

**REFLECTIONS ON MY YEARS OF MINISTRY
IN THE UNITED STATES
Justin Nelson Alphonse, C.P.**

I have been serving in Passionist parishes for the past 14 years both in Louisville, KY, and Birmingham, AL. Prior to parish ministry in United States, I also had served for five years preaching mission appeals (3 months every summer) for St. Thomas the Apostle Vice-Province.

Preaching Mission appeals for St. Thomas the Apostle Vice-Province was a unique experience here in United States. Culture, language, people, food, travel, driving and faith community were very different from where I came. It took a lot of time to learn and to listen to people's stories. I traveled to various parishes during weekends in different states, celebrated Masses, assisted with the Sacrament of Reconciliation and shared about our Passionist ministries that we do in India. Almost all of my visits to parishes had been very good, hospitable, generous, supportive, appreciative and welcoming.

I served one year at St. Agnes Church in Louisville, KY, as associate pastor. I was welcomed and got to know a lot of people in the parish and the culture of people. I enjoyed staying with the larger community of Passionist brothers at the Monastery. We prayed, played cards, ate meals together and shared our stories with each other. I got to know lots of our Passionist brothers and their ministries that they had done for years in various communities and places. My richest experiences were to live and to know our senior priests in the Province and their life examples. Many of our Passionist brothers were an inspiration in my priestly life. Though my stay in Louisville was very short, it created a great impression in my life.

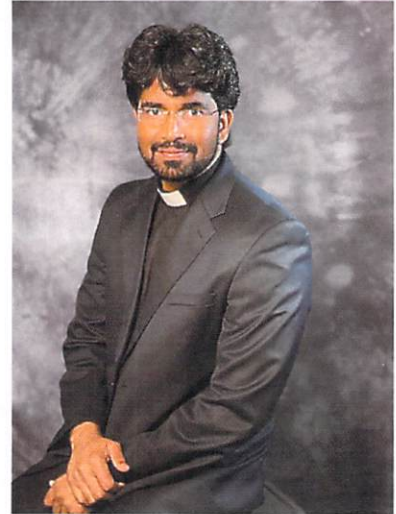
With the completion of one year at St. Agnes Church, the Provincial asked me to go to Birmingham to be pastor at St. Mary's Church in Fairfield, AL. I agreed to serve and ended up serving for ten years. It was a very small congregation. I had one of the best experiences in serving at St. Mary's and Holy Family Parishes. I fell in love with the congregation and the community and ended up serving both at St. Mary's and Holy Family Churches as Pastor. Parishioners came from different places near and far to attend services at St. Mary's and Holy Family. I got to learn and to know a new community, people, faith, accent, food, singing, culture, civil rights movement, stories and so on. There were financial challenges in both the churches to invest in any further developments and supporting the schools at the parishes due to small membership and enrollment in the schools. With the support of the church communities and the Passionist community, we were able to renovate churches, rectories and parish halls. People in Birmingham had truly created an impact in my priestly life, and I enjoyed my service to the community.

The past three years I have been pastor at St. Agnes Church in Louisville, KY. I came in just before COVID-19. It is a large parish with more than 1,300 families and St. Agnes School with 500 children from K-3 to 8th grade and the Passionist Monastery with many Priests and Brothers. It also has various committees, school and church staff and ministries to all age groups and assisting the needy beyond our community. I enjoy serving here at St. Agnes community. People have been very welcoming and supportive. I enjoy visiting the Monastery often, having dinner with them and playing cards with them in the evenings. I look forward to getting to know more people in my life and building a good relationship with them to grow and to share the love of Christ Jesus. This parish has opened many doors for me to learn as pastor. I truly thank everyone who has made my priestly life joyful in serving the communities in the United States.

MY THREE YEARS OF MINISTRY IN THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITIES!

Vimal Backiyaraj, C.P.

When I joined the Passionists in 2000, I never thought that one day I would be doing my pastoral ministry in Holy Cross Province in the United States. I left India and arrived in Louisville, Kentucky on the 31st of January 2020, and for the first time in my life, I saw snow and understood that I did not have warm enough clothing. I was excited to see Fr. Joe Moons, C.P., and Fr. Nelson, C.P., who came to pick me up at the airport. After a week of jetlag, I was taken to Birmingham, Alabama, by Fr. Nelson. For my first assignments, I was appointed as the associate pastor for Holy Family Church, Ensley, and as an administrator and associate pastor for St. Mary's Church, Fairfield. Both churches are located in the northwest side of Birmingham, AL. This was my first entrance into serving in a foreign mission, and I had no idea what to expect. I did not know anyone there, and I was unfamiliar with the cultural,



historical and ethnic significance within the community. I did not know how to fill the gasoline in a car tank at the gas station, and I had never even heard about tornadoes. Everything was strange and new for me, and I was anxious about many things.

Within a week of my arrival, I celebrated and preached my first English Mass as a guest priest at Our Lady of Sorrows, a neighboring church. My new home churches, Holy Family and St. Mary's, also both welcomed me with love and concern. Unfortunately, as I began to become acclimated to my new church families, COVID-19 virus started spreading all over the world. As a result, churches and schools were locked down and my dreams of doing pastoral ministry were diminished, but my hope in God remained strong. Because of the pandemic, it took a while to meet many of the parishioners, and even longer to begin to understand the Black culture and the struggles they had endured as a race and individually. Coming from India and the caste system, this was my biggest challenge during this time. But through the support of the parishioners and office staff, I learned about my roles at each parish, and I learned about the many faces of social injustice.

After schools and churches reopened, I became involved in the school board at Holy Family by helping raise funds and attending to the spiritual needs of the children. This work provided an opportunity to learn about both private and public school systems in America.



Apart from my work at St. Mary's and Holy Family Churches, helping at Our Lady of Sorrows Church (OLS) was a blessing that gave me additional introduction to American culture. Many people at were friendly and welcoming, and through their charm, Birmingham became my home away from home. Wanting to build upon my experience at Holy Family, I began assisting with the OLS youth groups. This was another opportunity to learn about the youth in this country. Through my ministry with the children, I realized that each child reflects God's love, no matter the nationality or religion.

Around this time, I started taking communion to the sick and administering other sacraments, which gave me a sense of satisfaction. However, I still felt unworthy to stand at the altar of the Lord. But my Spiritual director, Mgr. Martin Muller, often mentioned that ***"God does not call the qualified but qualifies the called."*** This reminded me that I am here in the United States doing my pastoral ministry not because of my gifts, talents, abilities and qualifications, but because of God's grace, my mom's prayers, my faith in God, my response to His call, my willingness to serve Him and his people that have brought me to this country.



When visiting hospitals and nursing homes in Birmingham, I realized there are so many patients who long for the sacraments and who seek emotional and spiritual support while infirmed. I yearned to help them by improving my counseling and pastoral ministry skills. So, after extensive prayer and reflection, I decided to do the Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) for chaplaincy. The ministry to the sick accompanies pastoral ministry and is a call within a call. Keeping this intention in my mind, I moved to Louisville, Kentucky, and joined Norton Healthcare to begin my CPE program.

Once in Louisville, I again had to adjust my mindset and learn how to fit into a new community. After some transitional time, I was appointed as the associate pastor to St. Agnes Church and School, which was an unexpected surprise for me. Not surprisingly, I really enjoy having lunch with our St. Agnes children. Their wonder, awe and silliness turn even the darkest day beautiful.



Also, I enjoy interacting with older kids and answering their questions regarding God, our religion, heaven and hell, etc. They are smart and I learn from them as much as they learn from me. Once again, God placed me exactly where I needed to be in order to minister to His children.

Every day is a learning experience for me. As a priest and CPE student, I continue to encounter sick, needy and lonely people. It is my calling to be available and reach out to them when they are in need. Remaining gentle and kind to other people can be challenging, but I am on a journey to be a better person.

My priestly motto is **“To be His Instrument.”** I have chosen this because I realized that God has blessed me in so many ways, I must remain grateful to God and use my gifts and talents for the glory of God.

**REFLECTION ON MY FOUR YEARS OF MINISTRY
IN THE UNITED STATES
Febin Barose, C.P.**

As I look in the rear-view mirror and reflect on the past four years, my heart pounds with gratitude, and my lips release a smile of joy. Once again, I gained the confidence to trust God, for he continues to unfold beautiful ways of living a life as a Passionist.

I arrived in Louisville from India on May 10, 2018, after leaving behind my country, culture, family, friends and peers. It was the fourth anniversary of my ordination. I came with anxiety, fear of the unknown and pressure to speak American English. However, when I arrived at the Louisville airport, David Colhour, C.P., and representatives from St. Agnes Parish greeted me with balloons and signs saying, "Welcome." That sign of being welcomed to a new country, people and land was energizing and supportive.

Life at St. Agnes as an associate pastor opened me to a new culture, unique expressions of living the faith, being part of people's ups and downs, and social, communal and cultural events. Celebrating liturgies and sacraments in the rich Catholic tradition we all share nurtured and enhanced my faith and worship. I could find the Lord present in our midst. My whole being was delighted when I dipped babies in the baptismal waters and said, "You are a new creation; welcome to the Church and the community! You belong here!" I could see the face of God on the newly baptized. I witnessed the joy in the eyes of parents and the community. In my four years, I could see the anticipation and excitement when a 2nd grader received Jesus for the first time in their tiny hand and said, "Amen." It was again a blessing to watch the more grown-up 8th graders as the Holy Spirit confirmed them to face the world with courage. It was joyful to accompany over 25 couples in the celebration of their marriage after listening to their love stories and how delighted they were to receive the sacrament of marriage. I also spent precious time with people in the last hours of their lives, anointing them for their peaceful journey and with families grieving the loss of their loved ones - helping them to find the meaning of death and life in Christ.

There was more. People's relationship with me extended beyond the Church and religious realm. Many of them became my friends and considered me as their family. I celebrated with people and had lots of fun. I loved eating lunch with the faculty and students at St. Agnes and answering their questions in a casual setting. I will miss young voices shouting, "Hello, Fr. Febin! What's up? Will you eat with us?" The answer was always – "Yes." I genuinely loved answering their philosophical and very complicated questions. Well, I had them, too, when growing up.

I looked for more opportunities to be a blessing to this community, while also helping me grow personally in a leadership role. My ministry did not consist of being an associate pastor, president,

preacher, teacher, spiritual director or counselor. It also demanded being a team leader, coordinator, decisionmaker, problem-solver, finance manager, strategic planner and visionary. I realized, again, I needed to follow St. Paul's example to be "all things to all people" and assume diverse leadership roles appropriate to all situations and needs. My business degree provided much-needed knowledge and confidence. With the heart of a pastor and the wisdom of a businessperson, I could employ business leadership skills, tools and knowledge in the mission and ministry of St. Agnes. Many hearts and minds assumed different supportive roles for me these past years. St. Agnes community gave me brothers, sisters, mentors, advisors, go-to persons and friends.

I began my preaching ministry at Mater Dolorosa Passionist Retreat Center in August 2022. People who walk into the premises of Mater Dolorosa are so excited to deepen their experience with the divine and the peace and joy He gives. It is a grace to journey with them and work for the Lord. I am in the process of learning and being formed in the retreat ministry.

There are challenges related to living and ministering in a different culture. Culture is a big umbrella that covers collective patterns of human behavior, beliefs, social norms, arts, customs, slang and habits. Living in a different culture is a continuous challenge. It will become less and less complicated over the years. Sometimes it is challenging when I have/had to compromise my cultural values and principles to fit into the expectations. In addition, there are ministerial challenges. Spiritual and faith needs of the time are different from those of yesterday. It is a constant challenge to actively listen to the changes around us and discern God's plan to cater to people's needs through the lens of our Charism.

"He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6). There are signs of hope I see in the Church, in our Congregation, and the Province as it moves towards more openness, participation, engagement, transparency and willingness to listen to each other and collective discernment from the Holy Spirit. We all strive to adapt and extend these new power values to our context and community to grow and survive. As a vowed Passionist, I hope to see the life and Charism to which I committed will continue to be relevant, valued and recognized as a unique way of life within the life and ministry of the Church.

**REFLECTION ON MY YARS OF MINISTRY
IN THE UNITED STATES
Fr. Bruno D'Souza, C.P.**

My name is Fr. Bruno D'Souza, C.P. I arrived at the Mater Dolorosa Community in Sierra Madre, CA, in November 2012. While my primary assignment was/is to be a member of the Retreat Preaching Team at the Mater Dolorosa Passionist Retreat Center in Sierra Madre, I also assist with sacramental needs in neighboring parishes, schools and high schools.

Being on the Preaching Team has given me the opportunity to meet various people who have a similar passion to preach the *memoria passionis*. Whereas, the common goal is the Passionist preached weekend retreats, each member brings along with him/her their own perspective on the retreat theme. There is a mutual respect for each other.

During these past ten years, I have had numerous opportunities to share my life as a Passionist and the Charism with retreatants that have made their retreats at the retreat center. One of the reasons I was asked to join the Preaching Team is to bring in a different perspective to the preaching of being a Catholic and a vowed Passionist coming from India. To that effect, I have made a conscious effort to incorporate some of my cultural and religious elements from India into my preaching.

Ministering at the Retreat Center has given me an opportunity to witness how the passion of Christ unfolds in the lives of the faithful. People come here from all walks of life - men and women, husbands and wives, the young and the old, the high school students and the young adults. Listening to their stories, accompanying them on their journey, standing at the foot of the cross with them, has helped me better understand my own Vows as a Passionist.

The move from Bhopal, India, to Sierra Madre was significant, as was my move from the Formation ministry to the retreat ministry. My initial years of ministering at the Retreat Center were a great challenge as I had to get accustomed to a different kind of ministry.

In recent times, the transition from vowed Passionist leadership at the Retreat Center to lay leadership has been a challenge for me. Everything feels and looks different. To adjust to the change has been particularly difficult. The awareness of where the future lies for our mission and ministry as a Province helps me to better understand and respond to the current reality.