

FRANCIS ACHARYA AND KURISUMALA: An Integration of Western Monasticism, Syrian Liturgy and Indian Sanyasa

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As Kurisumala Ashram, a unique experiment spearheaded by Francis Acharya, a Belgian Cistercian monk, in the context of Christian and Indian religious life, celebrates the golden jubilee of its foundation, Mathew Chandrankunnel, CMI picks up the major trends and traits of the Ashram and the Acharya. The author, in this article, gives a detailed account of the genesis and the synthesis of the Ashram. In the Ashram, according to the author, the individual is disciplined by the Benedictine vision of prayer and work along with the Indian genius of *dhyana*, *nididhyasana* and *aparigraha*. Dr Chandrankunnel presents the pilgrimage of Francis Acharya as a yoga of uniting God, fellow beings, and creation, programming everything towards a comprehensive transformation of the individual and community taking into consideration the spiritual and material development of humanity.

Kurisumala Ashram is an embodiment of a unique religious experience; the Western Monastic tradition of the Benedictine Cistercian way of community life integrated with the Indian spirituality of renunciation and simplicity endowed with the West Syrian Liturgical celebration. Kurisumala is therefore a global holistic religious experience and hence an antidote for the capitalist third millennium, namely, a globalized flat world driven by the engines of secularism and market forces alone. Kurisumala introduces, thus a spiritual capital, emphasizing the inner essence of humanity, namely, spirituality and religiosity. The initiator of Kurisumala is none other than Francis Mahieu, a Belgian businessman, who was succumbed by the impact of Gandhian simplicity, spirituality and sarvodaya and became a Cistercian monk who was driven by the single minded life goal of a new spiritual synthesis of the East and the West, amalgamating the best from both. This holistic paradigm for the third millennium has come of age, because of its successful and exuberant existence for more than half a century by continuously shining its benign light of spiritual awareness over the seekers. It is worthwhile on this occasion to ponder over the Kurisumala experience and its innovative founder. A seminar was conducted at Anugraha, Vazhoor, in collaboration with a few other sister institutions to evaluate the contributions of this spiritual movement on the Golden Jubilee of the foundation of Kurisumala Ashram.

Jean to Francis: The Contours of Life

Jean Mahieu was born in January 17, 1912 Ypres, in Belgium. Fleeing the German bombs during the First World War along with his family, Francis

Mahieu as a four year old encountered the Indian soldiers who were in Ypres accompanying the British soldiers. That was his first encounter with Indians. During the war, many of these Indians were fallen and gave their blood to colour the poppies that bloomed in the Flanders's fields. That might be a reason for Jean to come to India and surrender his life there. Jean studied at the College Sainte Marie, Brussels and the College de Melle. After the college he joined the Union factory as an apprentice because his Godmother and Uncle were childless and wanted that Jean be their heir and run the family business. After the work in the factory, in order to equip himself as the administrator of his Godmother's business, Jean took evening classes in business administration. After the evening classes, especially on Saturday's Jean and his friends used to celebrate life by singing and drinking enjoyable Belgian beers in the Rogier Avenue Café. As his biographer niece Marthe depicts "Jean was the boldest, the wildest of the group. At least at night, he was full time student".¹ During these days, Jean enjoyed life, celebrations and night life and lived many lives simultaneously. He was also a scout leader and took the scout chaplain Fr. Etienne Hemeleers as his spiritual director. One day after a street fight in the night, as a sudden intuition, he found all these enjoyments as trivialities of life and meaninglessness.²

Challenged by Gandhi

For the refinement of the young administrator, his Godmother and Uncle sent him to London for further training and he joined in a Polytechnic School. His spiritual director gave him the life of *St. Francis ff Assisi* as a parting gift and Assisi also influenced him in making his life decision. In London he felt lonely and poor. There were not many friends and hence he walked around and investigated the parks and took photographs. In the emptiness of this London winter, life's perennial questions, dragged Francis and made him to reflect on his life seriously. This was the time when he met Amy Henn, a young woman who became a friend and spirited his life till the end. One day as he was walking home, since the weather was good, he saw a crowd awaiting for somebody. With shock, he saw the centre of their attraction; "a bare-chested, bare foot, a white cotton loin cloth worn Gandhi" who the British press ridiculed as "half-naked fakir".³ It was a life transforming and impressive encounter. Marthe, his biographer described this encounter in the following way. "Jean cut out from the newspapers all the articles about the man of non violence. He was impressed his way of presenting himself as poor, his indifference to the luxury and pomp of the British empire, being admitted to His Majesty's receptions dressed a as pariah, an untouchable."⁴ About this encounter after fifty years Francis Mahieu, thus commented. "For me it was the victory of a man who incarnated poverty. It was the epiphany of a purely spiritual power and I dreamt of following the same path".⁵

Vanity of the World

However, he joined the regiment of lancers in the Belgian army and prepared himself to be a captain. His performances at the equestrian practices were excellent and stood eight in the theoretical exam. He had a great hope of becoming a decorated war commander. There were fifteen positions left open

and he was absolutely sure of getting one as he thought that the selection would be conducted on pure merit alone. Unfortunately, he was not selected and it was indeed a great disappointment in his life. He questioned the sergeant and he in turn gave a lame duck answer that his moral rating was very low which Jean could not digest. Jean argued with him saying that he was never reprimanded or punished and hence could not be doubted about his valour. He felt betrayed and interpreted the world as totally rigged. He lost his steam and during one practice, he was kicked by the horse, severely wounded and was hence bed ridden for three weeks. These failures, dissatisfactions and frustrations were sharpening another desire that was bubbling in him.

During the marriage party of his brother Charles, as a bomb shell he revealed to his relatives that he was entering the Trappists. Jean told them that the decision was settling in him gradually and he was guided by Father Hemleers, his spiritual director.⁶ Without anybody knowing, he contacted the novice master of Scourmont Cistercian Abbey, had conducted retreats there and they had already accepted him as a novice. Jean's another reason for joining the Scourmont Abbey was that they were planning a foundation in India. His encounter with Gandhi was still vibrant in his mind. As a prelude to his Cistercian entry, his Godmother invited him to visit the Holy Land. However, Jean's father Rene could not accept this decision of his son and was angry and broke his relationship by even refusing to converse with him. He told Jean "if you do this, I disown you. I will never see you again." But mother Anna was very supportive and it was to her that he confided first his decision to enter the Cistercians.⁷ On 14th September 1935, Jean left home. His father did not come down to bid him farewell or even to say goodbye. Both the son and the father were strong willed and had determined minds. Eight days later, his head was shaved and a white habit of a novice was given and he was rechristened as Brother Francis.

Being a Cistercian Monk

The Scourmont Cistercian Abbey was established in 1850 in the land donated by the Prince of Chimay. In 1861 there were 61 monks and in 1913, thirty four year old Dom Anselme Le Bail was elected as the Abbot. In 1914 Anselme was mobilized as an officer in the Belgian army and after the war he came back to the Abbey in his official dress and no one could recognize him. Taking up again the Abbatial duties as a transformed man influenced the community to "return to the original spirituality, deeper intellectual formation, and greater personal freedom within the community".⁸ In transforming the community, he was assisted by Dom Godfroid Belorgey another retired French cavalry officer who became a monk against the wishes of his family who considered him as crazy. He became the abbot of Citeaux, the mother house of the Cistercians. These two colossal spiritual figures influenced Francis in his Cistercian formation. When Francis joined the Abbey, there was already one hundred monks.

In the Abbey Francis was touched by the writings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux; the *Steps of Humility and Pride*, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* and *On the Love of*

God. The twelve degrees of the Benedictine Rule was restructured by St. Bernard into a triple search for truth; "truth about oneself leading to humility, truth about one's neighbour, awakening compassion, truth in itself leading to God, known only by those who approach him with a pure heart".⁹ It was the time Antony Thamby from Pondicherry, India arrived as a postulant and Francis was asked by the Novice Master to fetch him from the railway station knowing of his interest in India. Antony was born in Saigon, of Tamil Parents and studied medicine. He was already a priest when he entered the Abbey. Antony wanted to establish an Abbey in India and that was the reason why he joined the Abbey in Palestine. He got the permission to enter the Scourmont Abbey because of its plan to start a foundation in India. However due to ill health, Antony died in 1943 and his death had touched Francis and might have resolved to realize Antony's dream of establishing a Cistercian Monastery in India.

Intellectual Preparation for India

In 1938, he was sent to Rome to study at the Gregorian University. There he experienced the eternal Rome and enthusiastically wrote about this to his Abbey. He learned Hebrew and other ecclesiastical subjects. In 1940 he joined the University of Leuven, Belgium and stayed in the Holy Spirit College and studied theology. There he registered for the courses on *Upanishads* and was disappointed by the Euro-centric approach of the professors "who pointed out the omissions and weaknesses of the Vedic religions compared to Christianity, rather than conveying their richness and their own spirit in their cultural and historic context."¹⁰ Father Jules Monchanin belonging to the Society of the Auxiliaries of the Missions was interested in Indian spirituality and visited the Scourmont Abbey and had long conversations with the Abbot Anselme planning for the establishment of the Indian Cistercian foundation. It was expected that the novice master Albert Drezelle would join Father Monchanin next year in India and both together establish the Indian Abbey. Soon Father Monchanin went to India and became a guru to Francis. Unfortunately, the war came in between and the Indian foundation was placed on hold. On October 12, 1941, Francis was ordained a priest.

Scourmont Abbey was asked by the Abbot General to take over a Welsh Cistercian Abbey in order to continue the thousands of years old Cistercian life in the island of Caldey. This new plan changed the establishment of the Indian Foundation and Father Albert Drezelle was sent as Abbot to Caldey who was expected to go to India. Francis took over as the novice master in Scourmont and placed his doubt to the Abbot Anselme that would he be kept as novice master in the Abbey for ever. The Abbot Anselme assured him that the Caldey Abbey would be a place where the Asians could join as the British were governing India. Thus Francis believed that his plans for India were on the right track. Unfortunately Abbot Anselme had a stroke and became an invalid and all the plans for the Indian foundation were shelved.

Meanwhile Father Benedict Alapatt, a Sylvestrian Benedictine from Kerala, joined the Abbey along with two novices with the plans to establish a

monastic foundation near Madras (now Chennai), India. However, though Father Alappat spoke elaborately about the establishment of a new foundation in India, it did not get the approval of Francis as it was merely a transplantation of the western Monasticism. In 1952 news about the Indian Foundation established by Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux came in the form of a brochure. The bishop of Tiruchirapalli, Mgr Mendonca, in the forward emphasised that "to make the Church Indian as Paul had made it Greek or Roman, from Jewish as it had been in the beginning. Christianity continues to be seen in India as an imported religion, a vestige of the days of foreign domination. The best way is to begin with contemplative life".¹¹ Father Le Saux personally wrote to Francis hearing about his interest in the Indian *Sanyasa*. Since his health was not going well after an hernia operation, Francis went to Paris for better treatment and took the opportunities to learn more about India and Indian spirituality. Francis met with a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk who showed to Francis his doctoral thesis on Buddhism and introduced him to Indian students and to Olivier Lacombe, a specialist on Indian Studies and helped Francis to enter into the Indian realm. In Paris he took, five courses by well known Professors on various Indian topics such as yoga and Veda, Indian culture and Civilization, Yoga sutra of Patanjali, Buddhist idealism of Patanjali, and Upanishad Darsana at the school of Advanced Studies. By this time Francis started learning Sanskrit. This was the time he resolved to go to India and establish the Cistercian Abbey in Indian style. From this time onwards, Francis spent all his energy in the preparation for going to India. Meanwhile, in the Abbey the Indian project was shelved and they opened instead another project in Congo, Africa.

Meeting Vijaya Lakshmi Pundit

Francis had a retreat in the Scourmont Abbey conducted by Jean Danielou a Jesuit whose brother was living on the banks of Ganges in Varanasi. He spoke about the importance of assimilating the Eastern wisdom, principles and habits and thought the best way to enter the Eastern soul as contemplation.¹² Impressed by Francis, Danielou arranged for his stay in the Jesuit House in Paris and had introduced him to the Indian spirituality courses. It was an opportunity for Francis to learn Tamil at the School of Oriental Languages. In 1953 July Francis was elected as the novice master at Caldey Abbey and he moved to Britain. At Caldey, Francis received many letters from Henri Le Saux and his many experience about India like meeting of Ramana Maharshi of Arunachala which sharpened his desire to go to India.

Now Francis started to plan for his Indian journey and applied for an Indian visa. Several weeks he waited for a reply from the Indian Embassy in London and whenever he went and asked about his visa, they would simply say that "no information sir, they are still processing the application." Twice, he was denied the visa and he tried his best for getting a visa by contacting various missionaries working in India and the neighbouring countries. Meanwhile the bishop of Lahore, a fellow Flemish invited him to Lahore to establish the foundation there. Another proposal was to go to Goa with a Portuguese visa

and when Goa is united with India, Francis could stay in India. Father Bede Griffiths, a Benedictine was also planning to go to India and invited Francis to join him to go to London which Francis accepted joyfully. After seeing them off to India, he walked back to his room. On the way he went again to the Indian Embassy and applied for a simple tourist visa. Meanwhile, the Pakistan embassy sent him a resident permit while for the third time, a refusal for a visa came from the Indian embassy. Terribly disappointed, he went to the Pakistan Embassy to collect the visa and on the way he thought of trying his luck once again even though thrice his application was rejected. An Indian employee in her sari greeted him and told him that he should meet some one in the higher ups so that he could get a visa and suggested that he meet the Ambassador Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit herself. Francis went home and wrote a long letter narrating his ambitions and how he was influenced by Gandhiji and he also explained his plan for a Christian Ashram with an Indian style. Within a week, he was invited by an Indian official and was informed that if he could write in detail, he would have an audience with the ambassador Mrs Vijay Lakshmi Pandit. His whole documents were in Caldey and he went back there and shut himself for three days and wrote a seventeen page text with the title "the meeting of Hinduism and Christianity in monastic life". On April 21, he was given the appointment by the Indian Ambassador. Francis was received by the ambassador in her office where Dr. Rozario an official in the Education section of the Embassy, was also present. She told him, "I am astonished that you were refused this visa. I express my regrets to you. I will inform my brother in Delhi (Prime Minister Nehru) today. You will receive news soon".¹³ He gave some presents to this gracious and intelligent ambassador and she appreciated it very well. On May 16 he got his Indian visa. That was indeed a hard obtained visa and because of the strength of his determination only he could received it even though several times he was refused it. During the waiting period, Francis took up intensive Sanskrit and Tamil courses and prepared himself to go India. Francis went to his Scourmont Abbey and he was told not to enter his former room and should not participate in any of the community activities and he was asked to go to the Guest house. It was a terrible mental blow to him. The reason, he later found out was that he had asked for exclaustation from the Abbey in order to go to India and it was granted. Bitterness overpowered him and the remnants of that painful event could only be erased when he was accepted again into the Benedictine Cistercian order in 1999.

Experiencing Indian Spirituality

On June 24th 1955 on SS *Carthage* Francis travelled to India, reaching Bombay on 11th July. Dom Henri Le Saux was there in Bombay to receive him dressed up in saffron clothes, the colour of renunciation and spirituality. Father Le Saux took Francis soon to the Elephanta caves as an enthronement ceremony for initiating him into Hinduism. As the other guests were explaining to Francis the Shiva Nataraja, Le Saux plunched into contemplation in front of a three-faced Shiva statue. When Francis came next day, looking for Le Saux, he was again in deep meditation and was celebrating mass. Le Saux invited him to join him in the Eucharistic celebration. This extreme view of Le Saux was not appreciated by Francis and they had to part ways. However, Le

Saux took Francis to the Buddhist caves of Kanheri, Ellora and Ajanta. Francis went by himself travelling the whole of India, especially in the Himalayas; from Calcutta to Darjiling, Kurseong, Bodh Gaya, etc. Francis took the saffron clothes and when he visited the new foundation of Father Bede Griffiths and Father Alappatt was asked to remove the saffron clothes and to wear the habits. This incident suggested how much Europeanised they were and how they could not understand the element of inculturation.

From there, in order to meet Raimundo Panikkar, Francis went to Mysore. However, Panikkar was in a hurry and introduced Francis to Bishop Rene Feuga. Bishop Rene invited Francis to accompany him for the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Carmelites of May Immaculate (CMI) at Mannanam, Kerala. Not all were appreciative of Francis, and Mgr. Lucas, the Nuncio to India at New Delhi admonished him and commented thus: "How can a Catholic priest wear a sadhu's clothing? It's a dishonour for the church. These Hindus are depraved, irremediably corrupt. If you want to do serious work here, stop these undesirable eccentricities".¹⁴ The majority of the Church was not sensitive to the signs of the times and was still clothed in the vestiges of European colonialism. The depth and width of Indian spirituality was out-rightly rejected as silly and they felt that the Indian value systems are to be replaced by the European values, doctrines and systems of thought. This unfortunate tendency is still pervading in the Indian Church and that is one of the reasons why the Indian Church still remains as alien and does not have the power as a spiritual force. Francis wanted to change this attitude and his aspiration was to meet Christianity and Hinduism in monasticism and contemplation. During the celebrations at Mannanam, Francis met Mar Athanasios, the Syro Malankara Bishop of Thiruvalla who invited him for a Christmas celebration in Kumbalandanam, near Kottayam. It was a moving ceremony that touched Francis' heart and he grabbed the chance when the Bishop invited him to establish a Cistercian Ashram in his diocese. Francis went to Cherpunkal and learned Sanskrit from Father Thomas Kochayankanal, a Pundit and liked the Meenachil river belt and the surrounding environment. Meanwhile Rome did not approve of the monastic foundation of Father Alappatt and Father Bede Griffiths. So they talked about another foundation with Francis and he accepted Bede and Mar Gregorios, the Malankara Archbishop of Trivandrum accepted Alappatt as a diocesan priest. In October 1956, Mar Athanasios gave them a property in Pushpagiri and assigned a priest to teach them the Syriac Liturgy.

Francis visited Shanthivanam where Dom Monchanin had established an Indian Ashram. He blessed Francis and his new endeavour. Thus Dom Anselme's dream and Monchanin's dream were about to be realized in the person of Francis. The acceptance of the Monastic foundation by the Holy See was personally conveyed to Francis and Bede by Cardinal Tisserant through an appreciative letter. However the Cistercian Abbot General was suspicious and did not support the project.

Reaching Kurisumala -The Promised Land

Mr. K. V. Thomas, Pottankulam heard about the new foundation and was ready to donate land for the future monastery and made it known to Mar

Athanasios. The three left for Vagamon, situated 3,500 feet above sea level, and showed the Kurisumala Range. Father Francis was taken up by the stunning beauty of nature and readily accepted it. This place was a pilgrimage centre for the Christians. Thus the search for the Promised Land ended. Soon the plan was made by Mr. Ingle and soon a brochure was made with the title " Kurisumala Ashram, by a Cistercian Monk". Francis's elder sister Marie Therese became the fund raiser. Her daughter Guyguy told me that she often made winter clothes either for the monks or for auction so that the money could be sent to Kurisumala. On 3rd November 1957 Mar Athanasios canonically erected the Kurisumala Ashram and the four fold objectives were highlighted: ¹⁵

1 The solemn and complete celebration of the liturgy and the prayer of the Church – which is presently only partially celebrated in ur parishes by the clergy and religious more and more engaged in active work.

2. The consolidation and development of the Syrian rite, so venerable and rich, but exposed to becoming a hybrid of the dominant Latin rite.

3. Welcoming clergy and laity for prayers and retreats developing the spirituality of the eastern fathers, their asceticism and mystical theology.

4. Kurisumala Ashram will be especially dedicated to the unity of the separated brothers.

The life of the community is organised according to the Cistercian Order while the liturgical celebrations will be conducted according to the Syro Malankara rite. On 21st March 1958, on the feast day of St. Benedict and the 860th anniversary of the foundation of Citeaux, Francis, Bede and two Indian postulants, Sylvester and Varghese and their young liturgy professor started their Indian Ashram. After years of toil and disappointments, the dream became a reality. The dreams of Antony Tamby, Abbot Anseleme, Dom Monchanin and all others who dreamt of an Indian foundation could be realized only through the strong determination of Francis. On September 14th the chapel was blessed by Mar Athanasios and the full monastic life started.

For sustaining the community, they had a few cows and some epidemic killed the cows and their calves. He had to start everything from zero. So they started cultivating pineapples and unfortunately they could not find suitable market. Thus he ventured into dairy farming again and the Swiss ambassador Jacques-Albert Cuttat supported Francis and thus the Indo-Swiss project was established. Through that project the white revolution took place in Kerala.

Many youngsters came to be members in the Ashram and Francis decided that he would put a ceiling at twenty. He would say that he was inspired by his grandfather who had eighteen children. To handle the farm and to provide formation, Francis thought twenty is a good number and the number continues till today more or less the same.

Syrian Monastic Office

With the aid of Father Hambye, Francis took up the initiative to have the complete cycle of Syrian Monastic office. Father Bede has already translated the Syriac liturgy for ordinary days into English. They still lacked for the Sundays and feast days and the liturgical cycles. So Hambye and Francis together searched for the original collection of the Syriac liturgical texts for Sundays and Feast days which is known as *Penqitho*. During the Council of Diamper, in 1599, the original texts in Kerala were destroyed by the Portuguese and an abridged version for parish use was available though the much richer one is filled in seven volumes. Hambye and Francis started to trace the original seven volumes *Penqitho* so that they could translate and use it for office. It was a tremendous and audacious work because in order to have these volumes, they had to travel and search in the Chaldean rite monasteries in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and it was Francis' determination alone that brought the book. It is indeed an interesting story.

On March 19, 1961 Hambye and Francis flew to Lebanon and reached Beirut and were received at the Saint Joseph University, established in 1875 by the French Jesuits. They searched in the University Library and could not find the book and visited the Patriarchate of the catholic Syrians, Syrian Catholic Seminary, Armenian Patriarchate etc. At the Syrian Catholic Seminary he noticed the placement of the icons in the sanctuary, gestures of blessing, vestments of deacons and sub-deacons, frequency and direction of incensing, and the movements at the altar so that he could adapt it for the Kurisumala Chapel. Francis was a perfectionist and he wanted to have the exact replication at Kurisumala. They visited the Monastery of Sharbel Makhloof and could not find the *penqitho* even there. So they went to Syria, to Aleppo and searched for the *penqitho* in the Armenian, Melkite, Syrian and Latin monasteries and still could not find the *penqitho*. As a last resort, they were informed that they would have a chance if they go to Dmascus and visit the Jacobite Metropolitan. Mar Yacoub received them joyfully and showed them the very ancient Churches of Maaloula where the people still speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus. At Mar Musa, he admired the apse with a cave dug in it where the tabernacle was placed and in this model he made the sanctum sanctorum of the Kurisumala Church. Even there they could not find the *penqitho*. Mar Yacoub told them to go to Jerusalem and try their luck. Therefore they took the bus to Jerusalem through Jordan. In Jordan he saw a beautiful cross and paid for an exact copy of the cross which now adorns the Kurisumala chapel. In Jerusalem, at the saint Sabas Monastery, one of the few orthodox monasteries, he asked the prior about the formation of novices, the schedules and customs so that he could form his novices. There too no glimpse of *Penqitho*. They suggested that probably in Mosul, Iraq there might be a possibility of finding it because in 1896 it was printed there. Father Hambye left to Belgium and Francis was left alone. Feeling tired and dejected Francis took shelter in the Cistercian monastery at El Latroum, Israel and rejuvenated by being with the community. Then he flew to Baghdad and was received by Mgr Bacozy and since Mosul was a military zone got the permission with the help of Mgr Bacozy. He took the night train to Mosul and

visited the ancient Chaldean monasteries and the gate of Nineveh. He also visited the monasteries of Mar Mathai, Mar Elia and Mar Hormiz. In Mosul Mgr Benni invited him for tea. Francis asked him about the *penqitho* since it was there the last edition was printed. Mgr Benni remembered that it was printed there and invited them to check in the godown. There they discovered seven Penqithos bound in leather, though damaged but complete. The joy of Francis was immense. Mgr Benni sold all the seven volumes of seven Penquithos to Francis for 72,000 Iraqi dinars. It was indeed heavy to take all of them together and hence Francis kept one complete set of Penqitho with him and asked the Bishop to send the others to Cochin. Though Francis did not have enough money, he paid an advance to the Bishop by placing his trust in the providence of God and flew back to Delhi. In Delhi he showed to his friend Cuttat, the Swedish Ambassador, the hard won *Penqithos*. So for the *Penqitho*, he made a troublesome travel and could not rest until he found it and got hold of it. His determination was so strong and this will could be seen in all his endeavours. After getting the original text, the next task was to translate the book into English so that they can pray. The translation and completion of the *Penqitho* was the major work he had done after many decades of hard work and reflection. It remains as a monument to Francis' vision and love for the Syriac liturgy. It also contains the marks of his love for Indian spirituality and wisdom. Francis incorporated into it spiritual thoughts and passages from the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and other spiritual classics. This monumental work is known as the *Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit*.

Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit.: The Prayer of Asian Churches

This monumental work is an integration of the West Syrian Liturgy, especially the hymns of St. Ephrem, and the spiritual heritage of India. St Ephrem was called by his contemporaries as the Harp of the Spirit because of the poetic depth, spiritual beauty and richness of biblical metaphors exhibited in his poems. The prayer of the harp of the spirit is thus from the patrimony of the Asian Churches that spread from Syria to Asia, across the Mediterranean sea to Persia, India, Mongolia and parts of China. Twenty five years of prayer, translation, reflection on the *Penqitho* matured into the book as the *Harp of the Spirit*. The sub heading as the *Prayer of the Asian Churches* denotes the integration of the wisdom and spiritual heritage of India, especially from the Vedas, Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita. Thus the Christian Orient through St. Ephrem and the collective thoughts of the sages of India are fused into a beautiful prayer bouquet that raises the human heart and soul to the divine. The inspiration for the integration comes from the great Brhadaranyaka Upanishedic (I, III, 28) prayer "Asato ma sat gamaya; Tamaso ma jyotir gamaya; Mrutyor ma amrutam gamaya". Pope Paul commented on this prayer during his homily at the Eucharistic congress in Mumbai in 1964 thus: "Rarely has the longing for God been expressed with words so full of the spirit of Advent. . This is a prayer which belongs also to our time. Today more than ever it should rise from every human heart."¹⁶ The same theme was all the more emphasised by Pope John Paul II in his message to the Syro Malankara Church on the occasion of its Golden Jubilee celebrations "work

with fervour to bring Christian unity to completion. . Encourage dialogue between Indian culture and Christian faith. . as understood by Archbishop Ivanios, Bharat contributes abundantly to the faith by its culture. . Work to make the Christian faith reach everywhere, and to assimilate the values of Indian culture.”¹⁷ Taking into account of the pastoral exhortation of the Holy Father, the Indian Church took seriously the encounter with the cultural environment of India by immersing into the spiritual depth of other religions. This call for contemplation was given by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India gathered at Trivandrun in 1996:

The Church in India has to shed the image of an institution that lives for itself, and acquire the awareness that she is essentially a community in a state of mission for others . . She must develop a capacity for contemplation . . Interreligious dialogue should become an indispensable element in this, not only on the level of every diocese, parish and individual. It should become a reality at the grass-root level. Further, a deep insertion into the cultures and traditions of the people is necessary if she is to make the Mystery of Christ relevant to our land. Inculturation is therefore an absolute need”¹⁸

Thus the *Book of Common Prayer* translated by Bede which became the prayer book of the monks at Kurisumala, has undergone a mutation and developed into four volumes. The first volume is devoted for ordinary days and the second volume contains the liturgical seasons of the Annunciation, Nativity and Epiphany and for the feasts from November to February. The third volume incorporates the Fast, Passion Night of the Resurrection and the Feast of the Annunciation while the fourth volume contains the seasons of Resurrection, of the Apostles, of the Transfiguration and of the Cross and for the feasts from April to October. Taking into account of the cultural milieu, a special feast of Onam is also incorporated with prayers mentioning the myth of Mahabali during the end of August and the beginning of September when the Keralites are celebrating Onam as a harvest festival. The response mentions the traditional music instruments and calls the faithful to “make music, sound the drum and nadaswaram at the full moon of chingam, the festival of Onam.”¹⁹ Another interesting quotation from the Taittiriya Upanishad (III 6)

Absorbed in tapas and spiritual prayer
He saw that God is joy.
From joy all beings have come.
By joy they all live,
And unto joy they all return”

Quotations from Gita and other major Upanishads are also profuse and I don’t dare to quote more to show the interreligious dimension of the prayer book. These inclusions from the heritage of India make all the more the *Harp of the Spirit* indeed a prayer of the Asian Churches and thus substantiate the second title.

The interreligious dimension was not merely in the level of prayers alone. Francis tried to live it by incorporating Swami Dharmananda, a monk of Sri

Ramakrishna Order who came and stayed with the community for almost seven years as an associate member, participating in the prayers and all other activities of the community, working as the assistant guest master, teaching Rig Veda and taking classes on yoga without changing his religion or faith. He died on his way to Varanasi. Francis was also in Irshikesh, staying in the Ashram of the Divine Life Society of Swami Sivananda and took note of the daily routines in the Ashram and tried to make similar timetable in Kurisumala Ashram. In order to be a true Indian Francis took Indian citizenship on 6th August 1968 with the name Francis Acharya and became a naturalised Indian and Asian realizing his dream.

Thus praying together with the brethren from other religious traditions, the Kurisumala community was not only praying the spiritual heritage of India but also incorporated the other religions and took leadership in praying together as an Asian Community at large. At Kurisumala Chapel you will always find Hindus, Muslims and Christians from all denominations praying together and worshipping the One, the Good and The Beautiful, termed in Indian philosophy as Satyam, Sivam, Sundaram.

Another aspect of the interreligious dimension of Francis Acharya was his bold step to conduct the Bharatiya Puja. He was convinced by the exhortation of the Vatican and the various Papal documents to immerse fully in the local cultures and inculcate the Christian dimension. Though some of the ecclesiastical authorities were having a different opinion, Francis Acharya determined to conduct the Bharatiya Puja daily. The strong will in the establishment of the Kurisumala Ashram was also evident in his support for inculturation and Bharatiya Puja. He believed that it was a true way of integrating Christianity in India to its spiritual depth and cultural milieu.

Gandhian Influence

It is striking to note that that Gandhi who was influenced by the Trappists in the establishment of an Ashram in South Africa influenced another Trappist to style his Ashram in a Gandhian way. When Gandhi developed the concept of an Ashram he visited the Marion Hill Trappist Monastery in Durban in 1895. That was his first encounter with a spiritual settlement.²⁰ "The impressions of this self-contained, self-disciplined and deeply religious settlement remained permanently etched on his mind. The strictly vegetarian brothers and sisters supplied all their needs by their own labour, including farming and grinding grains, hauling water and chopping wood. They did their own carpentering, shoemaking and printing; they read, taught and prayed throughout the day at regular intervals. But the feature that made a lasting impact on the residents' vows of 'silence and chastity'. This was Gandhi's first exposure to a spiritually based settlement, which operated on the principles of self-sufficiency, manual labour, brotherhood, strict vegetarianism, silence, chastity prayers and service. Their motto of *Ora et labora* (prayer and work) appealed to Gandhi greatly and he would later incorporate the same into his own ashrams. Gandhi's first visit to the Cistercian (Trappist) monastery received further reinforcement through Tolstoy's and the ideas of simple living, high thinking and manual labour". Thus the Tolstoy Farm and Phoenix settlement came out of Gandhi's

encounter with the Trappists. Gandhi integrated the Christian principles into his Ashram and that paved the way for the seven Ashrams he established, two in South Africa and five in India. His Ashrams became the laboratories for his experiment with the truth and non-violence. The personal discipline and purification were tested first in his life and then asked his followers to strictly adhere to such disciplines and purifications so that a community based on true Indian values could be lived. Thus Gandhi was able to influence the individual and the community through the Benedictine discipline and thus he spiritualised politics. Thus for Gandhi service was prayer and prayer was service. There was no discrimination between individuals which are almost alien concepts in Hinduism. Thus Gandhi experimented with life and transformed his personality and with the power of that self discipline and conviction fired the imagination of a nation. This fire of simplicity and spirituality touched Francis and was challenged to follow it up which he joyfully did.

Gandhian simplicity, spirituality are thus all pervading in the Kurisumala. The monks wear saffron clothes, walk bare foot, eat vegetarian food, takes their meals being sitting, working hard either in the farm or in the kitchen, keeping silence in the premises all are perfectly Gandhian and Indian values which were incorporated into the Cistercian way of life. Moreover, the *Goshala* is very typical of Indian and it is the backbone of the Kurisumala Ashram. Krishna who was rearing a cattle herd symbolically represents the spiritual animation and Kurisumala Ashram for their lively hood rare cattle and takes care of them very affectionately. They spread the good news of the economical way of rearing them and a milk society helps the near by farmers to sell their milk in a profitable way. Thus the Gandhian ideal of cottage industry and boosting village economy is also practiced by the Kurisumala Ashram. Gandhi's picture was kept in the room of Acharya as a beacon light to shed light in his spiritual path.

Unification with the Cistercian Brotherhood

Francis Acharya was longing to be back in the fold of the Cistercian brotherhood where he started as a monk. The shock of his excommunication was so painful and the wound left unhealed. So he wanted to embrace his mother congregation again and asked the opinion of the fellow brethren. Father Yeshudas, the senior among the sannyasis told that they would like to join in an existing contemplative monastery, a community of prayer and manual work. Father Ishananda said that they want to continue the present form of Liturgy and way of life. So all the members of Kurisumala Ashram wanted to continue the same life style and but wanted to link with a contemplative monastery. Francis Acharya consulted Mar himothios, the Bishop of Thiruvalla and he also gave the green signal. He wrote to Father Albert Drezelle who was expected to spearhead the Indian project. He was happy to hear the completion and success of the Indian project and asked his forgiveness for not understanding Francis at that time and said that Abbot Anselme would be happy now. That letter of father Albert was a solace to Francis Acharya. He also got a positive reply from the Abbot General and he promised that he would be visiting the monastery in the year 1994. Dom Bernardo visited Kurisumala Ashram and stayed with them for three

days. On the day of departure as they all assembled, Dom Bernardo embraced Francis Acharya and removed his Abbot's pectoral cross and placed it around the neck of Francis Acharya as a symbol of his admiration and as a sign of future unification. That symbolic gesture from the Abbot General gave immense happiness to Francis Acharya.²¹ In June 1995, the general Chapter of the Cistercians voted unanimously to accept Kurisumala with all its specialties as a member of the Cistercian confederation. Mar Thimothios and Francis Acharya participated in the General Chapter and 160 Abbots and Abbesses stood up with standing ovation for a brother who was homecoming with enormous riches. Francis stood up in the assembly and quoting the Upanishedic prayer, thanked them and asked for a mother house to which they could be united. The Australian Cistercian Abbey at Tarrawarra was selected to be the mother house of Kurisumala and the union was perfect. A monk from the Tarrawarra monastery came to stay with the Kurisumala community and the unification was ratified in 1998 by the Abbot General and erected kurisumala as an Abbey. Then the Abbot of Citeaux read a message reflecting the spirit of the order.²²

Kurisumala is a gift the Lord is preparing for the Order
 Before it is a favour the Order does for Kurisumala
 It is for us to receive this gift
 Not to conquer it
 To serve it
 Not to enslave it

It is not a question of imprisoning the spirit in law, in the Order
 But of enriching the order with the spirit that lives in Kurisumala
 The Cistercian charism must be able to express itself
 In all cultures
 In each culture

It is not a question of imposing western expression on all the cultures
 But of favouring the proper cultural expression
 Of the original charism of our founders
 We have perhaps more to receive
 Than to give
 In welcoming Kurisumala

On 14 October 1999, the Abbatial Blessing was held. Dom David Tomlins, the father immediate from the Tarrawarra Abbey was the main celebrant at this function along with the other Cistercian congregation officials and proclaimed Kurisumala as the first Cistercian Abbey in India. With a life full of satisfaction and happiness, Francis Acharya completed his work, realized the dream many were dreaming and went to the Lord for his eternal reward on January 31st 2002. He is buried in the Resurrection garden of the Kurisumala Ashram visited by thousands of spiritual adherents.

Conclusion

History evaluates leaders by their contributions to posterity. Thus, Francis Acharya is a leader who had a vision and with strong determination and self will and fully giving himself to the grace and plan of God was able to realize that vision. His whole life can thus be summed up in the living

symbol of Kurisumala Ashram. Francis showed that monasticism can be a living and loving dialogue between the East and West. Before anybody could speak about globalization, Francis understood and envisioned a spiritual holistic process that will have impact on the coming generations. Francis Acharya thus, introduced the concept of the spiritual capital into the globalization process and showed the importance of ecological sustainability. Influenced by Gandhi and Francis of Assisi, he renounced the vulgar richness and embraced poverty, simplicity and spirituality and thus, in his own small way lived the *kenosis* of Jesus Christ. In his Ashram, the individual is disciplined by the Benedictine values of prayer and hard work along with the Indian values of *dhyana*, *nididhyasana* and *aparigraha*. He lived for the transformation of the individual and community. Like Gandhi, he worked for the sarvodaya, the spiritual and economic emancipation of people. His life was, indeed, a yoga of uniting fellow brethren, God and nature.

Endnote

- ¹ Marthe Mahieu-De Praetere, Kurisumala, Francis Mahieu Acharya: A Pioneer of Christian Monasticism in India, ATC Publications, 2008, p. 18.
- ² Mahieu-De Praetere, p. 19.
- ³ Mahieu-De Praetere, p. 22.
- ⁴ Mahieu-De Praetere, p. 22.
- ⁵ Mahieu-De Praetere, p. 22.
- ⁶ Mahieu-De Praetere, p. 27.
- ⁷ Mahieu-De Praetere, p. 31.
- ⁸ Mahieu-De Praetere, p. 36.
- ⁹ Mahieu-De Praetere, p. 40.
- ¹⁰ Mahieu-De Praetere, p. 57.
- ¹¹ Mahieu-De Praetere, p. 92.
- ¹² Mahieu-De Praetere, p. 102.
- ¹³ Mahieu-De Praetere, p. 119.
- ¹⁴ Mahieu-De Praetere, p. 140.
- ¹⁵ Mahieu-De Praetere, p. 161.
- ¹⁶ Francis Acharya, Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit, 3rd revised edition, Kurisumala Ashram, 1996, p. ix. Hereafter the book will be referred to as Francis Acharya.
- ¹⁷ Francis Acharya, p. ix.
- ¹⁸ Francis Acharya, p. x.
- ¹⁹ Francis Acharya, p. 641. Prof. John of Gandhian studies, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, shared some of his ideas with me and it helped me to write this portion of the article.
- ²⁰ Uma Majumdar, Gandhi's Pilgrimage of Faith: From Darkness to Light, New York : State University of New York Press, 2005, p. 107.
- ²¹ Mahieu-De Praetere, pp. 337-338.
- ²² Mahieu-De Praetere, pp. 345-346.