

FRANCIS VINEETH VADAKETHALA CMI

Footprints of a Philosopher-Theologian Mystic



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'Thirthankara'

It is with great sadness that the passing of Fr Francis Vineeth CMI was announced from India on Sunday.

I first met him at the 'Mysticism Beyond Bounds' conference at DVK/Christ University, Bengaluru in 2011 where he gave a presentation on mysticism from a practitioner's perspective. Amongst all the academic discourse this made a profound effect. A few weeks later I was privileged to visit him at 'Vidyavanam', the Christian ashram he had created on the outskirts of Bengaluru in Karnataka, where I was struck by how much he had achieved in transforming a barren desert into a spiritual oasis. On my subsequent visits to Vidyavanam I always felt it was like going to visit one of the early desert fathers, living peacefully and in harmony with nature as acolytes from all over the world came to 'seek a word'. We always had long and fascinating

conversations and one thing he said changed my life. After a conference in which he had switched with ease from Latin to Sanskrit I asked how difficult it was to learn Sanskrit. 'Do you have any Latin?', he replied. 'Yes'. 'Then you will have no problem - so much of Sanskrit is from the same root as Latin...'. And he was right. I went on to study Sanskrit at London University inspired by his wisdom. The last time I saw him was at the last retreat he gave at Vidyavanam. It was quite remarkable as his mind was half in this world and half in the next - sometimes he seemed to be talking to unseen presences that helped the conference along. It was an unforgettable experience.

Writing on Vidyavanam, Fr. Augustine Thottakara CMI referred to how Fr. Vineeth cultivated the 'Yoga mind' at the ashram, integrating apparently bi-polar realities of matter and spirit, describing him as an example of a modern sannyāsi 'who tries to awaken the religious-spiritual consciousness of the sadhakas and develop in them a soul culture that is deeply rooted in the age old principles of Indian spirituality and in the immensely rich Christian spiritual traditions without at the same time negating the positive values of matter, body and this world.'



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In this respect, Fr. Francis himself suggested that the heart of the renunciation required for the spiritual life is samādhi. A term deriving from the Sanskrit terms *sama* (equal) and *dhi* (mind) which Fr. Francis describes as a 'steadiness of mind obtained not merely by the mastery over the faculties through which distractions enter but more by being in touch with the Divine, the Lord who abides in the cave of one's heart.' [1] In this respect, the disposition of the practitioner is the most important matter rather than the state or way of

life. For Fr. Francis, Jesus Christ displays the ultimate manifestation of samādhi in the Gospels, not least in his Passion. He suggests that samādhi leads to genuine freedom, the sign of true spirituality, a person in this state 'is no more a slave of his impulses, not even of "good" desires. He submits himself totally to the divine will.' [2] 'How does one achieve that state?', he asked in 'The Asian Vision of God' to which he replied: 'it is because he has crossed over to the other side of life and discovered the true hidden treasure of his life. He is a thirthankara, one who has crossed over the river of life. It is on this side of the river, in the world of objects whether of senses or mind, that we are pulled hither and thither', but once we have crossed over we inhabit 'a world of light and delight as one experiences the Lord as the ultimate source of all bliss and beatitude.' [3]

Our dear Fr Francis has now himself become a 'thirthankara' as he has passed to the other realm of bliss of which he spoke so eloquently. May his prayers and intercessions continue to bless and inspire us.

Requiescat in Pace!

[1] F. Vineeth, (2004) *The Asian Vision of God*, p. 159. [2] *Ibid.*, p.164. [3] *Ibid.*, p.161.