



Spanish Missioner Praises The Lord At Christian Temple In Hindu Village

India

October 05 2004



At dawn, as villagers walk their oxen to the fields, they hear a Jesuit priest singing and playing a one-stringed instrument in praise of God at the "Christian temple" he has built.

Passing by Sanjivan (true life) temple, his church, the Hindu villagers momentarily stop and bow in reverence toward the singing 79-year-old Spaniard, [Father Peter Julia](#), better known to them as Swami Shilananda.

The priest has a flowing white beard and long hair, and is dressed in saffron robes. He sits near the red-stone church that, except for a small cross on top, resembles a temple to the Hindu god Shiva. The scene unfolds on the wind-swept plains of [Sinnar](#) village, 180 kilometers east of [Mumbai](#).

"There is no contradiction here because Christ gives a deeper meaning to what is inside," Swami Shilananda told UCA News on Sept. 20 while discussing the temple-like symbols inside the church.

He pointed out that a traditional church building and a priest's white cassock are alien to people in interior villages, but villagers know that a temple is a place of God and that saffron-colored clothes are holy.

"I have not baptized a single person, though some wanted to become Christians," said Swami Shilananda. "They hesitated when they were told that conversion is not external, but a change to live the true life of Christ, serving the poor and downtrodden people," he explained.

Namdeo Mahatme, a farmer from Bhattwadi, a nearby village, told UCA News, "He is a holy man and we know he prays to God for all villagers in this area."

"Swami used to come to our village and sing bhajans (hymns) and tell us stories from the Bible and about Hindu saints to live a good life," said Vishnu Jadhav, 25, from Idlis, another neighboring village. "People have deep respect and reverence for him and accept him in their homes.

According to Jadhav, Swami Shilananda has been guiding the villagers to lead a simple and holy life through bhajans.

Children from nearby villages often join him singing in the evenings, but "I am not trying to teach a lesson to anybody, except through living an effective way of evangelization," said the priest, who came to India in 1948.

He meditates and sings hymns, playing the "ektara" (a single-string instrument), in the temple he built in 1988 on a one-acre plot in Sanjivan Ashram in Sinnar.

There is no electricity in the ashram, where he lives alone in a two-room house. He lives simply, usually eating with pieces of bread the rice and vegetables he boils together using a wood-fueled mud oven. Visitors bring fruits and vegetables as their offerings for the priest.

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The Jesuit was born in Gelida village in Spain, and in his youth witnessed the communist destruction of churches in the country. His family later suffered during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s.

In August 1945, the month Father Julia entered the Society of Jesus at age 20, the world witnessed the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Those events, he says, inspired him to spread the peace of God.

He reached India three years later and was ordained a priest in 1960. After six years, he was sent to Nashik in western India, famous for several Hindu ritual gatherings. A couple of years later, Father Julia donned saffron, turned vegetarian and became a "sanyasi," or ascetic. He also learned Sanskrit and the local languages of Marathi and Gujarati.

His name "Shilananda" is a combination of two Sanskrit words -- "shila" (rock) and "ananda" (happiness). He noted that his original given name, Peter, also means rock.

"I became a swami, a sanyasi, because that was the only way to become one with the local people in their culture and ethos," he explained.

He added that great Indian holy men have inspired him. "They lived and meditated in deep forests and in caves during the biting cold seasons even in the Himalayas. God always cares for a man of God," he said.

In his self-summary, "foreigner by birth, Indian in thinking and Christian by faith," he brushes aside any conflict of faith that might arise due to his style of living and witnessing his faith.

To affirm his ashram style of living, he quotes the following as Vatican teaching on other religions: "These religions have taught generations of people to pray. They are all impregnated with innumerable 'Seeds of the Word' and can constitute a true preparation for the Gospel."

Jesuit Father Francis de Mello, his superior and the provincial of Bombay, agrees. Though it may be different in cities and towns, he said, "Many people in Hindu villages do not understand a Catholic priest in a white cassock as a man of God, but they do when one dons saffron-colored clothes."

Father Peter Dias, vicar general of Nashik diocese, says the Jesuit ascetic "lives an effective witness to evangelization, and simple villagers appreciate Christians because of him." Swami Shilananda's ashram falls under the diocese.

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