

IN MEMORIAM

REV FR. PETER FERNANDES



As the news of Fr. Peter Fernandes' death on 13th Dec 2014 was being circulated by me, I got a SMS from one of our Priests, "*We have lost a gem of a Priest*". I thought to myself this is very true. We have lost a gem, a shining jewel. He did leave a lasting impression in the Diocese.

The end came all of a sudden and very unexpectedly. But it can be said of him that he died a Saintly death, very peaceful and serene. He had no particular complaints of ill health, till about a month ago, when he returned from his retreat in Mumbai. Ever since he was a little uncomfortable till he was admitted at Cardinal Gracias Hospital, Nirmal Nagar where he was diagnosed with low haemoglobin. We thought of sending him for more detailed check up and treatment in Belgaum. But he preferred to go to his own trusted doctor specialist in Mangalore. He got himself admitted in Fr. Muller's Hospital and after being examined by the specialists there, he was on his way to the Diocese, via Honavar where he participated in the Parish feast and even made a round of the island villages of Honavar he long ago served with youthful zeal and enthusiasm. Perhaps a little premonition that took to him to so many places and meeting all his old friends, some very close to his heart.

Fr. Peter Fernandes was born at Honavar on 29th June 1942, his parents being Salvador and Monti Fernandes. His house touches almost the Church compound in Honavar and it is no wonder that he spent his childhood in the Church campus and presbytery, being closely watched and mentored by the one and only idol in his life, the late Monsignor M.C. Menezes, who was Parish Priest of Honavar for more than 30 years. It was Monsignor Menezes, who guided him till he was sent to St. Joseph's Seminary, Mangalore and groomed him to be a model Priest of God, the only irritant being his not securing a place in the erstwhile Belgaum diocese. For lack of facilities for Priestly studies here, he was sent to Ahmedabad where Bishop Charlie Gomes received him with outstretched arms. His professors and companions still speak of this exceptional Seminarian, who was model for others. Fr. Peter was ordained as Priest for Ahmedabad Diocese by Bishop Ignatius Lobo at San Salvador Church, Honavar on 9th Dec. 1968, an event not to be forgotten in the history of the Parish.

Soon after his ordination, he was allowed to stay in his native Parish of Honavar, which suited Msgr. Menezes best. It was a golden era of high caliber pastoral work ushered in by a new generation of Assistants in Honavar Parish, beginning with Fr. Peter Fernandes. He put his heart and soul in his work, ceaselessly ministering the sick and the old, villages and sub-stations and it is not surprising that the people there still remember him and he in his inimitable way kept in touch with many of them till his death.

In 1971 he started his ministry in Ahmedabad diocese beginning with Gomtipur Parish. Later on he was moved to Umreth Parish where he worked for 18 years. Bishop Thomas Macwan remarks, "*In Umreth he worked hand in hand with laity for faith formation and introduced various co-operative societies for the upliftment of the poor. He succeeded through his intervention with the Government in starting government support boarding's in Umreth, Thassa and Lindapura. A great achievement!*" He was then transferred to Nadiad as Parish Priest where he served for five years after which he was sent to Jesunagar- Jitodia Parish and finally to Limdapura Parish.

The studies in Rome in Spirituality on the encouragement of Bishop Charles Gomes SJ was a welcome break in his daunting and untiring mission work in Ahmedabad. When the Diocese was bifurcated and the Archdiocese of Gandhinagar was formed in 2002, Fr. Peter preferred to opt for Gandhinagar Archdiocese and served at Palanpur. Towards the end of 2008, Fr. Peter had a health set back and had the Angioplasty done on him to clear a major block in his blood circulation. A year of sabbatical in the States and Canada was the right rest that he needed. While in the States and Canada, he had the experience of serving in the Parishes in these countries too and made a deep impression on the people there, so much so, some of them trailed him to India, seeking his services as counselor and guide.

It was in 2010 that I requested the service of a Spiritual Director or at least a Staff Member for our Minor Seminary from Archbishop Stanislaus Fernandes of Gandhinagar, as some Seminarians of Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar did their training in our Seminary. Fr. Peter Fernandes, who was at this time in Canada was offered to us and I gladly accepted him. After three years of service in the Seminary in our Diocese, he requested to be incardinated into our Diocese and Archbishop Stanislaus allowed his wish, though reluctantly. On 19th March 2013 Fr. Peter was incardinated in our Diocese and continued to be the Spiritual Director and Professor at St. Michael's Seminary, Machhe till his death.

Fr. Peter was no ordinary priest. Though the missions were his first love, he was very much at home with people in towns and cities, even abroad. He had the gift of being present and in attendance when he was needed most. He spent long time listening and counseling people. With his ever ready smile and welcome approach everyone felt comfortable in his presence. He was soft spoken, polite and always encouraging. He paid attention to minute details and stopped to greet, what may seem to others, as insignificant people. He was a voracious reader, abreast of latest happenings and teachings, especially of Holy Mother Church.

No parallel could be found to him in his humility and simplicity. His needs were limited and he satisfied them with ease and diligence. Waiting for hours at bus-stations, running errands for others and simply walking that extra mile for one who was in need, was his character. Prayer was his forte, ingrained in his routine and never to be missed. Though by nature he was very orthodox in his behavior and habits, he surprised many with his modern outlook and experimental nature.

There is no doubt that though he was in our Diocese for a very short period of 4 years only, his life and behavior have left deep imprints in many hearts and minds of many. He bloomed where he was planted. He loved this Diocese and was determined to contribute to the maximum by way of his expertise, resources and energy. Blessed with a positive set of mind and principles it was his nature to encourage and promote all good initiatives. All that he leaves behind is a enduring smile and a charming personality. We will remember for long Fr. Peter and we will surely miss him. May he be a powerful intercessor for our Diocese before the Almighty.

Fr. Peter lies buried in his hometown Church graveyard at Honavar, just a few meters away from his house and the Church where he grew and nurtured his vocation and initial Priesthood. The vast crowd of mourners who came from far and wide to pay homage to his mortals remains throughout out the day on 18th Dec. 2015 and at the Eucharist was an eloquent witness to his popularity and esteem, especially among the poor people.

The Requiem Mass was offered by Most Rev Stanislaus Fernandes, Archbishop of Gandhinagar, with whom he spent almost 30 years of his life as a Priest. Bishop Peter Machado and Bishop Derek Fernandes of Karwar concelebrated in the Holy Eucharist along with about 50 Priests and more than 2000 people. Msgr Simon Tellis, Vicar General, in his homily spoke of the great impact that his saintly life and zealous ministry had on the people and the number of vocations that followed him. At the end of the mass Bishop Peter Machado rendered the funeral oration speaking of his life and works, and especially his ministry in Belgaum diocese. Bishop Derek recalled Fr. Peter's ordination day on the same stage where the funeral was held. The funeral service was well organised by the young Parish Priest of San Salvador Church, Honavar, Fr. Richard Rodrigues and his associates. It was a moving scene to witness the homage of the people to the son of the soil. It was as if they had known him all his life.

On 17th Dec 2014 the day before the burial at Honavar, we had an Eucharist presided over by Bishop Peter Machado along with about 50 Priests of the Diocese. The Bishop recalled how proud Fr. Peter was to associate himself with this Diocese. Similarly Fr. Joe Rodrigues, Rector of St. Michael's Seminary, Machhe, in his enology remembered how dedicated and concerned he was in the affairs of the Seminary.

We have really lost a pearl. It was as if he lived only to shine for a brief period his brilliance in our Diocese before he disappeared into the heavens! May his soul rest in peace.

Bishop Peter Machado
Diocese of Belgaum