

THE PASTOR BELOVED

“Let us love one another” (1 John 4:7) is very well known caption in Orissa because it is the motto of Bishop Thomas, aptly mirroring the multi religio-cultural context of Orissa. The catholic community in Orissa will fondly remember this inspiring message of the scripture because it is what Bishop taught his community for the last 38 years as its pastor in 2 dioceses.

Thomas Thiruthalili was born in a Syro Malabar Catholic family at Vazakulam on January 17, 1936, as one of three children of Kurian & Martha. He completed schooling at 16 and came to Gopalpur-On-Sea, Ganjam, Berhampur to embrace the mission life under the aegis of veteran missionaries belonging to the Congregation of Mission. He was the second batch of students from Kerala to join this particular Congregation. Bishop Thomas did his theological studies in Salamanca, Spain and ordained as a priest in 1963, and there he continued his studies of licentiate in Canon law at Pontifical University, Salamanca, Spain. When returned to Orissa, in 1965, he was chosen to become the Vice Rector of Minor Seminary in Bhanjanagar which catered the formation needs of both Cuttack diocese and the Congregation of Mission. He served as the Rector (1966 - 1974) with additional responsibility of the vice Provincial in the Congregation. This was a formative experience for him, taking charge of a seminary in Berhampur which became the hub of a thriving ministry. He emphasized holistic formation of the students - replacing the traditional layout for more flexible humanistic patterns which won for him many accolades.

Berhampur Diocese (1974-1990):

In the 1970s, as the Second Vatican Council infused new spirit to the universal church, Bishop Thomas daringly took initiatives to revitalize the Christian communities entrusted to his care. The result was expansion and birth of many new parishes and mission stations in the fertile mission area of Berhampur which he headed as the first bishop from 1974-1990. He had privilege to become one of the youngest Bishops of India at the age of 38 and today, he is the longest serving Bishop in the same hierarchy.

The new, young and energetic Bishop became one with the people, he had been the vocal throughout on all the issues of his diocese. He represented his people at all possible levels. The newly made Diocese did not have the cushion of lots of resources. The illiteracy was on par with some of the most deprived areas of the society and the public health amenities were dismissively poor. Bishop Thomas established a number of dispensaries and trained health workers to provide basic amenities in the health sector. He also promoted primary education in remote hilly terrains of his vast diocese by establishing schools and hostels for children of all faiths. He secured government and non government support to establish affordable housing units for poor people.

One can say that Bishop Thomas could turn a vast portion of Mission lands into a fertile soil for evangelization. The pioneer missionaries like Fr. Gomes, CM and others had a lasting impression on him whom he imitated in his personal style. As a pastor he gave much importance to the spiritual formation of the clergy and religious. Bishop Thomas inherited the same spirit of the St.

Vincent De Paul in matters of formation. It created a strong impression and appreciated as a pastor far beyond the limits of the regional church.

Balasore Diocese (1990-):

In 1990, he was chosen to become the first bishop of Balasore, a unique privilege for few bishops in history to be the first Bishop of two dioceses. Balasore was a virgin mission territory faced with the challenges and he steered the church successfully through the difficult periods of repeated famines and draughts. In his pastoral leadership, the Ho tribal community received the light of faith and this mission has reaped a rich dividend today.

From the time he arrived in January 1990, to Balasore, he visited parishes virtually every season and ensured that he met parishioners to make himself known to them, and to listen to them. This he continued at all major diocesan events, and especially in his Cathedral wherein he would stand at its entrance to have a word with everyone – not leaving until the last person had left the Cathedral.

The care for his priests is manifested by his high priority for the annual Priestly Retreat wherein he himself participated fully with his priests. Every one of the priests in his diocese cherishes his personal care and concern. All could come to Bishop's House, and a sympathetic and supportive ear would listen carefully and respond to them. Even in the threshold of proven mistakes, he defends his priests and religious, provided they have an openness to accept their faults and correct their ways. This compassionate approach of Bishop Thomas has reformed many and made them illustrious sons and daughters of the church. His care for the sick priests will speak volumes of his love for his clergy.

He always taught his priests to respect the religious and hold the view that both diocesan and religious clergy together with lay people of every sort hold a stake in the diocese. Formation of parish pastoral councils in every parish and establishing of various lay organizations are the testimony of his love and concern for the laity. The diocesan celebration of the year of the Laity in 2011 is one we shall remember for a long time.

Bishop Thomas believed in the strength of local vocations. Therefore, both in Berhampur and Balasore, he went on to promote local vocations. The cloistered convent of the Carmelite nuns in Chatrapur, Berhampur and permanent adoration chapel in Balasore reflect his love for contemplation and personal prayer.

Public Health care especially of the women and children was another area where most of his attention and energy was spent. Apart from establishing numerous dispensaries and training health workers, he established a full fledged hospital in the out skirts of Balasore as a modal health care agency for the poor. Jyoti Hospital which he founded in 1999 has stretched its branches rapidly with Jyoti Care Centre which take care of the AIDS patients, Jyoti Nursing School and Jyoti community outreach programmes to the remote villages. He relentlessly championed the cause of the women and directs the social service society of the diocese (BSSS) to work for this section of the deprived in the society. He often challenges the members of the

Orissa Catholic Health Association (OCHA) as its spiritual adviser to address the problems of women especially dalits and tribals in the remote villages and work for their equity and right place in the society.

He always insisted that the '*The Good News of Jesus Christ is for all*'. This view took a concrete form when Bishop decided to host Christmas party for other religious leaders and civic personalities of the diocese wherein they are given opportunity to air their views of faith, a perfect example of inter- religious harmony.

Regional Church

He became Chairman of the Regional Bishops' Council (OCBC) in 1999 a post which he is holding till today. He took his responsibilities very seriously in the Regional Church, as head of 5 lakh Catholics and a mission to 4.19 Crore people of other faiths, travelling extensively throughout the State. From the rise of extreme right wing organizations in Orissa and Maoist up surge, from the brutal murder of Graham Stains and Fr. Arul Doss to the super cyclone of 1999, to the extreme social disparity which continues to this day, Bishop Thomas was at the helm of this ship called "Orissa Church". Notably, he paid a harrowing trip to Khandamal in 2008 in the aftermath of the genocide and set a good example as a Pastor.

Bishop Thomas as chairman of the Bishops' Council played a key role in founding Regional Coordination Centre for whole Orissa. It amply proves his desire for Interdiocesan cooperation and sharing which can strengthen the Regional Church. Of late, realization of this dream project was his great passion. He knocked at every door to garner support and mobilize funds for the same. Further, he also supplied personnel and finance for the actualization of the same. Recently the Bishops' council managed to buy a plot of land. This is a serene plot surrounded by thick foliage 12 kms from the Bhubaneswar air port and 15 kms from the main railway station. Thus he added another feather to his illustrious service.

To put it succinctly, Bishop Thomas has drawn up a new roadmap for the Church in Orissa. He relentlessly advocated that the minority church in Orissa could play the role of a balm to bring peace and security to all especially deprived ones in Orissa which is a pre-condition for the well being and development of the State.

He served the church 38 years as a Bishop, fifty years a priest. He celebrated the silver Jubilee of his Episcopal Ordination in 1999. Bishop Thiruthalil holds such a distinguished place in the admiration and affection of the people of Orissa among whom he has lived and labored the past Sixty years. He effectively made Orissa his home away from home. We remember and celebrate his long and distinguished service. He is a man full of love, strong will and generosity for those in need.

Thank you for everything you have given to Orissa and to the whole Church. Your inspiration and leadership to the whole church will ever cherish and remembered. Wish you every happiness and every blessing in the years ahead.