

Meher Marfatia Meets The Last Few Spanish Jesuit Priests Still Working In Mumbai

TWELVE SPANISH MEN

I am with you always, yes, to the end of time.

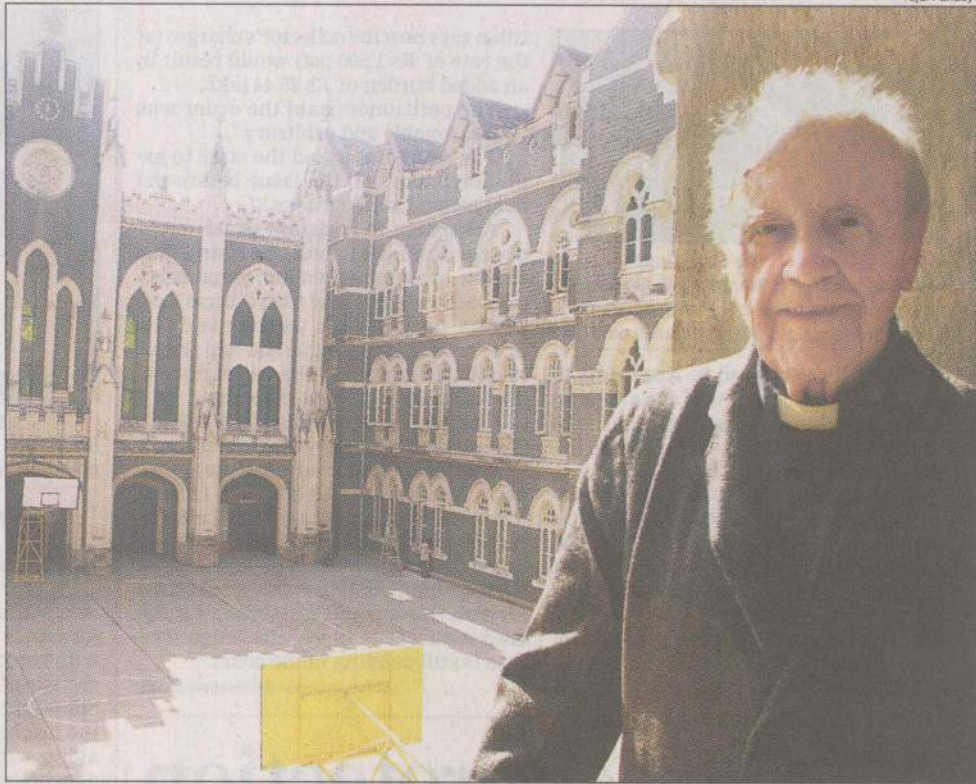
—Matthew 28: 19-20

These words I heard 50 years ago and came to India knowing He would be with me and that gave me courage," says Fr Tony Jurschik, pastor at St Anne's Church in Mazagaon. Urged to actually be the change they wanted to see in the world, many missionaries like him left Spain after the civil war ended in 1939. Most headed for South America, Japan, the Philippines and India. The dozen that continue to quietly work in missionary institutions across town are well into the autumnal years, yet show a spryness that matches the dedication their vocation demands.

The undisputed patriarch among them at 93, Fr Joachim Fuster still slowly strides rather than shuffles down the corridors of St Xavier's College where he is director of the Institute of Counselling. Growing up in Majorca almost a century ago, he little dreamt how close a bond he'd have with India, whose ethos he is so steeped in. Thanks to a BA degree in Hindi from Patna University and a Ph.D from Baroda, phrases like "Hai na" and "bandobast" charmingly pepper the conversation recalling 55 years of change in the city of his adoption. Fr Fuster rues selfish attitudes and an overriding lack of concern. "Youngsters want much more freedom now. They need better parenting which uses understanding, not anger," he says with a wizened smile.

Such sentiments have less to do with Jesuit zeal or a European sensibility; these men have consistently proved to be the greatest educationists, feels film-maker Gyan Correa who schooled at midtown St Mary's in the 1970s. When Fr Joseph Aran walked in to take a class, students were transfixed—"Shivaji stood before us within 30 minutes of being described"—is one recollection. But Correa has a more outstanding memory. Then assistant principal, Aran was to rusticate a bunch of wild boys caught indulging in strongly objectionable behaviour. When Correa defended his mates, an irate Aran ordered him to leave the room. That evening, the family received a phone call from the priest. "Not only did he praise my father for raising me to stand up for what I believed in, he apologised to me before everyone next morning," says Correa. "Though disagreeing with my viewpoint, he saw it as a character-building exercise. Fr Aran felt nothing should destroy a spirit of enquiry, stop one from self-expression. If he was big enough to publicly admit this, I learnt not to get carried away being opinionated."

Faith for a fledgling nation drew Fr Manolo Tasso to India from Veruela monastery where he studied philosophy and languages as a Society of Jesus novitiate. Then Indian missionaries reached Spain, asking for volunteers. The 21-year-old decided to oblige. "It was a question of answering an appeal. I offered myself," he says simply. He landed in 1948 amid a palpably dynamic people who, freshly freed from the British, brimmed with idealism and hope. At 80, Tasso serves as treasurer at Seva Niketan in Byculla and looks back on the years committed to expounding theology in city seminaries, besides teaching French and Spanish. He has returned only twice to Spain, content to keep in touch with grandnieces and nephews on email.



FROM MAJORCA TO MUMBAI: Fr Joachim Fuster, 93, who did his BA in Hindi from Patna University and his PhD from Baroda University, is director of the Institute of Counselling at St Xavier's College

Fr Jurschik revisits home every three years to meet his father. Otherwise, happiest where he now wholly belongs, he says, "Like the rest of Europe, Spain is getting more materialistic, faithless. It's no place for a priest. India has room for values and community spirit." The second of eight children of Catholic parents seeking refuge at the Czech embassy in Madrid, Jurschik may have been a lawyer had he not distinctly "heard the call from God". This was at a riverside retreat in Manresa, the peaceful spot that inspired a turning-point in St Ignatius of Loyola's life. It wasn't

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English (which, like every Spaniard, he studied from scratch) but the Marathi and Hindi diligently learnt as soon as he stepped on desi soil that helped him minister to Adivasis in Dindori and Dalits in neighbouring Manmad. Used to him wearing their typical kurta-topi, neo-Buddhist locals altogether forgot he was a foreigner. Spanish companions equally hailed "El Indio" as they watched Turschik move between villages encouraging better agricultural techniques for farmers through the Maharashtra Prabodhan Seva Mandal.

Also picking up Marathi "*aapo aap*" (just naturally), Fr Francis Juan often tells delighted mu-

nicipal officials, "*Tumchya peksha mee jaast Indian aah*" (I'm more Indian than you)! At St Stanislaus School in suburban Bandra, he and fellow missionary, 83-year-old Fr Peter Ribes, recount how they were "fortuitously sent to India", after assuring their superior in Spain they were ready to go wherever he deemed fit. From a Barcelona clan of doctors and engineers, Ribes reached India as a 25-year-old priest. Mumbai's last Latin tutor, he regrets that the three most beautiful classical languages gifted to civilisation—Latin, Greek and Sanskrit—have few takers today. "We're trapped in an age of mere information, no formation," he quips. Juan agrees that true knowledge eludes "two-dimensional youngsters" who flirt with a smattering of everything but miss depth in what they do. Ribes adds: "But Bombay has been very accepting. I don't need Spain. All fulfilment and joy lies right here."

The 2008 Jesuit calendar for Bombay Province pays tribute to priests whose contribution illuminated both religious and secular spheres down the decades. Interesting Spaniards among these include historian Fr Henry Heras, way ahead of the times in his appreciation of ancient indigenous cultures. Fr Hermenegild Santapau arrived with two doctorates and a deep love for India, to become chief botanist to the government, with several plant species and even a genus bearing his name: Santapauella. And Fr Ramon Nubiola was so adored by the Talasari tribals whose rights he tirelessly championed, that in May 1991 when over 400 of them tearfully filed past his coffin, someone said, "Open his heart and you will find the word 'Warli' engraved there."

Tejal Pandey