

## A Conversation With Our New Pastor, the Reverend Joseph Puthiyath Thomas

The Men of St. Edward the Martyr Church engaged in a wide ranging discussion with Father Joseph as he begins his first parish ministry.

### *What is your background?*

I grew up in a small village called Alapra in southwestern India near the coast of the Sea of Arabia. I was one of four children. There my father was a rubber tapper. This person taps the liquid in a rubber tree that is turned into rubber products we all know and use. My Mom, two sisters, brother and me worked on our farm with my father.



This is a picture of the terrain in Alapra India, where Father Joseph was raised.

Credit: kerala-travel-places.blogspot.com



This is the process of rubber tapping. A superficial cut is made into the rubber tree at a 30 degree angle to the bucket. The cut acts as a kind of sluice that guides the bleeding latex into the bucket. The latex is then treated to make rubber.

Credit: This picture of a screen grab from a YouTube video, ID anwn9TGRZLY

### *Were you Catholic from birth in a country that is predominantly Muslim and Hindu?*

Yes. Our family goes back four generations of Catholics, on both sides of the family. We were born with Christian, as opposed to, Hindu or Indian names. My brother is James and my sisters are named Theresa and Sarah. Very Biblical. I don't even know how my ancestors were evangelized into the Catholic faith. That is not important. What is important is that I am Catholic.

### *How were you trained for the priesthood?*

I started reading the Bible, learning Christ's prayers and taking possession of the rosary. My charism is the Congregation of St. Therese of Lisieux, who is known as the Little Flower of Jesus. Father Basilus started this congregation in India in 1931 and grew into 400 priests in India. I was attracted to this charism because of her spirituality and practicality to the spiritual life she lived. Her mother died when St. Therese was four. St. Therese thought her mother's death signified the beginning of the end of her life. But as a young teenager she was lifted out of her despair by the grace of God, recovering her strength of soul and became a Carmelite nun. She died of tuberculosis at the age of 24.

Her outlook was to be little, to serve the little, the unwanted, the elderly and the poor. She was always doing little things to make the lives of people around her better. This is why she was called the Little Flower. Her service was viewed at the time as unremarkable. This is because she was a Little Flower and not a big one. But Pope John Paul recognized her accomplishments and made her a doctor of the church. I embrace this approach wholeheartedly.

### *What is your background as a priest?*

I have always been a teacher. After I finished my education and entered into the Congregation I spent time teaching seminarians. Then I had the privilege with the help of my Congregation priests in raising the money and establishing the Little Flower School where I was principal. This school has grown into more than a thousand students. Most are Hindus. But it didn't matter to their parents. They heard of the quality education we offered them. These students got to know Christ through his teachings that we imparted at the school. They didn't become Catholic while attending but this is the start of conversion.

*Who is your favorite apostle?*

St. Thomas. When his ministry with Christ ended he journeyed to the Kerala State in India not far from where I was raised. He told the story of Christ and baptized many people. Some like me consider him the patron saint of India. He started seven churches there.

*What is your favorite Biblical passage?*

The Good Samaritan, Luke Chapter 10. Jews questioned who were their neighbors. They limited their definition to anyone who was a fellow countryman and gentiles who converted to Judaism. That's all. The story of the Samaritan helping the injured Jew reminds us that our neighbor is universal and not just particular. In a particular situation our charity should be truly helpful. Giving the thirsty water. Giving the wounded first aid. But the larger question Christ wants us to ask is not, "Who is my neighbor?" but "Whose neighbor can I be right now.?"

*What surprised you about St. Edward the Martyr Church when you arrived?"*



This is my first time in the United States and St. Edward is my first parish assignment. I have always been a teacher. But I wanted strongly a parish of my own. Where I could teach the faith, where I could be part of the lives of parishioners, where I can be involved all the important activities this parish finds important – like Altar Society or the Men of St. Edward volunteer group. People have been so welcoming and loving since I arrived, eager to help me in getting settled into my new ministry.

What I find most beautiful is St. Winifred's Garden. Although under the soil is the repose of souls, above them is abundant, beautiful life. The Garden is truly symbolic of life after death. The Garden should tell everyone our presence on Earth is not the end of life. I plan on being very involved in nurturing this wonderful gift.

Father puts his back into it during a Men of St. Edward Church grounds keeping maintenance project on July 21, 2018

*Is your mother disappointed that you will not give her any grandchildren?*

No (laughing). I believe it's because of my mother's prayers that I am a priest. My mother's prayers and the grace of God. My mother is very happy that her first son became a priest.