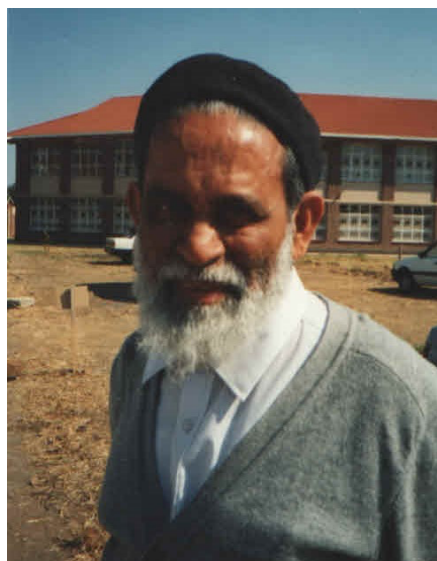


May 28

## Fr ANDREWS THEKKEKARA 1 July 1932 – 28 May 2022



A number of Jesuits from India worked in Zimbabwe since Independence but only one persevered; Andrews Thekkekara from Karanchira, Kerala.

He joined the Society aged 19 in Kodaikanal, Tamil Nadu, in 1951 and, besides the ordinary studies normal for every Jesuit, he did B.Sc. in Zoology (1958-60), a B.Ed. in English and Physical Science (1964-65), both of these in Palayamkottai, India and a Ph. D. in Ethics in the Gregorian, Rome (1970-73).

For his regency, he returned to Palayamkottai and he was ordained in Kureseong, West Bengal, in 1963. He worked as a parish priest for a year in Llayarasenedal and had a further year teaching in a secondary school, Carmel High School, in Nagercoil. Then he became a Major Seminary professor, teaching Ethics, at Trichy, (1968-70). After his Ph.D. in Rome, he returned to Trichy to continue teaching ethics until, in 1975, he became rector, as well as being professor, at Arul Anandar. After his term was over, he continued to teach there until 1986 when he went to Chishawasha Seminary to teach his subject, Ethics, for two years before being recalled to India for three years at Arul Anandar. In 1991 he returned to Africa for good, first at Chishawasha and then with a year at Chimanimani before returning to Chishawasha for five years until 2000. As the new millennium opened, he moved with the philosophers to Bulawayo (St Augustine's) for 18 years before returning briefly to Chishawasha Seminary where he stayed for a short while before moving into retirement at Chishawasha Mission in 2018.

At his vigil Mass before the funeral, diocesan Fr Joseph Mahlahla spoke warmly of Andrews' love of the Church as the expression of his love for Jesus. And he was able to live this love in the Society of Jesus which called him to be a missionary twice. Fr Kolvenbach, who was Fr General at the time of Andrews' ordination golden jubilee, reminds us he was a missionary first when he left Kerala to go to Madurai. This involved learning a new language and new customs. Then he became a missionary again when he left not just one part of India for another but one continent for another, in coming to Africa at an age when he could have retired in India, according to Fr Ludwig Real, and he would do 15

lectures a week where the maximum demanded was ten. He never wanted to come to Africa, Fr Anesu Manyere tells us, but did so willingly under obedience and so 'gave a witness to the values we pronounce'.

Fr George Croft takes us back to India in recalling how Andrews was deeply faithful to his work and had great compassion for poor folk, literally lifting one out of the filth into which he had fallen in Chennai. The most telling event of his time in India that has come down to us is of his putting his whole career at risk when he questioned the caste system during his time as rector at Arul Anandar. India is a country where caste, the division of society into social/cultural strata, is still in the blood of the people. Even in a Catholic university, people sat in the lecture halls according to caste. Andrews challenged this and wanted to do away with divisions. It seems this was not appreciated and contributed to his having to leave and rebuild his life in Africa.

Something similar happened in Zimbabwe when he was invited to lecture at the University of Zimbabwe and his strident comments on the social and political situation in the country led to his rapid dismissal. His approach to teaching and preaching was provocative as that of Jesus often was. 'Some of you beg the devil, come and tempt me', Fr Mahlahla tells us was a typical way he spoke to the seminarians. 'Imprudence can kill', he would tell them but he approved of it! John the Baptist told Herod off for marrying his brother's wife and Andrews would do the same, given the opportunity. 'If you don't destroy your hidden agenda, your hidden agenda will destroy you', he would say. He made a deep impression on generations of seminarians.

Fr Anesu Manyere told us his provocative style was a product of his own experience and 'wisdom spiced by the orient.' He could not be silent about what he saw to be wrong. Some mistook his hard line for a lack of compassion but for Andrews it was his way of being demanding and stretching people to do their best. That he was in demand as a spiritual adviser or director is proof enough of this. This writer feels that perhaps Tanzanian Fr Faustine Binamungu Mukasa SJ, in his spirited defence of Zimbabwean priests and religious' efforts to live their celibacy in his response to an article written by Andrews in JIVAN, has misunderstood his provocative style. Andrews wrote that Tanzanian Bishop (now Cardinal) Polycarp Pengo once, while preaching, 'jokingly said priests have more sons and daughters than polygamous Africans'. Binamungu doesn't mention that the congregation 'roared with laughter and clapped their hands'. In other words, the bishop was being outrageously provocative but the people got the point and realised there was some truth even if it was exaggerated. I believe something like this was Andrews' style. He said outrageous things so that people would sit up

and think. He wasn't to be taken literally – no more than Jesus' saying about a camel passing through the eye of a needle. He spoke openly about celibacy and recognised it was not lived by all but 'evil is more noisy than good'. There is more noise about the few who fail rather than the vast majority who remain celibate. It is 'an uphill task for these brawny young men'.

Andrews never learnt to drive and simply said, 'anyone who can drive is my driver'. He would stride out in his French beret looking for lifts or public transport or a willing driver.

He could grip a congregation or a retreat gathering with his stories with which he illustrated the gospel. He wrote of himself that he was endowed with 'the gift of the gab, exuding confidence, power and authority in matters where angels fear to tread. I found my directees like lambs compared to Tamils though they (in Africa) look like Goliaths.' In the same article in JIVAN he wrote, 'I used to think Indians were religious but Africans are definitely more religious. Andrews liked to quote,

And yet for us it is when he is on the cross.

This Jesus of Nazareth

With holed hands and open side,

like a beast at a sacrifice;

when he is stripped, naked like us

Browned and sweating water

And blood in the heat of the sun

Yet silent,

That we cannot resist Him.

Rev. Gabriel Molehe Setiloane, *I am an African*