

Through the prism of fraternal charity

Church in Odisha sailed through turbulent times in the recent decades. We held together through some stormy seas. Bishop Thomas Thiruthalil c.m., Bishop of Balasore was in the forefront in these trying times of Odisha's Church history. He has been the Chairman for Odisha Catholic Bishops' Council (OCBC) for 13 years now. Recently he completed 50 years in his priesthood, a rare honour for a reigning bishop in India.

There are a few favorite windows one can look at the enigma of Bishop Thomas in Odisha. We see more prosaic things: the Super cyclone, the Khandamal violence, the refugee camps in which people expressed their faith etc. The fact is, from the rise of extreme right wing organizations in Odisha 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 "Odisha Church".

Memory lane refuses to forget the strife after the murder of the octogenarian sage in Jalespetta an interior village in the heart of Khandamal which triggered a volley of strife. Bishop Thomas was the first one to publically condemn that heinous act and appealed to all people of good will to maintain peace and tranquility of the fragmented society. He sensed that it is the hour the people need the support most. Even if it was a helpless standing beside the victims or supplying the medical team or spiritual consolation, he was there as the shepherd. He was the first one, who reached Brahmanigam Parish after the first violence in December, 2008. He made a risky journey to the length and breadth of Khandamal through blocked roads and suspicious crowds. He justified this pastoral visit as the most crucial gesture a pastor could render to the flock. He went beyond the borders of his diocese. It was not his style or the words he used that made a difference: it was the content. He isn't a great communicator, but he communicated Christian spirit uncompromisingly, and they didn't spring full bloom from his intelligence, they came from the heart of a great catholic leader--from his long pastoral experience, his faith, wisdom, and his belief in the proven principles that have guided the church for two millennium.

When the need arose for pastors and medical personnel to mentor the community in exile in the camps, he was again the first one to lend finance, medical staff and service of the priests for the same. He sent his personnel, priests, sisters and medical team to the strife torn places to rebuild the confidence and assistance to the most needy.

Sustained attacks on the community in Khandamal and other parts of India taught us a

few painful lessons. First and foremost, it proved the inadequate preparedness of the local Church in the face of increased communal forces. Though late, the Church was forced to redefine her vision and mission and accordingly strategize the communication resources, revamp the networking system and public relations. Realizing the need for strengthening the local church, the Bishops of Odisha, post Khandamal, have decided to set up a Regional Coordination Centre (RCC) in Bhubaneswar, from where prompt steps can be taken through periodic liaisoning with State government, policy makers and the church personnel for instant lobby and support. Bishop Thomas as the chairman played a pivotal role in this crucial decision. Of late, realization of this dream project was his 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. This was an additional feather to his illustrious service.

Secondly, the need for reconciliation and promotion of peace was his priority. The Catholic Church-though miniscule in size- has to play the role of leaven in the society, involving communities and governments to support socio-political actions to address disparities in the society at large and to manage conflicts non-violently on several levels. Bishop Thomas relentlessly advocated that the minority church in Odisha could play the role of a balm to bring peace and security to affected areas in Odisha which is a pre-condition for the well being and development of the state.

His practical wisdom always advocated that in the minority scenario of Odisha to preserve the peace, we'd have to become agents of peace and reconciliation first. He promoted ardently peace and harmony in the region. He advocated a new peace building environment in this local church.

His challenges seem complex. It will always be this way. But he always remembers his first principle in priesthood which is that of complete trust in the Master who called and selected him to lead the Church. He always believed not only in keeping the guard, but also continue to work together to lessen and eliminate tension and mistrust. Therefore he promoted dialogue and ecumenism. It's well grounded in thoughtfulness and knowledge of a missionary who has seen life. He observes good faith and justice towards all and cultivates peace and harmony with all.

Vatican II, whose golden jubilee we celebrate this year promoted the concept of *'People of God'* in the church. This belief has been the underlying basis for everything he was trying to do these past 38 years as the bishop of two dioceses in Odisha. His pastoral program brought about the lasting qualitative improvement in catholic community. He knew the immense value of regional unity and the importance of subordinating parochial interests to the preservation of the unity in diversity.

Post Khandamal was an opportunity for a fresh start for the community and fresh opportunities for Bishops' Council to inspire it. He well understood that everything he did was a precedent for the community's future. He was hopeful but realistic about the future of the new church. Despite, all adversity, Bishop Thomas believes that Odisha like a phoenix can rise from the ashes. He also believes that it is within our reach to resolve what seem to be intractable conflicts. He believes in Orissa's future. He believes that it would be different from any other part of India.

There have elapsed decades of laborious pastoral ministry, during which a wide and profound examination was made regarding modern conditions of faith and religious practice, and of Christian and especially Catholic vitality in Odisha. There is no doubt that Bishop Thomas has converted it into an initial gift of celestial grace.