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CMI

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Dr. Fr. Thomas Kalayil CMI: A Placid Scholar and a Solid Professor

It was during the Christmas vacation of 1986 that I met two people who became highly influential in my life. One was a priest and the other was a scholastic. For the next three years I continued to have periodical interactions with both of them. Eventually, on June 4, 1989, I joined the CMI congregation at Chethipuzha. By the grace of God, these two gentlemen were there to receive me and to initiate me to religious life. Dr. Fr. Thomas Kalayil and Br. Francis Njallampuzha were my rector and assistant rector respectively, for the next one year. As trainers they were the best ones in the Saint Joseph Province, Thiruvananthapuram of the CMI Congregation could provide us with.



Fr. Dr. Thomas Kalavil CMI

Fr. Thomas Kalayil, for me was a great source of knowledge. During the one year when I was trained under him, I could not think of anything that he could not deliver to me. Until the moment I joined the seminary, I thought my father to be the most knowledgeable person on earth. I corrected my opinion after meeting Fr. Thomas. He could clear all the doubts I had, whatever the magnitude might be. My fascination never ended as everyday he brought surprises.

One day some foreigners visited the monastery. They were with Fr. Thomas when I first met them on the corridors of the Sacred Heart Monastery, Chethipuzha. When I passed them, I heard Fr. Thomas speaking to them in a tongue that I had never heard. I was curious. In the evening, during the daily gathering after supper, my curiosity burst out. I asked Fr. Thomas about the language in which he was conversing with the strangers. "Italian," he replied. I became more curious. My next question to him was, where he learned Italian. He then told us that he had studied in Rome. From the very next day, several things were revealed to me about this great man who was looking after a bunch of fifteen year olds. He completed his Doctorate in Biblical Theology in May 1973 from the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome with the maximum possible grade of Summa Cum Laude Probatus. The title of his doctoral dissertation was Christ's Work of Redemption according to St. Ephrem. He had reached the Gregorian University in 1965 to complete the Licentiate in Theology. He continued his studies and acquired a second licentiate in Sacred Scripture from the renowned Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome during 1967-69, with the grade Cum Laude Probatus.

Hence, I did not find it strange to believe his fluency in Italian. What astonished me was his mastery in other languages. He taught us Latin from mid year. I came to know that he taught Hebrew, Greek and Syriac as well at various levels in several other place.

Fr. Thomas Kalayil is a formator par excellence. He loved his students as his own. He treated the formees under him as his own children. He used to address us in the same rhythm and melody our parents used to address us, quite often using our pet names. The Johannine construction of Jesus as a loving father to his apostles (John 21:5) was very much exemplified in Fr. Thomas.

During the month of November and December he entrusted us to Fr. Joseph Puthenpura and left for Dharmaram College. This was his plan ever since he took up the rectorship of minor seminary students in

the year 1982. We came to know that he was teaching Biblical Theology in Dharmaram College. He lectured Pentateuch, Wisdom Literature and Introduction to Sacred Scripture at Dharmaram College. I was fortunate enough to attend his lectures in Wisdom Literature, when I was doing my Bachelor's in Theology in 2002. I remember him always as a placid, jovial and contented scholar.

Immediately after completing the doctoral studies, Fr. Thomas Kalayil was appointed to Dharmaram College. He served Dharmaram College for two terms as a member of the faculty. His first innings was from 1973 to 1982. He came back to Dharmaram in 2007 and continued there till 2017. Between 1982 and 2007, he served Dharmaram College as visiting faculty. During his long tenure of service at Dharmaram College, he held several administrative positions such as that of Academic Secretary (Registrar, 1973-75), Controller of Examinations (1978-81) and Master of Students (1975-82, 2007-2008). Fr. Thomas was always a protective father to the scholastics who were entrusted to him. His students knew him, heard his voice and loved him. (John 10:14, 27) In the entire history of Dharmaram College, among all the Masters of Scholastics, he would ever be remembered among the most popular ones.

Fr. Thomas Kalayil is systematic as a spiritual director. He made sure that he meets his directees periodically. A distinct feature of his spiritual direction is that, he schedules the sessions with the directees well in advance so that none of them misses the mandatory meetings. He keeps the record of all those who are under his spiritual direction. He prays for them regularly. Even when he travels outside for classes, his scheduling made sure that his directees never misses the regular spiritual directions. While living as an aspirant I experienced his spiritual interests and involvements. At Dharmaram, Chethipuzha and Mannanam, for several years, he was the one who was giving introduction to the celebration of Raza, the most solemn celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy. When he was our rector, he used to train us in the active participation in the Liturgy. Between 2008 and 2017, as a spiritual director, he guided numerous scholastics in their spiritual discernment.

Fr. Thomas Kalayil has been a much sought after teacher. He has an engaging style of teaching. It was a delight to see him giving lectures. He has a very attractive body language while delivering lectures. He involves everyone to be actively participative. The vast knowledge he has in almost every field makes his classes great. This is the reason why he had invitations from a good number of places for regular classes. He served as a visiting faculty in Kristu Jyoti College (Bangalore), Vidya Deep (Bangalore), Sandesa Nilayam (Changanacherry), Mar Thoma Vidyanikethan (Changanacherry), Amala Theological College (Changanacherry), Missionary Orientation Centre (Kottayam) and Vijnana Nilayam Institute of Philosophy and Religion (Eluru, Andhra Pradesh). He treated all his students in a dignified manner.

One of the unavoidable things in the life of a religious is to minister as a superior. In religious life, administration is often considered as penance. In two separate terms for about a total of six years, he was the Vicar Provincial of the St. Joseph Province, Thiruvananthapuram. During his first term, he also served as the Provincial Councillor for education and communication. In the second term, he guided the province in the affairs of evangelization and pastoral ministry. His personal contacts with the then heads of the eparchies helped him to make sure that the relations between the province and the eparchies were cordial and functional. St. Joseph's Monastery, founded in 1831, is the first monastery of the CMI congregation. It is also known as the mother house of the CMI congregation. He was appointed Prior of St. Joseph's Monastery, Mannanam in 2002 for three years. His leadership gave the monastic community a newfound vitality. His loving presence and caring attitude attracted people around, to the monastery. He had special care for the supporting staff. His sense of history helped him build a strong network of supporters for the monastery. As an ardent devotee Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara, he took several steps to popularize devotion to him. During the same period, he was also the parish priest of the St. Joseph's parish at Mannanam.

His administration was not without any hurdles. He had to face one of the tumultuous times in the history of Kuriakose Elias College, Mannanam, while he was its manager. A good number of teachers participated in the state-wide strike of the government employees and teachers. The entire college was almost paralysed. The road between Mannanam Bus Stop and College gate were flooded with posters, placards and supporters of the strike. Fr. Thomas took the leadership in obtaining the High Court order in asserting that the road is a private road of the Monastery. This forced the eviction of the striking staff and removal of

posters and placards. He ordered strong action against some of the teachers including a state level leader of the teachers' organization. Some of these measures helped to clamp down the strike to a certain extent. A usually calm and pleasant Fr. Thomas became fearless fighter for the cause of rights of the Monastery.

Fr. Thomas has deep love and sense of history. It was during his tenure as Prior of the Monastery that a serious attempt was initiated to organize the archives at Manannam to make them more accessible to researchers. He spent a good amount of time in cataloguing the documents in Syriac, Latin etc. He was pulled drawn into another unfinished work during that time. The work towards the compilation of the complete works of the legendary writer and father of St. Thomas Christians, Dr. Placid Podipara, that had begun a couple of years before, was almost moribund by then. As a student of Fr. Placid and a great admirer of him, he took up the daunting task of editing and publishing them. It was a laborious effort on several counts. He had to literally read every line as the number of typos was enormous. The main reason for this was the presence of the numerous theological and historical terms that were not available in the computer dictionary. Word by word, he read, re-read, copyedited the works of Fr. Placid, almost every day. When he completed his term as Prior, he was half way through the editing. However, he didn't get an opportunity to continue living in the Mannanam monastery after his term was completed. He was transferred to Thiruvananthapuram and then to Thiruvalla. During the next three years, he lived in Thiruvalla with limited facility and mobility. He was without any official assignment during those days. This was a blessing in disguise. He continued and completed the editing work while at Thiruvalla by not just completing the proof reading but by writing authentic and authoritative introductions to each and every work of Fr. Placid. The great works of Fr. Placid are accessible to the whole world now, thanks to Fr. Thomas Kalayil. No one can think of a better person than Fr. Thomas Kalayil for bringing such a magnum opus in five volumes consisting of over 3000 pages. The Church, in particular, that of St. Thomas Christians is perpetually obliged to Fr. Thomas Kalayil for this great accomplishment. I would say, it is an invaluable asset to researchers all across the various fields of theology. This might be one of the greatest theological contributions by the CMI congregation in modern times. As for Fr. Thomas, he had delivered numerous talks on Fr. Placid. He had written on Fr. Placid in several journals and annuals. In the souvenir Placidachan published in 1995 to commemorate the tenth death anniversary of Fr. Placid Podipara, the article titled "The Profile of a Prophet" contributed by Fr. Thomas Kalayil is a much talked about item in scholarly circles. There will not be a disputed in attributing Fr. Thomas Kalayil as the foremost Placid scholar of our time.

Fr. Thomas is a prolific writer. He is one of the few theologians in India who regularly contribute to the development of theology in the vernacular. His articles on the Bible, biblical themes and Church History were appearing frequently for decades in the periodicals such as Biblehashyam, Mathavum Chinthayum, Karmelakusumam and Kathiroli, etc. In Kathiroli alone, more than 100 articles were published which were much appreciated by the laity, religious and clerics. Fr. Thomas also had contributed to the theological journals such as Asian Horizons, Christian Orient and Jeevadhara. In many of the bulletins and annuals too, he contributed regularly. It might be another mammoth task for anyone to collect all the works of Fr. Thomas Kalayil. He is a solid professor with content and delivery.

During his youth, he was part of the great initiative of the translation of Peshitha to Malayalam. He collaborated as translator and General Editor in the publication of a new Malayalam translation of the New Testament from Mannanam in 1978, which many scholars consider as one of the best Malayalam translations of the New Testament theologically and literarily.

He is on the committee of the members of Dharmaram College who are preparing its history. Fr. Thomas has a collection of a host of rare documents. Added to this is his memory about events and persons. Several of the chapters of the history including the introduction have heavy contributions from Fr. Thomas Kalayil. During the various rounds of the meetings of the history committee, his adaptability was very visible. Fr. Thomas is communitarian to the core. He thoroughly enjoyed the semestral outings of the staff members. He makes sure that he cancels all his programmes to take part in community activities. Although a man of conviction and courage, he never tried to insist that his views are the final ones. In several theological and related controversies, he always stood for the common good.

In December 1989, he celebrated his Silver Jubilee of Priestly Ordination. His mother, Birgitta was fortunate to take part in the jubilee celebrations. His father Joseph belonged to the noble family of Kalayil from Koonamthanam, Chethipuzha, Changanassery. He was born on August 18, 1937. His primary education was at St. Anne's (Convent) School, Changanacherry during 1943-48. Later he continued his school studies until the Secondary at St. Berchmans English High School, Changanacherry.

In 1955 he was admitted to the Mary Immaculate Minor Seminary, Mannanam. In the very next year, he was trained at Mary Queen's Minor Seminary, Mutholy. His novitiate and juniorate were at Sacred Heart Monastery, Chethipuzha during 1957-1959. On May 16, 1958, he became a professed religious. He reached Dharmaram College in 1959 for his ecclesiastical studies. During the historical Eucharistic Congress at Bombay where for the first time a Roman Pontiff, Pope Paul VI, visited India, he was ordained priest on December 1, 1964.

The octogenarian Fr. Thomas Kalayil belongs to a rare galaxy of the priests in India who contributed extensively to theological literature. His type of persons is a rarity. The life and times of Fr. Thomas Kalayil remind every CMI priest to respond positively to the talents each one is bestowed with. Fr. Thomas used to get up very early in the morning. His usual day begins with morning meditation and the Holy Qurbana. He then reaches the chapel at 6 AM, to take part in the morning prayers along with the community. Then he goes back to his room for academic work. This routine gives him sufficient time to read and write. The vast collection of books, articles and documents he has in his room are not just decorations and space fillers but are accreditations and mind chillers of his scholarship. Living with him, studying under him and knowing him for almost three decades, I can undoubtedly say that his veins contain the true blue blood of holiness and scholarship, like that of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Emmanuel Andumalil, Bernard Alencheril, Placid Podipara, Mathias Mundadan, et al.

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