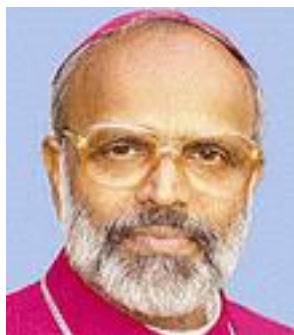


Where the Church's Growth in Fastest

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Bishop From Northeast India Speaks on Christ's Appeal
The northeast corner of India is the place where the Catholic Church has grown most over the past 30 years, with an average of about 10,000 adult baptisms every year -- and this despite the fact that for many generations missionaries were banned.



Mark Riedemann for Where God Weeps in cooperation with Aid to the Church in Need spoke with a bishop from the region, John Thomas Kattrukudiyil of Itanagar, the capital of Arunachal Pradesh.

Q: Since the 1970s the Catholic Church has exploded in this northeastern corner of India growing today to a number a little under 200,000. To what can we attribute this explosive growth of the Catholic faith?

Bishop Kattrukudiyil: This is a phenomenon that surprised everybody. The Church, the government, everyone was surprised. The immediate reason I can give was the desire of the young people of Arunachal Pradesh to profit from the charitable activities of the Christian missionaries. They saw the good activities done by the missionaries and since the missionaries were not allowed in Arunachal Pradesh they thought: "well let us go out and invite them." One thing led to another; they received baptism and they became Christians, Catholics. Another factor is that the young were not at all happy with their traditional religious practices. For example, they used to have to offer many sacrifices when someone was sick. This is very expensive and as the traditional religion imposed more and more such expenses they then turned to the new religion, Christianity, that asked them only to pray to Jesus. They then found that when they prayed to Jesus they were getting healed, they were getting graces. So that helped a lot to bring about change.

Q: Can one say that traditional religions are based on fear?



Bishop Kattrukudiyil: It is basically based on fear. They

believe in many evil spirits and these spirits control their lives and they always have to placate these evil spirits. And how do you placate them, for example, in an area where there is no medical help available? By offering more and more animal sacrifices. When someone is sick, the village traditional religion leader tells them that this is because of an evil spirit so you have to offer 10 mithun -- the Indian bison -- for sacrifice, or five pigs or 10 cows. For a village this involves hundreds or thousands of animals and that is a big burden on them. As soon as they saw an alternative, they jumped on it.

Q: And the missionaries could come and say: "Have no fear, there is one spirit, the Holy Spirit, and it's a good spirit."

Bishop Kattrukudiyil: Yes and especially in presenting him as our loving Father in contrast to these spirits who are only there to threaten us and to persecute us. I think that made a big difference.

Q: And this extraordinary growth in the face of the fact that in Arunachal Pradesh, and the other sister states of northeastern India, there is an anti-conversion law. What is the anti-conversion law and how did this come about?

Bishop Kattrukudiyil: This anti-conversion law exists not only in the northeast like Arunachal Pradesh but in other states like Orissa, and Pradesh. How did this come about? This law came out of fear among a section of Hindus that Christianity might spread all over India. It is an unfounded fear though it may be that it is being used as a political tool in order to win political power. Some Hindu's whip up the emotions of the Hindu majority by saying that Hindus are in danger and thus the need to bring all the polarized Hindus under one political apparatus and then turn that group into a political power. This could be the political angle to the whole story; otherwise it is unbelievable that Christians who number no more than 2% of the population could pose a threat to a big country like India.

Q: As a consequence of not having any priests, it was the laity who started the evangelization in Arunachal Pradesh?



Bishop Kattrukudiyil: Yes, especially the women. A

priest established a mission at the gates of Arunachal Pradesh close to the market place. He met some of the Arunachal women and invited them to the mission. These people were more than happy to have someone to talk to. While they were doing their business in the market and through talking to them, he learned a few words of their language. They trusted him. He then mentioned his faith to them. They accepted and many of them were baptized. They went back to their village. He mentioned too that their children were welcome to study. So they brought their children to the mission. He put these children in the schools. In the end this mission station became the center for baptisms. Many people would say: "Let me go to Harmuti to get baptized" and they would come, stay there a day or two, get baptized and go back to their village.

Q: And as we know, today, there are hundreds...

Bishop Kattrukudiyil: At least about 180,000 Catholics must be there.

Q: ... And 10,000 adult baptisms every year?

Bishop Kattrukudiyil: Close to that number takes place every year.

Q: What would be the most important tool in terms of the presence of the Catholic Church in Arunachal Pradesh?

Bishop Kattrukudiyil: The government and the tribal population accept us because of our contribution in the field of education. Everybody knows that the whole northeast owes a great deal to the missionaries because a large percentage of the populations who are educated have gone through our schools.

Q: In fact, many generations coming now into leadership have passed through these Catholic schools?

Bishop Kattrukudiyil: Many of those who initiated this anti-conversion law have their children and grandchildren in Catholic schools. They say: "Yes, yes it is good that the missionaries have schools for us, but not for the poor because they may get converted." They want the poor to remain ignorant. They just want to use the Church facilities for themselves.

Q: ... Only for their own purposes?

Bishop Kattrukudiyil: Yes and in fact, this tendency is seen also among a certain sections of the elite in Arunachal Pradesh who ask me: "Bishop, why are you wasting your time opening schools in the remote villages? You have a very nice school in Itanagar. Put all your resources there; charge a very high fee and we will send our children there." I say: "No, that is not the purpose for which I am here. I would open a school in the most remote village sooner than here in the city."

Q: And the purpose is to reach out to the poorest of the poor?

Bishop Kattrukudiyil: Yes. Accepting Christianity is a byproduct but we would like to give these people who have been denied the basic right to education the possibility of good education.

Q: Would you say that the primary phase of evangelization has passed or are we still in the primary phase?

Bishop Kattrukudiyil: The expansion of the Church at a rapid phase has slowed down. Somehow with the passage of time, the coming of missionaries, institutionalization of the Church this rapid phase has slowed down but the appreciation for the Church has remained and the people still keep coming. The focus now is on consolidation like giving catechesis, and this has its own difficulties: difficult terrain to reach the villages and the question of language, all these dialects, every priest is not able to learn all these dialects so we need translators and then lay catechists.

Q: The first evangelization came from the Baptists and they did a fantastic job. You have good relations with the Baptists. Now there are new churches coming in. How is the relationship with all these groups and how is this inter-Christian dialogue managed?

Bishop Kattrukudiyil: The first Christians in Arunachal Pradesh were the Baptists, however, today in terms of influence and visibility, the Catholic Church is by far the most visible in Arunachal Pradesh. When the government wants to deal with the Christian groups they approach the bishop of the Catholic Church to find out what the Christians will say. I have over time found that all the Christian groups generally and very subtly accepted the leadership of the bishop and accepted the bishop as a representative of the Christian groups. In fact, when they need to do something they approach me and they follow the Catholic line in terms of all socio-political realities despite the fact that they are keen to keep their individuality.

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Mark Riedemann - Church in Need