

Father Vineeth: My Best Mentor

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It was in May 1985 that I reached Dharmaram College, Bengaluru, for my philosophy studies. My association with Father Francis Vineeth Vadakethala CMI began during this period. In fact, I read his excellent book *Foundations of World Vision*, a discourse on metaphysics from an Indian perspective, before I knew him closely. This small book not only enabled me to understand the person of Father Vineeth and his perspectives and positions, but also helped me to form my life vision, especially from a philosophical point of view.

I was blessed to be closely associated with Father Vineeth all through my student days at Dharmaram and, later, when I began to teach in the Faculty of Philosophy at DVK. He was the best mentor I had: he accompanied me in my spiritual and intellectual growth. My admiration for his person grew as I went along with my four-year long philosophy at Dharmaram (Bachelors and Licentiate). His accompaniment was very personal and persuasive, but always non-invasive; while Father Vineeth supported me at every stage, he always gave me freedom in my choices with regard to the specialization and the professors with whom I worked; but, in all those instances, I had a sure anchor in Father Vineeth. Indeed, he was a mentor I could count on. As I look back, I realize that the *nishkamakarma* he was teaching us, based on the Gita, was excellently practised in his approach to me and other students.

Father Vineeth was a living model when it came to our spiritual grooming. He not only instructed us on the great ideals of religious life from an Indian perspective, but he also lived it in an unassuming manner. His presence itself was inspiring; his classes (as well as his meditations) had a rhythm that made his students feel comfortable and confident; his simple ways of dealing with everyone boosted their aspirations and made them aim at higher and nobler goals. I, along with many of my companions, recall the vivid image of Father Vineeth spending time in adoration late at night in a small private chapel: his busy academic life and colourful administrative portfolios did not deter him from his unquenchable thirst for being and becoming an *upanishad*, to be at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ. His mystical leanings, I believe, were born out of his life-long closer proximity with Jesus; for me, obviously, the life of Father Vineeth was definitively anchored in the person of Jesus Christ.

He inspired many of his students, including me, to take up academic projects that had serious implications for practical life from an ethical, religious, or spiritual point of view. I happily recall the fact he invested quality time on the projects of his students. He not only guided them, but also corrected various drafts of their writings with a view to enhance their quality; in many instances, many of his students published their research writings prepared under his guidance. In fact, in most of those instances, Father Vineeth himself promoted them to get their papers published, if needed, also with his personal involvement. My publications during the student days, particularly my first scientific article on tradition and modernity as well as my first book on the *Ramayana*, for example, were made possible with his

blessings, corrections, and personal involvement: if not for his personal interest and promotion, they would not have been realized at that stage.

When I started teaching philosophy in 1994, Father Vineeth was around to inspire and support. The positive energy and encouragement that I received from him was immense in shaping myself as a teacher. Though we were different on academic interests and temperament, there was a synergy that worked so well. In another two years, Father Vineeth was launching his dream project, Vidyavanam Ashram. I am glad to recall that I could be part of this project in its humble beginnings, at least in sharing the birth pang from afar. Indeed, it was in this project, I feel, that his mettle was tested and proven. His definite determination and unwavering faith in the Divine Providence made it possible for him to look beyond the initial hiccups and to dream high of a campus on the outskirts of Bengaluru where seekers of wisdom could find a sure source of inspiration and succour. With Vidyavanam, Father Vineeth also evolved from an acclaimed academician into a renowned guru and spiritual animator, who could offer a higher vision of life to many who approached him for guidance and animation.

Father Francis Vineeth was a man of integration and inspiration. He sought wisdom with an open mind and embraced the best from everywhere. His quest for *Samanvayam* enabled him to bridge between the East and the West, Eastern and Western, Oriental and Occidental, Indian and Christian, and to come up with a great model of academic and mystical realization. His life continues to inspire and challenge us, especially at a time when members of different religions, including Christians, tend to bank on their fundamentalist leanings and political motives for the realization of their short-sighted goals. The open embrace that Father Vineeth encountered on the cross of Jesus Christ enabled him to go for an open embrace of the best in all, counting on the assured stirring of the Holy Spirit on the thought and life-vision that ever continues to evolve.

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