

A Prophet of Spirituality and Inculturation

Fr. Kuriakose Palakkattu, CMI.



by
Fr. Jacob Marangattu, CMI.

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My first memories of Fr. Kuriakose Palakkattu CMI are of him as an expert *Thabalist* of Dharmaram College in the late 1970s. After arriving at the Rajkot mission in 1989, I had some occasions to interact with him while he was the Principal of St Mary's School, Gondal. Later, once again, he went to Baroda for advanced classes in Hindustani music and my experiences with him date from that time onward.

Though we met only occasionally at common programmes there was a certain rapport between us that led us to engaging conversations. And these conversations always revolved around spiritual, liturgical and Gujarati cultural matters. I found in him simultaneously a self-realized person and a seeker. Though I was only 10 years junior to him, I belonged to a different generation. For almost from my novitiate time onwards, a new trend in formation was taking shape in our congregation. The content of this newness consisted in more rational application of mind, more freedom, different styles of prayer, increased openness to the world, etc.

Yet, Fr. Kuriakose was quite enthusiastic to converse with me. I found in him a person who thought ahead of his time. He had his original and authentic ideas on spirituality, which in a way was founded on Jesus' vision of praying in "Spirit and Truth". He had transcended the level of mere 'ritualism' in prayer and worship. For him, what was of greater importance was higher levels of worship, such as, a life of righteousness and justice, as the Prophets proclaimed; a life of gratitude as the Psalmist urged, and a contrite and humble heart as advocated by the Wisdom Literature. Yes, that was Fr Kuriakose, Palakkattu.

He was a man thoroughly convinced of the need of inculturation both in liturgy and in life. The transplantation of liturgy, from other cultural backgrounds into Gujarat as an exact replica, was for him like trying to fit a square into a circle. He longed to experience the liturgy in the soul of Gujarati culture. Bhajans, and chanting in the Hindustani raga were an ecstasy for him. He preferred the Harmonium to the Keyboard for the umbilical chord
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connection of the former to ancient Indian culture. His life was a mission of inculturation in liturgical music. *Suo moto* he would visit various formation houses in the diocese initiating candidates into Hindustani music. He encouraged aspiring musicians to compose hymns in Gujarati musical style. No one, I believe, would forget the various choirs he led in Prem Mandir during religious professions, singing newly composed Gujarati hymns - many of them composed Fr. George Urulianickal CMI.

Fr. Kuriakose was a man of smiles; he always spoke with a smile on his face, and didn't know how to speak otherwise. He was a slow and thoughtful speaker who conveyed his points convincingly and agreed to disagree gracefully when necessary.

I had numerous occasions to speak with him for hours, especially, during his chaplaincy at Prem Jyoti Ashram, Wanker, Mahuva. Those days, whenever I went to Rajkot *via* Wanker, I used to invite him to come along with me to Rajkot: for him a diversion and for me a company. Those four-hour drives were filled with discussions on the points I mentioned above: authentic spirituality and the need of inculturation in the church. He had enlightened and forward-thinking plans for the Wanker Ashram aiming to make it truly reflect Gujarati culture. His wish was that sisters open the convent gates for Gujarati devotees allowing them to come to the ashram and engage in Bhajan Mandalis and religious discourses, without infringing upon the cloister and that the sisters learn Gujarati language to better communicate with local people.

I can say father Kuriakose is now returning to the Father after completing the mission entrusted to him upon this earth; to be a prophet of authentic spirituality and a messenger of inculturation in the church. He lived these ideals fully till the last moment. Dear Fr. Kuriakose, we, your brothers, sisters, and fellow labourers in the Rajkot mission, wish you a very blessed journey back to "our Father". May the angels welcome you into heaven!!

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