

Our Newest Confrere-Bishop



An interview with
most Reverend VARGHESE THOTTAMKARA, C.M.
Coadjutor Bishop of the Apostolic Vicariate of Nekemte (Ethiopia)

John T. Maher, C.M.,
with Varghese Thottamkara, C.M.

Editor's note

Last June, as the General Curia gathered at St. John's University in New York City for final preparations for the International Visitors Meeting, word spread very quickly of the appointment of Fr. Varghese Thottamkara, C.M. as coadjutor bishop of the Apostolate Vicariate of Nekemte, Ethiopia, a place with a strong Vincentian presence. Announced in a press bulletin by the Holy See on June 28, 2013, it caught all by surprise, most of all Fr. Varghese! Before his ordination as bishop and departure from the Curia and Rome, Fr. Varghese sat down with *Vincentiana* for an interview and to share his thoughts, reactions, and hopes.

Tell a little about your background, family, education, and how you came to the CM.

I was born on June 2, 1959 at Thottuva, in the Archdiocese of Ernakulam-Ankamaly of Kerala, to late Mr. & Mrs. Souru (Xavier) and Mariam Thottamkara. I have 3 brothers and 2 sisters. My father was a farmer and from a middle-class family. After completing high school studies at G.V.H. School, Koovapady, I joined the minor Seminary of

the Congregation of the Mission at St. Vincent's, Gopalpur-Orissa on July 2, 1976. My cousin, Fr. Basil C.M., another Vincentian priest, was my inspiration in joining the CM. Fr. Louis Vadakeparambil was my vocation promoter.

I did my philosophy studies at Aquinas College from 1979-1982, and entered the Internal Seminary of the Indian Province of the Congregation of the Mission, on May 11, 1982. Having completed theological studies at St. Joseph's Pontifical Seminary in Alwaya, I pronounced vows and was incorporated into the Congregation on May 10, 1986. The priestly ordination was conferred on me on January 6, 1987 at my home parish, St. Joseph's Church, Thottuva by the late Cardinal Antony Padiyara of the Ernakulam- Angamaly Archdiocese.

What has been your 'pathway' or various assignments in ministry?

After ordination, I served as assistant parish priest, hostel warden and youth animator in our parishes of Muniguda and Christnagar in the diocese of Berhampur for three and a half years. In October 1990, I was assigned to Ethiopia to teach in the Minor Seminary of the Vincentians at Ambo, where I learned the local language Amharic, and served as English teacher and assistant Rector for 3 years. From 1992 I started teaching in the Major Seminary at Addis Ababa as a visiting Professor. In 1993, I was transferred to Addis Ababa as the first Rector of St. Paul's Major Seminary of the Apostolic Vicariate of Nekemte. During this time I taught various topics in Theology at St. Francis Theological Institute.

In 1995 I was sent to Rome by the Ethiopian province to specialize in Moral Theology. On completion of graduate studies, I was awarded a Licentiate in Moral Theology from St. Thomas University of the Dominicans known as '*Angelicum*'.

I returned back to Ethiopia in 1997 September and was appointed Rector of the Vincentian Major Seminary at Addis Ababa and continued to teach Moral Theology in St. Francis' Institute. I served also as the Dean of Theology of the Institute. I served as provincial consulor of the Ethiopian CM for two terms and assisted in the formation program of the CMRS (Conference of Major Religious Superiors) with classes, conferences and retreats and taught Medical Ethics in the Nursing College of the Catholic Bishops' Conference at Wolliso.

In 2002 June I returned to India and served as Rector of the Vincentian minor seminary, provincial consulter and assistant provincial of the Southern Indian Province and Rector and Superior of the "Vincentian Major Seminary" at Aluva. The Superior General appointed me Procurator General to the Holy See of the Congregation and Archivist General in 2005. As Archivist General of the Congregation, I attended a Course in Archivistry and Paleography at the state university of LUMSA in collaboration with the Vatican Library. In 2006 I was elected

as the provincial of the Southern Province of India in which position I served for 4 years. On July 10, 2010 in the Jubilee year of the death of St. Vincent, during the General Assembly, at Paris, I was elected one of the Assistant Generals of the Congregation of the Mission.

What was your experience like as a missionary in Ethiopia: ministry, people, etc?

I worked in Ethiopia mainly as a formator, retreat preacher, spiritual counselor and teacher. My service was not limited to Vincentians alone, but was extended to the seminarians, religious, and priests of various Congregations and dioceses of Ethiopia. I enjoyed serving the Ethiopian Church, as I saw how much it was needed, as well as how much my service was appreciated. I really felt satisfied that my work there bore fruit. Today, I can see many of my former students working earnestly in Ethiopia in various positions for the good of the Church and of Ethiopian people.

The Ethiopian people are a very warm and hospitable people. They respect guests and honor them. Even the poorest readily to share with others the little they have. I was so deeply affected by the Ethiopian cultural values that I made a comparative study of them with some of the important Gospel values for my research paper in Rome as part of the work to get a licentiate in did graduate studies. Though I left Ethiopia after 12 years of service there, I love the Ethiopian people and am happy to go back to Ethiopia.

What was your reaction when you were informed of your appointment as Bishop?

Indeed, it came to me as a surprise. I thought that they would certainly be looking for an Ethiopian to lead the Vicariate. So my first reaction was "why me?". I remembered the words of one of the bishops of Ethiopia who said "*It is the Holy Spirit who works through us and therefore we can never say 'no' to the Holy Spirit!*". I imagined how challenging the task is going to be and I knew my limitations. Yet I said in my prayer, "*If this is what you want me, Lord, let your will be done. But please, give me your Grace to carry it out well*". The officials (Bishops) from the Propaganda Fide also explained to me the need, and the reason for choosing me. So I accepted with all humility.

In your opinion and from your experience, what is the Bishop's role in today's Church?

I believe the role of the Bishop is to lead, teach, and to give witness. This role is to be exercised in collaboration with the laity, religious, and priests of a diocese. Above all, a bishop should guide and lead

through personal example, genuine love, and respect. The bishop should be a unifying force who, together with the faithful, religious, and clergy, allows themselves to be guided by Christ, the eternal shepherd. The true good of the diocese, especially of the faithful, should be the primary concern of the bishop.

In your opinion, what are the needs of the Catholic clergy and people of the Apostolic Vicariate of Nekemte, Ethiopia?

The majority of the priests of the Vicariate are my former students. They know me well and I know them. They are enthusiastic and devout priests. I believe they need somebody who will motivate appreciate, and unite them. I will be concentrating on these aspects as I reach there. The people are very simple and poor. They need all kinds of assistance. The pastoral and catechetical need is great. The faithful must be helped to grow in their faith and live it. They are looking to the Catholic Church to help them address their social and educational needs. So evangelization through schools, social work, and charities is also a goal of the diocese.

Is there anything you like to say to the confreres in your province, the General Curia whom you have lived and worked with, as well as the entire Congregation as you enter this new phase of your life and ministry?

I am proud of being a Vincentian. I owe my identity to the Congregation of the Mission. When I was celebrating the sacerdotal silver jubilee in my home parish in India last year, my parish priest asked me to tell to the youth whether I am happy with my vocation as a missionary. I told them "There are many challenges of being a missionary. But if you ask me whether I am happy as a Vincentian, my answer is this: *'If God were to offer me another life, I would again choose to be a Vincentian priest'*". I said this with deep conviction, and I repeat this even today. I learned to be a simple zealous missionary seeing the example of many committed confreres. So I wanted my confreres to be true to their call. I thank the Congregation for forming me and giving chance to serve the church and the poor in various capacities. Now I am taking up this task of the Church in the name of the Congregation. The Apostolic Vicariate of Nekemte is entrusted to the care of the Vincentians. I am the eighth consecutive Vincentian bishop of the Vicariate. They have asked me to take up this task just because I am a Vincentian, and a former missionary in Ethiopia. So I ask all the confreres to continue to consider me a confrere and encourage and support me. I will do this task in your name.

Is there anything else you'd like to say?

The task ahead for me is a challenging one. I feel sad that I have to once again leave behind my friends and community and learn to adjust to new realities situations and ministry. I hope with the help and prayers of all I will learn to fit into the new shoes. I look forward to the continued love, support prayer, and encouragement from all. Thank you and God bless you all.