

Satish travelled 40 kilometers with his new scooter to be blessed by Fr George. An acquaintance that began way back in 2001 had developed into a very personal fraternal relationship. It is no wonder when we learn that the past 12 years for him had been years of experiencing the impossible - from being a leprosy patient thrown out of his home, to a successful family man.

‘Sumanahalli Society’ in Bangalore is a project of the Archdiocese of Bangalore, entrusted to the Claretian Fathers, who work in collaboration with several other religious congregations. It is here that Satish received complete cure. But neither his family nor the society would welcome him back. So, ‘Sumanahalli’ led him through a process that gave him back his dignity as a human being. Today he is working with the Indira Gandhi Hospital as a Class IV employee drawing a salary of Rs. 14,000. He owns a house, organized by the Society through Government aid. Satish is just one among many such patients who travelled back to life through the inspiring commitment of Fr George Kannanthanam and his team.

Claretian Fr George Kannanthanam was the Director of this Society from 2001 until recently. Under his leadership, it has helped almost 10,000 leprosy patients to regain their human dignity and worth. According to him warm personal relationship was the key factor that gave back their lost dignity. They could get medicine and food from any such centre. But the personal rapport, which allowed them free expression of their feelings and the homeliness they experienced, contributed towards the healing of their painful

A Social Hub for Destitutes



wounds of rejection from their loved ones.

What was behind such vision and commitment? Fr. George narrates: “I was born in 1963, into a family of nine in Kerala, as the 8th child. My parents, Joseph and Brigit, adopted two more children from an orphanage to grow up with us and get settled like any one of us in the family. That sowed the seeds of social consciousness in me. It also prompted me to join the Claretian Missionary Fathers. My urge to reach out to the marginalized in the society led me to do Masters in Social Work from Chennai University. God blessed me to be the Gold Medalist of the University in 1988. Personal desire coupled with the professional training enabled me to take up several programs for the most downtrodden groups for the past 25 years.”

In 1988, during his theology days, he initiated his first project named HOPE along with the fellow students to help alcoholics and drug addicts. Wide stretched

preventive programs were undertaken among the students in Bangalore. In 1992, after his ordination, he pursued the project converting the alcohol ridden Shirady village in South Canara into a sober zone.

He could achieve this by organizing the youth and women through protest and social boycott. In 2000, he started a full fledged treatment centre called ‘HOPE Recovery Centre’ at Belgaum to cater to the largely NGO starved areas of North Karnataka. The centre has been a refuge for over 4000 patients in the last 15 years. He was invited as resource person to the UN Asian Convention, 2011, in Vietnam, on ‘Substance Abuse’.

Fr George also coordinated the program of Prison ministry India (PMI) for Karnataka between 1987 and 1991. From its budding stage he spread it to different parts of Karnataka. His meeting with Mother Teresa in the National gathering of PMI in Delhi spurred him further to serve the poorest of the poor.

Sanjay who was in Sumanahalli for 10 years recounts his experience: “When I came here, there were about 40 inmates here. All were completely destitute. We felt terribly lonely, a group deprived in all sense. Fr. George, wanting to make us feel at home, told us to call each other by name. He and the other staff also did the same. All staff members began to spend time with us, even sharing our meals. We could call Father on his phone or to walk into his office at any time. Soon we began to feel as a family, no more alone in this world.”

Making Sumanahalli a home for every kind of destitute person was not a ‘one man affair’. Fr George created partnership with likeminded Congregations and movements to set up projects

in the campus on condition that they help in rehabilitating any of the destitute groups. So came Echo project of the Norbertines initiated by Fr Antony, in 2005, for mainstreaming the children in conflict with law, the Bosco project of the Saletians offering vocational training for street boys, Montfort Fathers' orphanage, Claretian Support project for destitute HIV affected persons and St Joseph's of Tarbes' school for children affected by leprosy, HIV, or other disabilities. Sumanahalli bubbled with life through these ventures.

The next initiative was a garment manufacturing and training centre, the first of its kind in the country for destitute persons. Sumanahalli turned out to be a social hub of Bangalore, with more than 1000 persons.

The society approved these efforts in the form of awards - National award for rehabilitation of the leprosy patients from government of India, given away by the President Abdul Kalam (2003), Mother Teresa award for selfless service (2012) given by former Supreme Court Chief Justice Venkatachellaiah, the ‘Best Citizen of Bangalore’ award from Namma Bengaluru Foundation (2013) selected from among 61,000 entries.

Fr. George has now moved out of Sumanahalli, leaving behind a rich legacy to continue. He is now with another equally vulnerable group – the visually challenged. His 'Project Vision' aims high. Get everyone in Bangalore to pledge their eyes, making it the eye capital of the world. He plans to achieve this goal by collaborating with every willing social and religious group and by creating the necessary systems to make it operational because “this was what Jesus did”.

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