

International Priests

Sharing in missionary zeal for rural ministry

By Tim Streiff

In the United States, more than 35% of priests in active ministry were born outside of the country and serve in a missionary capacity. They come from Mexico and Central America, Vietnam, the Philippines, and all throughout Africa. Many of these priests come to the U.S. through reciprocity programs with their home dioceses and serve for a decade or more before returning to ministry in their homeland. Others come to America through missionary orders and serve wherever clergy are most needed. Catholic Rural Life sat down to chat with two foreign-born priests who belong to missionary orders and have been assigned to rural ministry in the U.S.

Many of these missionaries found their vocation in their own rural communities. Father Saju Vadakumpadan witnessed the dedication of a missionary priest from his own hometown which inspired him to join the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate in India. He remembers serving at the ordination Mass in his home parish at the age of 12, which inspired him to enter the high school seminary just two years later. The religious order has a long list of ministries including education, social work, and hospital ministry combined with the contemplative life in a monastery.

“There is a balance between being

a hermit and serving the people of God; being a religious but with the community, too.” said Father Saju.

Father Saju remarked that his vocation involved a long road of formation and education. After more than 15 years of formation with the Carmelites, including a bachelor’s degree in education and a doctorate in history, his superior asked him what he wanted to do. He said to his superior, “I have two dreams: to be a teacher and to be a missionary.”

With his expertise in education, the order assigned him to a school near where he grew up in Kerala, first as a teacher and then as principal. Father Saju served in the school for 20 years, but his dream of missionary work still remained.

When the opportunity arose for him to do missionary work, he jumped at the chance to fulfill the rest of his dream for ministry. He was assigned to a new mission that had just begun in the Bahamas. He was made pastor of St. Vincent de Paul Church in Nassau without knowing anything about the parish or the island, but he trusted first in God’s will for him. He recalled the words from Scripture: “My Grace will be with you,” those were the words of our Lord to St. Paul.” Father Saju remarked that it was no easy task being the shepherd on a Caribbean island.

Opposite: Father Saju Vadakumpadan in various roles with his flock. **This page:** Father Lourthu Antony Kulandeijesu leads worship in his parish.

“I saw extreme poverty, survived two hurricanes, and my rectory was regularly robbed,” he said. “I made peace with having very little.”

Father Saju saw his work as a part of God’s providence so he knew that he would be alright.

“Someone is protecting me, watching over me,” he said. “Everything is planned by our God to form me.”

After four years of ministry in the Bahamas, in 2015 Father Saju was reassigned to Louisville, Kentucky, first in an urban parish and then in three rural communities.

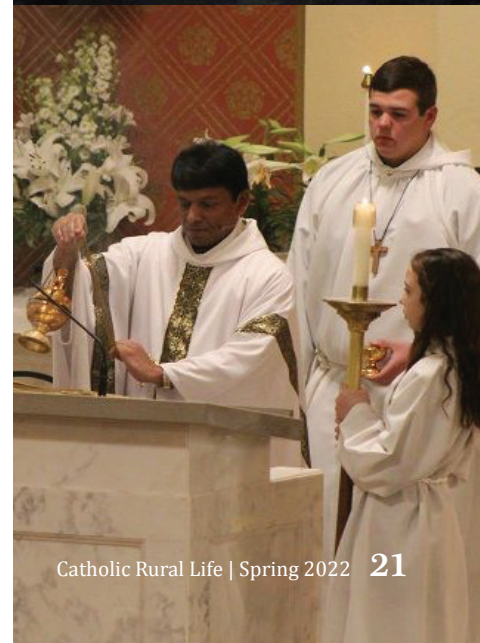
“Rural and urban ministries have their differences,” he said. “The parish administration is similar, but the experience is totally different. There is more personal contact in a rural area.”

Having been in Kentucky for six years now, Father Saju knows that Catholics are only a small percentage of the population in the state. Still, he wants to make sure that “people feel the presence of Catholics” in the area despite the small population. To do his part in leading his parishioners, Father Saju collaborates with other ministers in the area and has been invited to preach at a local Baptist university.

Likewise, Father Lourthu Antony Kulandeijesu, or Father Tony for short, came to Kansas from India in 2016 as a member of the Heralds of Good News. The Heralds have missions in Papua New Guinea, Africa, and the United States. Their charism in missionary work is characterized by hard work and zeal, as well as

encouraging vocations to the priesthood and training seminarians. The zeal of the members of the Heralds of Good News also extends to works of mercy and numerous clinics, schools, hospitals, hospice centers, religious formation houses, and homes for lepers.

Coming from a small town in India, Father Tony was moved by the words of Christ to the 72 disciples he sent out to preach the





This page: Father Saju and Father Tony like many visiting rural priests, shoulder an immense load and are indispensable to the church and its rural ministry. Below, the priests attend Thrive Retreats for rural ministry from CRL (Father Sanju is in the bottom left photo, far right; Father Tony is in the bottom right photo, far right).

Gospel: “Take nothing with you.” This was his motivation for joining a missionary order. After being ordained in 2010, he “wanted to go anywhere the church needed priests, but especially to rural communities.” Living close to the land and agriculture was easy for him since his family grew coconuts in India, but “Kansas has a much larger scale and the priest can be more integrated into the life of agriculture.” Father Tony is especially interested in sharing his priestly ministry with farmers through prayer and blessings in the fields. He makes time to visit many of his parishioners’ farms and always offers a blessing over their machinery, seeds, soil, and animals.

“The priest integrates the family, the Church, and nature,” he said. “The sacraments rely on creation, the bread and the wine, the

oils and the water.”

Because of the interconnectedness of human nature and creation, Father Tony encourages his community to steward the land and not dominate it. He tells them to look for more opportunities to try new farming techniques that will help the land be fruitful for generations to come.

For Father Tony, doing missionary work has not been without its challenges. He found it challenging at first to acclimate to a new language and being away from his home and family, in addition to serving three parishes in Kansas.

“I had to change my accent,” he said. “I learned to speak English with a British accent since that is who taught English in India, but I had to relearn pronunciation when I moved to Kansas.”

He found his parishioners to be very welcoming and was grateful for their support when he became ill with COVID-19.

“When you are sick, you see the love the people have for their priest,” Father Tony said.

He returns to India regularly to preach and share about his missionary work to the seminarians

who are preparing to become missionaries themselves.

These two missionary priests have found support through the Thriving in Rural Ministry program offered by Catholic Rural Life.

“I was blessed to attend the retreat, I found spiritual nourishment and new ideas for my ministry,” Father Tony said about his experience at the October 2020 retreat.

Father Saju said he was glad he attended the retreat at St. Meinrad’s Archabbey because it showed him that there are others experiencing the same kinds of challenges in their ministry. They could also share successes with one another. Not only did the retreats provide additional ideas for best practices and help these priests gain additional insight into their own communities, but there is also a tendency for the prayerful and open atmosphere of the retreat to help bridge the gap sometimes felt by international priests serving in the U.S. and their brother priests.

