manager.

Sensing the new PA of the company manager did not understand him the press manager said bluntly: "Sir, your predecessor used to take cash from us for giving us all your printing works and in our bill we charged the amount".

Then, Shaju understood the press manager is speaking about giving and taking bribe! So he told the manager, "Sir, you have done our work well. Now make your bill in such a way that my company does not suffer any loss and you get the money worth your work".

A big printing press manager and an official with good salary also give and take bribe money! This was beyond the experience and understanding of Shaju. When Shaju joined in his very first

job, he showed me a letter which his mother (my sister-in-law) had written to him. In the letter his mother had very well instructed her son about attending the office on time, doing the work entrusted to him faithfully. So without any avarices of making quick money Shaju keeping the family culture and did very faithfully his job to the best of his abilities. I also encouraged Shaju giving telling examples of trustworthiness of my father and my grand-father. So there is some truth in Shaju's saying that in the critical years of his formation I have been an inspiration and encouragement in his character formation and social behavior.

Last year I wrote to Shaju that there is a possibility that I might go to Philippines as the ICOM world congress is being held in that country. Shaju promptly replied me that Philippine is almost half the way to New Zealand and so he is sponsoring my air tickets via Manila to Auckland. "So Uncle, this time you have to come to New Zealand," he concluded.

With the invitation from the organizers of the International Christian Organization of the Media (ICOM) to participate in the ICOM world congress as a Resource Person and Shaju's offer of return tickets to New Zealand and back I approached my Provincial. I was prepared to receive a 'no' from my Provincial as I knew that he has denied permission in the past for fellow Jesuits to visit their relatives abroad. But after consulting his advisors Provincial Superior gave me permission both to participate in the World Congress and to visit my nephew and family in New Zealand. So after participating in ICOM World at Tagaytay, I landed at Auckland airport on October 16, 2016.

At the airport Shaju and my grand niece Rosmi were there to receive me with bunch of beautiful orchid flowers. I have never seen before such colorful orchid flowers! They drove me straight to their recently purchased bungalow in the city centre. I was the first guest from India to visit their new specious abode. The orchid flowers remained fresh on the dining table for many days.

I had reached Auckland on a Sunday. In the evening I went to the church with my nephew and his family. Shaju drove us to a church some 10 kilometer away because there was Syro Malabar liturgy in our mother tongue Malayalam. I joined the main celebrant Fr. Joy Thottamkara after politely declining to be the main celebrant. But on that day, October 16th being 'Mission Sunday' Fr. Joy asked me to give an appropriate message as a missionary from India. Since I am not confident so give a sermon in Malayalam I told Fr. Joy that I would give a message at the end of the Holy Mass in English which I did. So I had the opportunity to speak to some 400 people about the present day India, Gujarat and my works as a missionary. After the Mass Fr. Joy and some parishioners appreciated my 8 minute long sharing and a few asked for more information regarding what I said about Gujarat and my ministry of writing and other works.

Next day morning after breakfast Shaju drove me to One Tree Hill. We had an hour - long walk around and reached the hill top for a bird's eye-view of Auckland city with bays and sea closely. The New Zealanders enjoy outing to the sea and the bays were full with hundreds of family boats.

In the evening I celebrated the Eucharist in Syro Malabar Rite and baptized two year old Irene, the grand-daughter of my cousin brother James. Irene's parents Jomi and Riya in Auckland had arranged the Mass and baptism as soon as my visit to New Zealand was confirmed with Shaju.

So I was prepared to celebrate the Mass and baptism in Malayalam. But my sermon on new life in Jesus was in English. The gist of my sermon was that it is a personal relationship with Jesus which makes Christian life meaningful. I had no experience of conducting baptismal ceremony in Malayalam. I was told that a Malayali priest would join me. But as the priest could reach only in time for the party after the ceremony I could joke that I did not make any mistake in the ceremony as there was no one to guide and correct me. The baptismal party was a wonderful occasion to meet a lot of friends of Jomi and Riya from two different cities where they worked earlier.

I had already told Shaju that I am not interested in touring much. Still Shaju had planned a two-day long tour to a unique place in New Zealand: the land of Maori tribals, the original inhabitants of the New Zealand. So one day very early in the morning with Shaju at wheel we set out to the tourist place Rotorua. Shaju's wife Mini was with us. By experience I know that when there is a woman in the group every details of the tour are taken care off. Nothing will be lacking in the journey. With foresight all things needed in the journey like hot, snacks, sweets, paper napkins towels as well as emergency first aid materials are packed and stored in the car.

New Zealand is known as the Land of Long White Clouds. So while on the road I was not surprised long white clouds following us in the sky. There were also occasional light showers of rain which was playing hide and seek with the morning sun. After about three hours' drive we reached Silver Oak Heritage Hotel at Rotorua where Shaju had already booked two rooms for us.

After refreshing ourselves and taking coffee and snacks we set out for Whakarewarewa –the thermal village next to Rotorua city. At the entrance of the village we joined a group of tourist people for a guided tour of the village. A well built tall young man and a beautiful young lady gave us a brief history of Whakarewarewa thermal village of the Maori tribe. The tourists entered the village in two groups crossing a narrow bridge over a riverlet. We joined the second group led by the well-built young man. He took us around the village explaining various specialties of the place. There at many places white smokes were coming out of the earth emitting strange smell. I saw sulfur gas (lava) and small hot water springs coming from the belly of the earth. There were a few small lakes of hot springs from continuing volcanic eruption. In one place hot water is channeled to flow into small bath tubes dug in the surface of the earth so that people can take bath in them. In one place a Maori youth was dipping bunches of corns in a hot water pond and then taking out and giving boiled corn to the tourists to taste. We could see a far away volcano vomiting lava and sky-high smoke in the air. Then we were treated about half an hour songs and dance by a group of Maori people in the hall.

We saw a century-old Christian church in the village. The guide told us that there are two Christian churches in the village. What surprised me was a cemetery next to the church. For, the dead are buried not digging pit but above ground with a mound of mud.

Rotorua is a city surrendered by three lakes. In Rotorua lake there was a plane which can land and take off from the water. On the road I also saw a small bus which could run on the road and in the water like a boat. Close to the lake were a big museum and a large garden in its front with a variety of colorful flowers and plants. In the evening we went to see a village buried under a volcanic eruption.

A volcano erupted from mount Taravera in June 1886. It is estimated that about 120 people buried alive under the lava and steam poured out from the sudden eruption. Some thatched roofs of buried houses can be seen in the valley of the mountain. Today grass, shrubs, bushes and trees have grown on the mount Taravara and its valley.

On the second day at Rotarua Shaju drove us about 10-15 kms away from the city to Agrodome for a unique farm experience. There was a farm tractor – trailer to take the tourists through all over the farm. There were grain fields, kiwi fruit and olive orchards as well as animal farms. There were also large green areas of pasture lands for grazing for animals like cows and sheep-goats, deer and donkeys. There were also variety of cultivation and greenery of the farm was feast to my eyes. We also saw two exhibitions. In one of them there were goats and sheeps from different countries and breeds. I saw first time a man on the stage sheering a sheep and throwing some wool for the tourists to handle and feel it. In the second show in large enclosure of green land a dog tented a group of sheeps grazing to sheep pen.

Of the 11 days in New Zealand I spend most of the days at Auckland and surrounding areas. The country as big as Great Briton is 1500 km long from North to South. As New Zealand is surrounded by sea a person can reach sea from anywhere in the country travelling just 120 kms. Auckland is the biggest city in New Zealand. It is on the East side on the bank of Tasman Sea. I admired specially two things in the city: the Sky Tower and Sea Life Aquarium. The wide spread Albert Park was also very attractive.

Sky Tower is a landmark with which New Zealand is often identified. It is a monument of 328 meter or 1076 feet high. Its view deck is at 220 meter or 722 feet height. Practically the whole city can be seen around the view deck. Up in the Sky Tower tourists can enjoy meals and coffee respectively in Orbit Dining Hall and sky coffee shop.

Then, rich sea-life can be viewed inside the Sea life Aquarium built inside the sea water. First time I saw at touching distance Penguins an artificially created sea water pont and ice parks. A vast variety of fishes of all sizes, colors and shapes are special attraction in the aquarium. The rich, colorful sea lives are indeed mesmerizing.

The Albert Park in the centre of Auckland city has a unique charm of its own. The park has flower gardens, lakes, ducks, cranes, and water-birds, birds of air on big and small trees and children Entertainment Park

What I carried back to India from New Zealand is the truthfulness or the trustworthiness of the New Zealand people. Let me give you a concrete example where people's words are taken for truth. While I was in Auckland Shaju's son Jovin met with an accident. On the way to Auckland University he stopped at a traffic red light. A car behind him in high speed hit hard on his car. Fortunately nothing happened for both the drivers. But there were noticeable damages both the vehicles but both were still in running condition.

Jovin came back after his classes in the university and reported the accident. Shaju told him: the car is insured, please call and inform the insurance company. On the next day as instructed by

the insurance people Jovin took the car to a designated garage and left it there. In the afternoon in the same day after visiting Sky Tower with Mini and Shaju on the way back we picked up Jovin from his University gate.

On the third day of the accident the insurance people called Shaju and told him that the car is not worth repairing and that the full insurance money will be transferred to his account on the following day.

Shaju then told me: "Uncle, people here don't cheat in anything. They do not have recourse to lies. They trust fully in what we say and we too trust them fully for their trustworthiness. So there is no need for any negotiation or arguments and controversy in everything like in India!

My hosts Shaju and Mini were telling me that I need to spend at least 3 to 5 weeks to see and experience New Zealand fully. But seeing my interest in meeting people rather than visiting a lot of places they arranged almost every evening get together with their friends either at home or in the homes of their friends in the city. So I enjoyed very much meetings and sharing life in New Zealand with a lot of people. So my eleven days spent in New Zealand passed quickly like a dream.

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