



# FRANCIS VINEETH VADAKETHALA CMI

*Footprints of a Philosopher-Theologian Mystic*

## Anne Overzee, UK

Connected at the Level of Heart



I had arrived in Bangalore straight from Cambridge University, in 1975, and for some reason the staff at the United Theological College (UTC), Bangalore, where I was to live for the next two years, sent me to Dharmaram for my research to be supervised by a Father Vadakethala, as he was known then. I was new to everything (including Catholicism), but Father Francis, as he said I should call him, was not only immensely knowledgeable about Indian philosophy and spirituality, but also gentle, unassuming, and very kind. He embodied and lived out the simplicity and humility of a Christian *yogi*, and even I could not fail to recognise the depth of his contemplative experience. Over the years, I was fortunate enough to know him as teacher,

friend, and, at a deeper level – although I didn't know it at the beginning – as *guru*.

During my time in India, I would travel to ashrams and interview mainly Hindu and Tibetan practitioners and, then, return to conversations reflecting on what I had discovered with Father Francis. My research was, inevitably perhaps, shaped my own spiritual journeying. Since my degree had been in Theology as well as Religious Studies, our talks naturally often came back to what I encountered as the practices of Christians in India. Later, I came to realise that Father Francis' vision, in which indigenous Indian spiritual practices were fully integrated with Christian understandings, was actually already realised in his own being and consciousness.

I remember one occasion: while away on my travels and staying at Mother Teresa's Motherhouse, I stumbled into realising that in some sense I 'belonged' there: I had 'come home'. So, on my return to Bangalore, without thinking twice, I went straight to Father Francis and asked him to baptise me at the Motherhouse. I shall never know how he managed to free himself of his considerable responsibilities to do that, but unquestioningly he gave me his word that he would. Somehow that '*diksha*' cemented our relationship; and

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I will never forget learning afterwards that the night before he baptised me in Calcutta, he was on his knees praying for me, while I unknowingly was dreaming of the waters of the Red Sea opening for me to walk through...

Following on from that shared experience it seemed unsurprising to me that Father Francis was travelling to Europe to give a retreat in Germany and a talk in Oxford just at the same time that I needed to leave India and return home.

'I know how to do that', he said with such confidence that I left the problem with him! When we got to board the plane he took my vina, went straight to the cabin crew and told them he wanted the vina in the cabin with him, pointing out to them a particular seat. He walked straight to one of the business class seats and tucked it into the space behind his seat. And when we came off the plane and met up again (I was in the cheap seats) he handed me my vina with a broad smile. I took him home to meet my family and they welcomed him with open arms, as did later the man I was to marry five years later. And, of course, it was Father Francis who married us.

One of the most vivid memories I have of Father Francis is of offering Mass in a small chapel at Dhar-

maram during my time in India. We sat on the floor, the oil lamp was burning, there was a total simplicity of form and a deep peace in the room. It was the same when



he celebrated Mass in our home in the UK. During the Mass, Father Francis was able to indwell Christ to such an extent that he radiated His presence.

As I write this now, I imagine sitting with him once again: he is smiling, his head a little to one side, and as I start to speak – to tell him how infinitely grateful I am to him – he slowly closes his eyes and opens them again while taking in what I am saying. And, once again, we are connected at the level of heart.