

# Pioneering priest returns to India

## PEOPLE

An Indian priest who has spent the past decade serving the growing Syro-Malankara Catholic Community says he leaves Adelaide “full of hope” for the future of the church in the Oceania region.



Fr Stephen Kulathumkarott at his farewell Mass at St Maximilian Kolbe Church, Ottoway. Picture: Kiran Skaria

Fr Stephen Kulathumkarott arrived in the Adelaide Archdiocese in October 2013, charged with establishing communities for the Syro-Malankara Church throughout Australia and New Zealand.

Over the past 10 years under his watchful eye and missionary work, the Eastern Catholic Rite has grown to include 13 communities (seven in Australia and six in New Zealand), comprising around 300 families and more than 1000 members.

Melbourne and Auckland are the fastest growing communities and in Adelaide there is a core group of about 10 families who regularly celebrate Mass in Malayalam at St Mary’s Church, Port Adelaide.

On May 14, the local community and guests gathered at St Maximilian Kolbe Church, Ottoway, to farewell Fr Stephen, who has now returned to India where he will serve as Vicar General in the Mavelikara Diocese.

Prior to departing Adelaide Fr Stephen reflected on his pioneering service to the Oceania communities.

“It was always a dream to have our church here in Australia and I feel we are now all accepted here,” he said.

“How can I ever forget the warm and welcoming people who embody their beliefs with such conviction? The open-hearted acceptance of multicultural, multilingual communities is a true testament to the welcoming, supporting and joyful nature of the people I will deeply miss.”

Fr Stephen said when he arrived in Adelaide there were already a handful of Indian priests in the diocese, however he still had to get used to a new way of life – daylight saving, changes in the weather and cultural differences. He laughed when he recalled his first visit to see the late Archbishop Philip Wilson at his West Terrace residence.

“One surprising cultural shock was when I went for the first time to the Archbishop’s House and Archbishop Wilson was preparing a coffee for me. In my culture, it is not normal for an Archbishop to prepare coffee for a priest.”

Fr Stephen said he was indebted to Archbishop Wilson, and more recently Archbishop Patrick O’Regan, for their support of the Syro-Malankara community.

One of his proudest moments during his ministry in Adelaide was when members of the community made a pilgrimage to St Francis Xavier’s Cathedral as part of the Year of Mercy celebrations in November 2016 and for the first time, the Cathedral held a Mass in Malayalam. About 250 people attended and Archbishop Wilson concelebrated.

Members of the local community have also become regular participants in the annual St Thomas feast day Mass in the Cathedral, with Fr Stephen a committed participant in the Migrant Chaplain and Pastoral Workers meetings.

While also serving as an assistant priest at the Kilburn-Clearview parish, Fr Stephen spent much time in airports and on flights as he travelled to help establish communities in Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney, Brisbane, Perth and Townsville in Australia; and Auckland, Christchurch, Wellington, Palmerston North, Napier and Hamilton in New Zealand.

“The extensive travels around Australia and New Zealand were exciting and interesting, but it did become a strain over time,” he admitted.

However, Fr Stephen said the appointment of four other priests in recent times to serve the communities was a big help.

And while the COVID pandemic restricted his travels it also provided a silver lining in bringing the far-flung communities closer together.

“I used to meet the communities maybe once a month or every two months, but during the pandemic we could all join together online for Mass, community prayer meetings, training programs and business meetings,” he explained.

“Our members suddenly had the feeling there were many in their community...we said Mass together and a lot of people outside of Australia were watching too.

“We still do prayer meetings and catechism classes online, but it was important that when it was safe to do so, people came back to attend Mass in person.”

Other highlights of his ministry included the establishment of the Malankara Catholic Youth Movement and Malankara Women’s League, and in 2019 the first National Convention of Syro-Malankarites was held in Melbourne. About 700 people attended, with the Major Archbishop Baselios Cardinal Clemis Bava making his first visit to the Oceania region.

As for the future of the church, Fr Stephen believed it was in a very good place.

“I am filled with gratitude and hope, knowing that every community established in Australia and New Zealand will soon have resident priests to guide, serve and bless its members,” he said.

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