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Faith and community get a lift in a parish in India

Janina Gomes | Jun. 22, 2011

Parishioners gather for mass

FIRST PERSON

AMBOLI, ANDHERI, MUMBAI, India -- I belong to a parish in a densely populated suburb of Mumbai, India, a parish, I am happy to report, that is functioning quite well.

Records indicate that St. Blaise parish dates back to around the year 1560 when Portuguese Franciscans came here and constructed a chapel. A parish, as it might have been viewed then, came some 25 years later -- around 1585. The number of Catholics then, according to records, was 1,637 adults and 400 children. Today the parish claims a membership of more than 14,000.

If you look at our parish church, with its pantheon of apostles on the roof top, it is distinctive -- and in other ways it is much like the other buildings near a junction of two heavily traveled crossroads. The area is generally noisy, with the sounds of motorcars; taxis; motorbikes and rickshaws; and buses filling the air.

Step inside, however, and it is a different experience. In St. Blaise parish the liturgies are rich and inspired. The parish priests deliver powerful and relevant sermons. The choir is active and engaged. Well trained lectors do the readings carefully. Taken together, celebrations lift the parish community in prayer.

While the parish dates back more than 400 years, the makeup of the parish today is quite young. It benefits from the energies of young working couples who have moved into the suburbs in search of less expensive

accommodations. So baptisms are quite common and they are integrated into the liturgies. Imagine the whole congregation joining in blessing a child, all with raised hands -- one in the spirit.

St. Blaise parish hums with activities. We boast 32 ?associations,? or parish groups, including, for example, altar servers, choirs, Eucharistic ministers, a Hindi prayer group, a family group, a health cell, and several bible study groups, to name a few.

From women generating income for their families by selling foodstuffs on Sunday mornings and feast days after Mass to those selling medals and rosaries along with other religious trinkets and knick knacks, parishioners mill around stalls near the church where sellers and buyers all are friendly and cooperative.

The parish also offers yoga classes and courses on human development and spirituality. Women seem to be playing an important part in organizing these classes.

St. Blaise has an electronic face as well. Our technical group keeps up a parish home page [1]-- we?re on Facebook [2] as well.

On the conservative side of the ecclesia spectrum, our parish has a neo-catechumenate; on the more progressive side, we have small Christian communities.

Until just this month when he was reassigned, Fr. Felix D?Souza was our parish priest. He has had a reputation for listening carefully to the concerns of parishioners and for finding ways to bring us all together.

When I asked him recently what the secret is for maintaining a well managed parish, he said: ?I believe in giving space to God to work his way in the parish through the people and structures available.?

D?Souza added that God can do wonders if given the chance. ?To allow him to work wonders requires our human efforts and the ability to surrender these in prayer to the Lord.?

He explained that ?giving space? means finding ways to allow young and old to contribute their talents and passions. ?Giving encouragement and appreciating their work thus becomes the perfect backdrop for a host of activities to unfold on the canvas of the parish.

?Actually, ?Great things happen when God mixes with his people? could be our parish theme song?, said D?Souza.

St. Blaise parish takes seriously the call to inculturation, allowing Hindi culture to enhance Catholic liturgies. St. Blaise is the first parish I have been in that uses bhajans, or Hindi devotional songs, during the mass.

The priests are very engaged in our parish. Recently, when I sat down to read from a book I wrote called *Biblical Stories for Teenagers*, I called on Fr. Reuben Tellis to provide some commentary. He stepped right in to help out.

It is said that the Spirit blows where it will. We like to feel as if we are in control. Truth is there are some things we have no control of. It?s then that God most often uses us, his instruments of love and peace, in the most unlikely places.

I am happy I belong to a parish where I feel I am relating to God and a community of believers who put aside differences when it comes to praise and worship.

Earlier this month the priests of our parish took on new assignments. But they have left a vitally active parish - and there's little reason to think the life at St. Blaise will do anything but grow in the years ahead.

[Gomes is a writer living in Mumbia, India. She is the author of *Prayers from the Heart*, Pauline Publications, Mumbai 2009, and is an occasional contributor to *NCR*.]

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