



# Missions & Miracles

St. Francis Xavier Missionary Associates

Winter 2003

## The making of a Pilar Father

Father Peter's mother, Mrs. Nasumenta Fernandes, kisses his anointed hands soon after his ordination.

- Fr. Peter Fernandes, sfx



Archbishop Raul Gonsalves presides at an ordination ceremony in the Pilar Seminary Chapel.



**There is something very specific which makes a Pilar Father stand out from the rest.**

What attracted me to join the society was the charism of St. Francis Xavier; and yet there was something else which is very obvious in the Pilar Fathers, but hard to describe in words. Their spirit of simplicity, adjustability, hospitality and community living beckoned me to become one of their missionaries.

**My first three years in Apostolic School were painful yet enriching.** I knew at first sight what it means to be a Pilar Father. It was painful because for the first time I started breaking the bonds from my natural family and attempting to establish new bonds within the society with those who seemed to be strangers. I started a new and different way of life, a life shared with 120 students. We learned to do manual work in cooperation with each other, and, of course, our main

concern was food. The quality of the food was very poor and this presented quite an aggravation. For young boys at this stage in life, it was absurd, but a circumstance of the vow of poverty we had to accept.

However, it was enriching in that I discovered that I could adjust and live in harmony with so many other students, even though I found it difficult to like many of them. I learned to live a simple lifestyle in a very hard way.

**A second great experience I had was in Nagpur, while doing my philosophy/university studies.** We were sixty some students ranging from 19 to 21 years of age, living in a very

limited space, even by Indian standards. The premises had one hall, which served as our refectory, our study hall, and our recreation and T.V. room. We constantly bumped into each other, but such close interaction brought us together as if we were family. Soon we began to live as one Pilar Family and took pride in saying it loudly. I took pride in the joys and successes of our community. We supported one another in our shortcomings. Other religious communities and diocesan priests and seminarians would love to visit Pilar Niketan because we showed them remarkable hospitality. In fact, that was our trademark in the city of Nagpur, and continues wherever we work.



*“The zeal and the charism of our patron, St. Francis Xavier, became more and more clear.”*

**My regency/pastoral year gave me a wonderful opportunity to interact with a variety of adults, as well as students. We all worked in the orphanage named after St. Francis Xavier, located in the outskirts of Goa, a remote village called Rivona. This was a most unique experience, for in my charge**

Pilar Seminary & School of Theology in Goa. ▲  
Newly ordained priests prostrate themselves as a sign of total commitment to God and Church. ►

were more than 150 male students, from kindergarten to 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Most of the children were from broken families or born of prostitutes. In addition to caring for the children and running the orphanage, the great challenge was to live in an infrastructure that was lacking the basic necessities. There was no running water or proper bathrooms and ventilation was poor.

**many others.** The zeal and the charism of our patron, St. Francis Xavier, became more and more clear. And that something else, so difficult to put in words, eventually became known to me. In willing obedience, the Pilar Fathers give their lives wholeheartedly in service to others in the spirit of simplicity, adjustability, hospitality, and community living. When we are called, we go where we are needed. Our community is our family living in service to the Lord, and loving the God who loves us; the God as Mother Teresa once said, “Who keeps using you and me to light the flame of love in the world.”

Work, study, play, and prayer are integral parts of formation.



My entire day was immersed in the lives of orphans. Most of the students had emotional problems. I became both mother and father to them. I listened to their cries and worries, comforted their pains, and tried to reassure them. One of the great tasks of the day was to take the 150 some students to the river for bathing. All of this, together with maintaining discipline and trying to achieve some sense of order, taxed my energies so that, by the end of the day, I would be truly exhausted. There were moments when I thought of leaving the seminary, but the love, smiles and gratitude of these children reassured me and strengthened my vocation. I realized that I desire much more to give than to receive.

**FORMATION AT-A-GLANCE**

Stages of Formation	Years	Students
Apostolic School	3	115
Minor Seminary	2	65
Pre-Novitiate	1	26
Novitiate	1	21
Philosophy	2	37
University	3	48
Regency		
Pastoral year	1	16
Theology	4	52
Total number of seminarians:		<b>380</b>
Years in training:	<b>17+</b>	



**Below** Prayer and Indian spirituality go together.



**The kind of formation that a Pilar Father goes through makes him stand out from**

Cost to support and educate one seminarian for a year: **\$2,500**

# Formed by the Poor

(A personal experience)

- Fr. Agnelo Gomes, sfx

*After my second year of theology I decided to take a break from studying theology and spend a year doing and living theology.*

I chose to work in a poor slum in Bombay far away from my cozy home state of Goa. Of all the years I spent in formation, this year molded my thinking and gave my vocation a real meaning.

**I vividly remember, on June 17<sup>th</sup> 1999, stepping into a new experience that left a lasting mark on my life.** Sakinaka is in one of Bombay's dirtiest and poorest wards. It is among hundreds of slum areas that have mushroomed in the commercial capital of India, where thousands flock from other regions for better jobs. Unfortunately, the slums also provide a cover for various underworld operations. During my stay there, I lived with a poor, humble family, adopting their simple lifestyle. Initially, it was quite an adjustment, but later I just loved it. Although, I lived with a family, I worked for St. Anthony's parish. The parish was clearly dedicated to helping the marginalized working class in Sakinaka and neighboring wards through their collective action. Our approach to the people was not one of giving handouts, but of education and organization, so they can understand and solve their own problems. This

parish of 5,000 people was divided into 24 Basic Communities. Each community identified people's needs, social issues and civic problems. Everyone at the various levels and age groups were made aware of the issues. Joint action, integrated with liturgies, was initiated in the communities, instead of controlling everything from the parish premises. Hence pious associations and groups who were inward looking were encouraged to reflect and act beyond the four walls of the church. Youth groups that previously, wanted only to socialize were now challenged to go beyond themselves. Our theology was closely linked to the lives of those around us. We started with issues and

then we reflected on God's word. I realized that understanding the problems of the people in the light of the Word of God contributed as much to my formation as a priest as studies and prayer.

## My Experience:

### a) with the priests of the

**parish:** I consider myself very privileged and fortunate for the opportunity to work with two exemplary priests, Fr. Hugh Fonseca, the pastor, and Fr. Alex Carvalho, his assistant. Their lives identified with the lives of the people. We came together as a team to discuss, to pray and to seek what the Lord would want of us in various situations. What they were doing, I wanted to do.

St. Anthony's chorus performed during Parent's Day.

The liturgy supported our outreach message. As a theologian and musician among the poor, Fr. Agnelo touches the lives of many young people.



**b) with the children:** I loved the children of this place. I learned so much from their creativity and questions, and their enthusiasm to be involved in realistic issues. Being with the children at daily school as well as Sunday school, coaching them in soccer and track, helping them in their studies, giving free music and guitar lessons helped me encourage them to get involved in parish activities. Meaningful liturgies, programs, community gatherings, both at the center as well as at the areas, would be organized with the invaluable help of the children. The Word of God would often be presented in the form of a skit, role-play, song, or dance.

**c) with the youth:** I felt very much at ease with the youth. They warmly accepted my presence in their lives. Being a member of the parish soccer team, co-ordinating their projects, and being involved in a number of social actions has helped me to understand their problems, and view them from their angle. Their eagerness to be involved in various area programs and their enthusiasm to help fight problems like alcoholism, unemployment, inadequate housing etc., was very encouraging and educa-

*“Our theology was closely linked to the lives of those around us.”*

tional for me. And, it was an opportunity for them to develop their personalities and learn to appreciate each others religious beliefs, cultures and languages. Our outreach youth groups were composed of young people from all religions, languages, and cultures.

**d) with the adults:** Like most people, the people of this parish are struggling to get ahead and provide for their families; yet, they are eager and ready to be part of the programs. They would readily organize themselves and fight for a legitimate livelihood and a peaceful, harmonious environment. Being involved in the lives of the adults gave me an opportunity to acquire a living knowledge of the anxieties, aspirations and joys of the adult world.

My 14 months of close interaction with the people of Sakinaka gave me a mountain of experience for reflection, not only for theology, but for life. It taught me that I cannot be a mere spectator of human



tragedy, but that I must be a participant in people's struggle and must take a stand with them in morally conflicting situations. I learned it takes time to see life from another's perspective in order to articulate their problems from the heart. Being poor among the poor taught me that I can be happier with fewer commodities, that sharing of self brings joys.

I'm very thankful to God for his providence and my superiors for permitting me to have such a rich experience. The poor are indeed rich and for me they are very enriching.

A parish of 5,000 became a catalyst of change in its part of the city.

*Please assist our work through prayer and contributions to:*

**St. Francis Xavier Missionary Associates**

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First Communion Sunday at St. Anthony's. Catholics make up only 2% of India's population.

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