

On the Catholic frontier

Daniel Wilkes | May. 11, 2010



Bishop Stephen Lepcha baptizes a former Hindu, Patricia, in the village of Mabong in Sikkim, India, March 12. (Photos by Daniel Wilkes)

WEST SIKKIM, INDIA -- Bishop Stephen Lepcha gasps for a breath in the thin air. He trudges a few more steps along the narrow path etched into the side of the mountain, here in the craggy foothills of the Himalayas, then stops, his chest heaving. We are enveloped in an inky blackness except for the weak beam of a flashlight four of us share. The road we left behind an hour ago is far below, yet the lights of Behga, the tiny village atop this mountain five miles from the border with Nepal, still look distant.

Bishop Stephen, a stout man of 57 with graying hair and a generous smile you rarely see him without, is the ordinary of one of most remote regions of the Catholic and geographical world. He is on his way to say Mass and administer the sacraments. This long and tortuous journey on foot from the barely navigable dirt road below has been made for a single -- albeit somewhat large -- family.

At Behga, a village of a few hundred souls scattered among small plots of terraced farmland, a plastic canopy flaps in the breeze, supported by large bamboo poles. This is the parish church. Under it sit over a hundred people, wrapped in thick jackets and blankets against the night's chill, who rise as the bishop approaches. The bishop was scheduled to be here at 4 p.m. It is now 8. This is his yearly visit and at least the day is correct. The actual time of day has little meaning for this special occasion.

William Sherpa, 31, takes a cup from a tray, and as the bishop bends his head back, William pours the warm milk into the bishop's mouth. This is the traditional greeting of the Sherpas, the storied mountain-dwelling tribe, best known in the West as guides and porters for Mount Everest ascents; many individuals, like William, also have this as a last name. They are traditionally Buddhist, and were all Buddhist for centuries. It was just 20 years ago that Catholicism began making slow inroads in the Sherpa communities of western Sikkim.

Far removed from the church's current dilemmas with sex abuse and debates over stem cells, women's roles, and procreation, Bishop Stephen serves on one of Catholicism's final frontiers. Overcoming immense natural and man-made hurdles to bring the church to the people of Sikkim, this is Catholic evangelization and pastoral care in its purest and most direct form. I was able to witness it firsthand traveling with the bishop and the parish priest of West Sikkim, Salesian Fr. George Thirumalachalil, over three days in the spring.

Darjeeling, Bishop Stephen's diocese, comprises the state of Sikkim, the district of Darjeeling (of the train and tea fame) in West Bengal, and the kingdom of Bhutan. Within it are just over 30,000 Catholics spread out over some of the earth's most forbidding terrain, an area of some 17,000 square miles. A kingdom until it joined the Indian Union in 1975, Sikkim is wedged between Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan and is India's second-smallest state and least populated, the latest census numbering under 600,000. It is one of the most isolated places in the world, sorely lacking in infrastructure (it has no airport or railroad, and only poor roads) and economic opportunity. Average yearly income stands at just \$600. Most of Sikkim's population of 540,000 relies on primitive agriculture and government subsidies to survive.

In 1990 Father George moved to Sikkim and started the Don Bosco School at Malbasey, which is now one of the best in Sikkim. At first, he could claim only one family of converts, but today there are over 300 Catholic families and six churches and chapels sprinkled throughout the rugged mountains and pristine valleys of his parish. "There are almost no first- or second-generation Catholics in Sikkim," says Father George. "You're more likely to find first- or second-year Catholics."



The story of a young church emerging in Sikkim is reflected in the

evening at Behga. William Sherpa's parents, Bhaje and Bhoju, at 78 and 79, are being baptized as Helen and Paul. A decade after their son and his wife, Albina, converted to Catholicism, his parents have followed.

Only a 10th of the audience is Catholic, but they not only attend the bishop's two-and-a-half-hour Mass, but witness Helen and Paul's baptism, first Communion and confirmation. It is a prime opportunity to expose potential converts to the Catholic faith, a fact not lost on the bishop and Father George, who set up the bishop's itinerary. Father George knew the Sherpa family was popular, but even he was surprised by the large turnout.

"The most important thing," Bishop Stephen says during the homily, looking out over the largely Buddhist and Hindu group, "is to know about God. Forget about religion, religion will not save you. Don't be afraid to accept Jesus Christ." Then he strikes a reoccurring theme. "Holiness is not the monopoly of the few, but is open to all who are willing to accept it."

He is both an inspiring teacher and natural performer, spreading his arms wide, as if to embrace the entire world when he tells his congregants-cum-pupils that God is not just for a few of them, but for all. During a sung Our Father, with a beaming smile he waves his arms in the air to the rhythm, like a conductor before his orchestra. It is a bouncy, joyful Our Father, injecting life into what can be one of more routinized moments in the liturgy.

During Communion, he turns to a statue of Jesus on the cross behind him, the figure bleeding profusely. He points to the host, then back to Jesus, and uses the physical symbolism to explain how Jesus died to wipe away their sins.

In these remote villages that only see a priest once a month, and their bishop yearly, Bishop Stephen is keenly aware that to be effective he needs to instruct and enlighten, not just go through the motions of the Mass. "I must explain the meaning of what I am doing; I want them to better understand what they are partaking in,"

Bishop Stephen says after the Mass. "Only then can they fully enjoy it. I'm not great, but God is; I want them to feel that. I take as the gift of God the people that will listen to me. If I don't get to speak to someone about God each day, I'm not happy."

A tiger and a conversion

Bishop Stephen's unlikely journey from a tiny village in North Sikkim to his rise in the Catholic church begins with a story about a hungry tiger. When he was a young boy, a tiger developed a taste for cows and other livestock and set about terrorizing the animals and people of Stephen's village. The marauding tiger quite literally took a serious bite out of the Lepcha family's livelihood. That is, until a Swiss missionary priest came to the village. Fr. Augustine Rouller, of the Canons Regular of St. Maurice of Agaune, happened to be an avid hunter. He gladly stalked and killed the predator. It won him many compliments and a handful of converts, including Stephen's Buddhist mother and father.

At age 11, Stephen followed his parents and became Catholic. He didn't understand much about the faith, but he says his parents' devotion had a major impact on him. His father never taught his son explicitly about Catholicism, but he would fast regularly, read the Bible daily, and wear fresh white clothing to Mass every Sunday, something Bishop Stephen remembers vividly. "By example, I could imagine, I could believe, he was worshipping a true God," says Bishop Stephen.

A missionary priest sponsored part of his Catholic school studies while Stephen worked manual labor jobs to fund the rest. He eventually studied at the seminary in Darjeeling, and went on for philosophy and theology under Belgium Jesuits in Calcutta, whose missionary zeal and intellectual rigor he admired greatly.

A road almost not traveled

Earlier in the day, before the evening with the Sherpa family and friends, we set off for the tiny village of Mabong after a short night's rest. We are already running late when we come upon a long bamboo stick blocking the road. Road construction on what will be a paved road above had loosened rocks and boulders that now tumbled down the mountain onto the old dirt road on which we travel. After an hour and a half delay, we are cleared to proceed. Five miles farther a sudden plume of dust envelops the road some 50 feet in front of our jeep. Large rocks and bone-dry soil cascade down the mountain side -- a natural landslide this time, typical for the region.



Using his cell phone, the bishop calls the two Missionary Sisters of

Mary Help of Christians, Nellie Kujur and young nun-in-training Roselin Ekka, who had gone ahead to set up the chapel at Mabong for Mass. Once the slide subsides, we leave our jeep and carefully walk around the pile of rubble, praying the slide doesn't start again or that the crumbly ground under our feet would give way. The sisters' jeep arrives and we continue, the bishop noting that dry season is the easiest time of year to travel in Sikkim. During the rainy season whole roads -- including the one highway that connects Sikkim to the rest of India -- are flooded or washed out for days, weeks, sometimes months at a time.

We leave the sisters' jeep behind and hike up another winding trail of loose dirt and rocks to reach the chapel in the tiny community of Mabong. Children with soiled faces and dirty clothes run out to greet us, leading us to the plaster-walled chapel, the size of a modest American living room. They are in their "Sunday best," Father George says about the bedraggled children. They get a bath once a month because water is so scarce during dry season. The women walk each day to fetch water from a well four miles away.

After the bishop finishes hearing confessions in a nearby home, as he does at each stop, the Mass begins in the chapel, filled to capacity with around 70 adults and children. It is here in Mabong I witness the most touching moment of the journey. After 15 baptisms and 20 confirmations there is to be a marriage. Musa and Patricia, in their early 60s now, had married civilly some 40 years ago, but a few years ago Musa converted to Catholicism. The formerly Hindu Patricia professes her faith, and the bishop baptizes and confirms her.

The marriage ceremony is next. The bishop places a thin gold band in the groom's outstretched hand. Musa struggles to fit the ring on his bride's finger. He is entirely blind. With the helping hands of family members, and his wife looking on patiently and lovingly, he finally slips the ring on her finger. The parish church is awash in smiles.

Other challenges

The formidable challenges posed by nature in Sikkim can be a significant obstacle to evangelization, but for Catholics in particular, social and political pressures are also a constant struggle. Though locals say the situation is slowly improving, Catholics report instances of being socially ostracized from their communities and find it harder to land government jobs and access government services.

Because of a history of outside invaders -- Muslim conquerors followed by European explorers, traders and occupiers -- who forced their religion on the locals, combined with the fact that Hindus and Buddhists do not put any emphasis on winning converts, many Indians are suspicious of anything that approaches proselytization.

For someone like Robin Tamang, who grew up an orthodox Buddhist and converted after teaching three years at the Don Bosco School in Richenpong, it was a controversial decision. Longtime family friends would refuse to visit Tamang's home and the staunch Buddhist community marginalized the family from social activities, especially after his parents also converted. "People convert because they see Catholic values in action. I did," said Tamang. "I saw that the Catholic lifestyle was different, not selfish, but caring about other people. I saw it in the religious and my school colleagues."

Michael Rai, who runs a Catholic primary school with his wife, had a similar experience when he converted as a sixth-grader 20 years ago. His Hindu caste, the Rai, place their main religious emphasis on ancestor worship. Michael's father, whom he was supposed to obey unquestioningly, was a respected Hindu priest. Michael says he was impressed by the values and action he heard in Catholic sermons and saw in the educational work of the church.

His father, whom one might expect to be the most upset with his son, started reading the Bible and soon became an expert on Christianity. He took great joy, says Michael, in singing the Psalms. Ultimately, at 75, Michael's father joined the church, abandoning centuries of ancestor worship and the Rai caste. The Hindu community never forgave the family for "switching sides," as they viewed it.

Non-Christians are not the only ones discriminating against Catholics in Sikkim. Bishop Stephen notes that it has become increasingly common for members of Protestant denominations (Presbyterians and Baptists are the largest) to sideline Catholics socially, and sometime politically, in the struggle to win more converts to their side. Protestants are more heavily engaged in politics and have the ear of many high government officials, says

Bishop Stephen.

When the state government does not want Catholics to own land on which to build a church or institution, an 1834 law from the former kingdom of Sikkim is selectively invoked that stipulates that tribal land cannot be sold. To circumvent this, the diocese will sometimes register the land in an individual's name, not the church's.

Bishop Stephen says it is also difficult for Catholics to find government jobs, that the common refrain from bureaucrats who control jobs is: "Well, you are Catholic, go ask *your* people, they will give you a job." As for government assistance, Catholics are often conveniently left "off the list." For instance, a popular and widely publicized program to give poor villagers corrugated metal roofing did not reach many poor Catholics. "If the government is giving out anything," Bishop Stephen says, "Catholics get the last drop."

Additionally, the bishop notes that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a pro-Hindu nationalist organization and the ideological faction at the core of the larger right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party, has been making a push into Sikkim. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its supporters have been fighting for years to pass an anti-conversion bill in Sikkim, says the bishop, and the legislation made it before the legislative assembly twice but failed.

Despite all this, Bishop Stephen is not quick to condemn. "Christian spirituality is very mysterious in the non-Christian world. For instance, the idea that you should unconditionally forgive your enemies sounds like madness to the rest of the world. So it is really out of ignorance they are persecuting us."

Are converts Catholic enough?

Late on the third night of our journey, we leave the last village on our itinerary, Khanisirbong, where over 50 new Catholics were baptized, received first Communion and were confirmed, to return to the Don Bosco School in Malbasey. In the jeep, Bishop Stephen voices some concern to Father George and Sister Nellie, the nun who prepares the villagers for the sacraments, that some of the new converts don't appear to be ready, a theme he has hinted obliquely before. "They can't enjoy it," said the bishop. "That's the sad part. They don't understand it and they can easily leave the church."



Father George, who along with the sisters is the driving force on the

ground behind evangelization in West Sikkim, demurs. "People may have a lot of faith but little understanding. It would take many years to build up that understanding," he replies diplomatically as we bump along yet another rutted road.

Later, when it's just Father George and me talking, he's more direct. "New converts don't need to know everything," he says. "So what if they can't memorize every prayer perfectly or get the sign of the cross exactly right? Are those really the most important parts of our faith?" he asks rhetorically. "My job is not to be an obstacle. Start with faith then knowledge will come. Knowledge grows over time."

Father George sees joining the church as a first step to improving oneself and the community. "When you

become a Catholic, you earn a passport to upward mobility: better education, no caste distinction, and help from the Catholic community. It's a liberating influence from ignorance, from poverty. It is the poor who are always searching for God because they need him the most," he says. "Take Mabong, for example. Catholicism is new there. Go back in three years and you'll find improvements. Cleaner children, kids are in school, which in turn makes the parents want to work harder."

In a way, the bishop himself is a product of such thinking. He joined at an early age and says he didn't grasp much meaning for years. But slowly, by watching his parents' example and learning from his interactions with priests -- and benefiting from their kindness -- his faith blossomed into a better understanding of the Gospel and the theological underpinnings of Catholicism. It was a process that took time.

On one of our stops, we visit Dentam, a town near Behga that serves as the small commercial hub for this area of West Sikkim. Father George and Bishop Stephen look out over a large plot of vacant land; Father George points out a spot he thinks would be good for a proper church, so Masses will no longer have to be held under tarps or in living rooms. The two meet with a local Catholic businessman to talk about land possibilities. The bishop and Father George nod in agreement as they talk of better fulfilling the needs of the budding Catholic community here. While they may have minor philosophical differences about the speed at which they induct new adherents into the church, they are both toiling under incredibly difficult circumstance for the same mission. As Bishop Stephen puts it, "Our first duty is to bring the Gospel to people. We should be giving Christ every day, and going door-to-door to do it."

Door-to-door, indeed.

[Daniel Wilkes is a recent graduate of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, who has spent the last nine months working with Salesian sisters and priests in India.]

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