

A SACRED FLOWER OF COMMITMENT

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Very Reverend Father Sebastian Thuruthel, MST is awarded 'Vaidikaratnam' by His Beatitude Cardinal George Alencherry, Major Archbishop of Syro Malabar Major Archiepiscopal Church, Ernakulam. This is, without a doubt, a singularly deserved honour of its kind and it speaks volumes for itself.

The commendable combination of 'Vaidikaratnam' and 'Father Sebastian Thuruthel' is an impressively memorable moment in history, both in the life of Father Sebastian and in the annals of the Christian tradition that is grounded in the unparalleled spirit of Saint Thomas. As the award of 'Vaidikaratnam' presents a 'pearly shawl' to honour Father Thuruthel, on the one hand, Father Thuruthel evolved a new definition of how best a Catholic priest could be, through the meritorious life he lived so far and continues to live, on the other. He holds the major privilege of having been the teacher and guide of a large range of students who are family-holders, nuns, priests, bishops and archbishops, including Cardinal George Alencherry. More importantly, he is a high quality priest and guru of remarkable learning, zeal, dedication and culture, all in one. I have immense pleasure in placing on record my heartfelt, deep and reverential sentiments of warm felicitations to Very Reverend Father Sebastian Thuruthel for having become a 'vaidikaratnam', yes, a glowing gem of a priest, himself.

Father Sebastian was born at Cherpunkal on the 26th day of January in 1926 (26.01.26). He completed his school studies with ESLC (English School Leaving Certificate) in 1944 and proceeded to intermediate studies in S.B. College, Changanacherry, till 1946. Having discerned a divine calling and a special mission in his life, he pursued his priestly studies at St Thomas Petit Seminary, Parel, between 1946 and 48. He completed his major seminary studies at St Joseph's Pontifical Seminary, Alua, from 1948 to 55. He was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Palai on 15 March 1955. He did his BA English Hons. (MA) at Madras Christian College, Chennai, for 1955-58. In due recognition of his palpable skills in teaching and formation, he was invited to be Professor at St Joseph's Pontifical Seminary, Alua, for an extraordinarily long tenure from 1958 to 69.

The diversely rich life journey of Father Thuruthel took a definitive turn as he was invited to be the first Rector of Deepthi College from 1969 to 75 and joined MST in 1975. He was elected General Councillor and Vice- Director General of MST from 1978 to 1983. Being elected Director General of MST for the semi-decennial period 1988-93 was the culmination of his administrative job in life. Then he proceeded to nurture spiritual inklings in the missionary candidates as Spiritual Director at Jeevan Jyothi, Srirangapatna, Mandya, between 1993 and 96.

Verily true to his versatile character, the priestly contribution of Father Sebastian has been exceptionally wide-ranging and brilliant. His teaching and seminal career at St Joseph's Pontifical Seminary (1958 to 69), St Thomas Apostolic Seminary (1975 to 76) and Deepthi College (1969 to 75 and 1983-5) is worthy of special mention. His pastoral care at Mumbai (1976 to 78), Coimbatore (1985 to 86) and America (1978 to 79) as well as his missionary engagement in Mandya (1986 to 88) was considerably commendable, too. His leadership touched its heights while at the helm of affairs of MST as Director General, also as General Councillor, and it requires being much-admired for several reasons. Outstandingly so, he presented a 'luminous face' of MST in various ways, both to insiders and outsiders.

Besides, opening several new avenues for MST, like Sangli mission region in Maharashtra as a by-product of his service in Mumbai, pastoral service to other Churches in India and overseas and

formation of students in institutes other than that of MST, is to be very well credited to the account of Father Sebastian. Moreover, he has always been ready to reach out to all persons and quarters in pastoral, formative and social arenas. Father Sebastian Thuruthel is a great and very much a complete person. He is endowed with all-round human talents — physical, intellectual, psychological, linguistic, social, cultural and spiritual. He has been displaying his professorial, administrative, directorial, pastoral and innovative capabilities all throughout his life, in diverse ways. He has a natural flair for language, literature and art and therefore is proficient in English and Malayalam. He is gifted with a sociable character and a pleasing disposition. Making human relations, that too with a personal touch, is his natural aptitude. Positive thinking is his foundational strength. He radiates a sense of fulfillment and joy always.

A happy person as he is, his intellectual powers are intertwined with seasoned sentiments. He is pastoral in his orientation and caring in his temperament. His genius contains in maintaining, entertaining and encouraging open perspectives and innovative ways, wherever they show up, in his students in special. Further, Father Sebastian is sincere-hearted and does things with his whole heart. He wears an ever-ready, broad and heart-warming smile on his face always. Seeing good qualities in the other and appreciating them is a quality that is inbuilt in him. He has an enormous capacity to listen to people and to feel their pain as well as to enjoy their joy. He is a powerful symbol of hard work, so much so that even in his eighties and nineties he works in the agricultural and horticultural gardens as well as extends pastoral service to the parishes around, untiringly so. Most of all, he is a man of deep and refined faith, conviction and fine divine tuning in life. With a wide range of personal qualities of being simple, humble, gentle, spontaneous, guileless, contented, frank, friendly, cheerful, cordial, and the like, Thuruthelachan, as he is popularly known, is affable and dear to one and all. Born to be so, I do not think he can ever be otherwise!

Father Sebastian has been an exceptional endowment to MST. His joining Deepthi College, Melamapara, the minor seminary of Missionary Society of Saint Thomas the Apostle, and later joining its team of Founding members, was indeed a higher vocation of a missionary character, yes, vocation within a vocation. No doubt, his linguistic and literary expertise, pastoral experience and especially elaborate teaching skills in St Joseph's engagements in the missions and pastoral corridors, his extensive teaching and Pontifical Seminary, Alua, stood in good stead in his new missionary journey.

His formative career and his ascendance to the apex administration as General Councillor and Director General, most of all, his inventive ways, proved to be a remarkable blessing for MST in diverse ways, in guiding the destinies of the missionary personnel of MST, who is scheduled to shoulder the mission of Jesus towards higher altitudes and larger magnitudes.

In addition, Father Thuruthel considers life as a mission and that mission emerges from his divinely-specified vision, precisely so. The spirit of priestly commitment in him was such that it defied being contained in small measures and was happily inclined to overflow towards larger horizons, especially to corners that are in real need. Even after his formal retirement he continues to be an immense source of inspiration for all priests, both within MST and outside, in portraying an exemplary pearl (ratnam) out of a priest, even in the simplest matters. He has a God-given charisma of deeply touching the hearts of those who come in contact with him. He has always been a precious touch stone as a priest in MST, and for that matter even outside MST, in diverse ways. He stands an icon of devotion, quality and excellence in life, both human and divine. To say the least, he has been a God-send to MST and to all those who profusely benefitted from his person. Certainly, MST has always the privilege of being proud of having him as a well-regarded and exemplary priest member and a veteran missionary guide for all times to come.

Deepthi College, the kindergarten formation centre of the new missionary venture, was the garden centre where Father Sebastian proved himself a blossomed and seasoned 'Rector' with an

extraordinary and resourceful capacity for teaching and formation. He was committed to living the ideal ‘seminary must be a home’, as per the Vatican document ‘Optatum Totius’. To quote his own words from an interview published in Santhome News a few months ago, ‘I was a pot used by God to water the seedlings in the nursery of divine vocation’. Obviously, his self-realization speaks volumes of what he really has been. His open and fresh outlook to life as regards the training of missionary siblings was his principal strength. Most importantly, he created a social milieu of friendly and collaborative set of professors on the staff, who contributed very much to his success in rendering effective formation. No wonder, Deepthi College, with Thuruthelachan at the core of it as a dearly loved Rector, wouldn’t ever have a second anywhere else!

Father Sebastian was always a fatherly figure to the students. Outgoing temperament was the wide setting for his grand success as Rector. He would love them and respect them, so much so that he used to deal and speak with students as if they were his equals. He would give attention to every student, recognize their talents and nurture them towards their blooming up. He knew when to be serious and when to be in lighter veins. He had a special knack for helping young boys to grow beyond inhibition. He had a facility to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the students. He had a talent for accompanying them in their personal life and encouraging them to learn, open up and grow up in a resourceful fashion. He loved to spend time with them, joke with them, tease them, play games with them and assist them to be prayerful, good and capable human beings. He would listen to them and help them to be out of their problems, too. In sum, he loved his students as God-given gifts and was deeply committed to them. No wonder, his students treasure and admire this ‘fatherly father-figure’ in lofty regard and esteem, for all times to come.

The most natural and remarkable dimension of the brilliance of Father Thuruthel has been reflected in being a teacher and a Guru of an exceptionally professional calibre. Of all the teachers I had in my life, from school to university, I never came across a high grade English teacher who could excel Father Thuruthel in his command over English as well as in the art of teaching, especially for the young ones. He is a born teacher and stands an unrivalled authority in phonetics and linguistics. He has a very artistic and appealing handwriting as well as a good looking hairstyle, very symbolic of his personality. His pronunciation, diction, style, modulation, and the like, would make a melodious music out of English language, so much so that English language itself would feel proud of him! He used to chew and relish teaching with a confident and cheerful face. No wonder, even dull students, like me, would get interested and start learning unawares!

The most creditable quality of this ‘Father Guru’ is his insightful power of inspiring and motivating students towards scaling excellence in life. Father Sebastian is Bachelor of Arts Hons (MA) in English from Madras Christian College, the present Chennai. But, it appears to me that the modern day Doctors of English wouldn’t have the nerve to stand before his merit in English and teaching, quite ironically so. In fact, old is gold and distinction is a rare and hard-earned merit. Needles to mention that Father Sebastian had it to the brim! He is proud of having a few students, who, having got ignited and enthused by him, would learn the dictionary itself by heart and write letter to him in phonetic symbols, within a few months of his teaching effect. Kudos to the Guru!

Among nearly 350 members spread over 47 batches between 1969 and 2016, MST has quite a few persons who can handle English admirably well, thanks to the painstaking toil and devotion of this Father Guru. Yet, to my honest impression, the towering stature of Father Thuruthel, in the quality of English, the elegant style of speaking, the engaging way of teaching with a smile, the aesthetic handwriting, the inspirational capacity, and the like, more importantly, the good quality human being he is, will ever remain without a parallel, unique in excellence and style!

Well, the ‘pearly coronation’ of Father Sebastian Thuruthel with the award of ‘Vaidikaratnam’ is a historic moment of celebration – a celebration for all his students and disciples, all priests and even

nuns, the Syro Malabar Church, the Christian community in India, the universal Church and for the entire human society at large as well as for himself and MST. Father Thuruthel has carved in his person an 'icon' of human and divine excellence in life. He has emerged to larger horizons of visibility as a 'beacon' of how best a Catholic priest can ascend the ladder of wholehearted devotion and service to the world of the humans as well as to the nature we have our being in. No wonder, Father Sebastian's sublime model was Jesus the greatest Master, who humbly and lovingly washed the feet of his disciples and potted a divine mould of human life. It is my ardent wish that this momentous event of 'vaidikaratnam award' may prove an occasion for priests and religious in special for getting further motivated, enlightened, empowered and elevated as powerful channels of the divine spirit, in view of making a world family of God the Father that is radiant with harmonious living and peace with one another.

Father Sebastian Thuruthel in his noble self is a 'novel', both in terms of a long narrative and a tale as well as of originality, newness and freshness. I am not a novelist, not even in the least, though I wish I were! Therefore, I own up, I am not able to do justice to all that he is by describing in words. I do not aspire to do it either. What I have been trying to do is to write a 'short story' about him. But, I do feel, even as a short story, what I made is incomplete. Much more about Father Sebastian still remains to take its due space even in a short story on him. I am afraid, my language is yet to grow, a lot more, in order to do the job I intend to fulfil. All that I can underscore right now is that 'there is something very special about Father Sebastian Thuruthel'! I am not able to articulate what it is in a manner that is worthy of him. I believe, silence will do that brilliant job much more eloquently than words can ever aspire to!

May Very Reverend Father Sebastian Thuruthel keep enjoying good health and cheer always and, as a precious 'pearly priest' and a 'priestly pearl', continue to inspire, motivate and empower profusely priests and people of God, towards a life that is value-based, humane and filled with divine delicacies!

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