



**St. Francis Xavier
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POSTAGE

Tsunami devastation in Nicobar and
Adaman Islands.



Missions & Miracles

St. Francis Xavier Missionary Associates

Spring 2005



Dear Friend:

As we remember the life, death, and resurrection of One who made a huge difference to our world, and renew our commitment to be like Him, Fr. Peter Fernandes, sfx, and I thank you very much for extending your care and generosity to spread Christ's justice, peace and love among our non-Christian brothers and sisters in India and Nepal.

The earthquake and tsunami on the day after Christmas overpowered our missions in the Andamans and Nicobar Islands. In this issue, Fr. Franklin Rodrigues, sfx, shares a personal account of the aftermath. These missions our Order founded in 1965 consist of 576 islands spread over 4,000 miles of the Indian Ocean about 800 miles east of mainland India. The southern tip of the Islands is approximately 60 miles from the epicenter of the earthquake.

Members of our Order are busy with emergency relief work. As missionaries they are adept at lifting suffering people from their hardships. Your care through prayer and support for the people of these missions and other Tsunami affected countries is appreciated. God bless you for your generosity and be assured of our prayers always. **Christ is Risen! Truly He is Risen! Alleluia!**

Sincerely,

Fr. Agnelo Gomes, sfx
Superior Delegate



Pilar Fathers escape jaws of death on the islands.

Fr. Peter Fernandes, sfx.

Bishop Alex Dias comforts the displaced people as he visits the camp.

Fr. Franklin Rodrigues reaches out to the aboriginal children.



"I am not scared to go back."

Fr. Anuj Kumar Nag, who was in the worst-hit part of Car Nicobar, is the only Society of Pilar priest to reach Goa, since he was airlifted to Chennai. He always loved the sea and the waves in particular; until he saw the Tsunami approaching.

The jaws of death missed them by a whisker! Of the fourteen Pilar Fathers working in the Andamans and Nicobar Islands, all survived. However, for several harrowing days after the earthquake and Tsunami struck, three were still missing. Fr. Pritam Toppo, Fr. Dionis Kerketta and Fr. Anuj Kumar Nag providentially came through this catastrophic event of nature, lucky to be alive, yet painfully aware of the deluge of destruction and death all around them. All have a terrible experience to share.

Thirty-three year old Father Anuj Kumar Nag, based at St. Anthony Church in Hutbay, found himself in the midst of the devastation that struck the isles. He had gone to Malacca on the island of Car Nicobar to celebrate Christmas and New Year Mass for the people there.

In his own words, *"I was to celebrate Sunday Mass at 7:30 a.m. It was 6:30 a.m. and I was about to go for bath, when the disaster struck. I was alone in the Christ the King Church, close to the sea shore. Suddenly there were strong tremors. The earth was terribly shaking beneath. The church was rocking and so was I. I ran outside and sat on the ground. Right in front of me I saw the church walls crumbling along with the Sintex water tank located above. The earthquake stopped for a while followed by a frightful calm. However, not long before that, I had heard crying from across the road. I went to see what had happened to the people straying there."*

Fr. Anuj saw his neighbor's house fallen to the ground. The man of the house was under the walls. As he helped the man out of the rubble, he told the house woman to leave their compound with the children. They ran, but in the rush were caught in the barbed wire and unable to free themselves. As Fr. Anuj helped release them, he saw the huge wave coming. He took the two children by

hand and, with the woman, started to run. He called out to others to run for safety.

"I never ran like that in my life." The earthquake had split the road and water was gushing out from it. Water was on every side, yet he continued to run, gripping the children's hands. Finally they reached higher ground where other people gathered. Still, the water touched their feet, but thanks to God, there it stopped.

Fr. Anuj recounts how they could see nothing below, except water. Water everywhere. After three hours, the water began receding. Fr. Anuj, along with a few men, went back to observe what had happened. *"At the shore we saw that the water had receded. The sea looked normal. Everything else was erased. There was no church. The school was no where in sight. His small residence was completely uprooted. Everyone lost everything. Dead bodies were lying everywhere, and some were floating on the sea."*

The gusty circumstances Fr. Anuj beheld left him in shock which is still haunting him.

The survivors were very reluctant to go anywhere. They stayed together and spent Sunday night on the road. Everyone preferred to remain

Right Fathers with other volunteers help bury the dead. **Below** A chair and a desk are all that remain of Father's church after the Tsunami.



Left Epicenter of the earthquake (red dot) that caused the tsunami was only 60 miles from the islands.



Fr. Atlee Gomes helps to unload a truck of relief material.



Fr. Dionis Kerketta carries supplies from a ship.



Frs. Dionis, Franklin, Pritam and Atlee, grateful to have survived.



Priests and nuns board a ship to visit people on the other Islands.

Gigantic task is undertaken by Pilar Fathers of relief work rebuilding lives.

awake, fearing the tsunami may strike again. Compounding this nightmare was the frightful menace of the mosquitoes, leaches and crocodiles. For five more days, Fr. Anuj and other men climbed the coconut trees and brought down coconuts on which they all survived. He conducted a prayer service to give moral support, and all responded with faith and trust in God. Fr. Anuj was one of the last to be airlifted from Nicobar to safety.

Asked whether he would go back to work in the Islands, the diminutive priest answered in the affirmative. *"I am not scared to go back. I will for sure. I will go wherever God wants me to go."*

-Fr. Frank Rodrigues, sfx.

After the initial reaction of shock and fear, the Pilar Fathers extend their hearts and hands for a noble cause of reaching out to all who were shattered by the Tsunami.

Together with the government and the dioceses, the Pilar Fathers initially set up four relief camps, then later added four more, as additional survivors were rescued. Each camp shelters 1,000 to 1,400 individuals.

"The biggest relief camp is set up within the Stella Maris Cathedral and our school building, housing 1300 displaced and rescued people," Bishop Alex Dias of Port Blair said. Priests, nuns, and other volunteers looked after the inhabitants.

Government officials were not cooperating with the Church personnel in relief work. According to Bishop Dias, the officials arrive at the camp only during visits by the top government officials, such as the governor. "But since the victims are housed in our property, we have taken over running of the relief camp with food, clothing and medicines".

I tried to procure the first available flight to Port Blair, anxious to support our missionaries and to work out a plan for the relief and rebuilding. As soon as I arrived, I gathered all my conferees, who were in Port Blair. We decided to go to Little Andaman, and take with us a

Fr. Franklin Rodrigues, sfx. is the Provincial of the Kolkata province. The whole of North-east and Southeast India, and missions of the Andamans and Nicobar Islands, come under the Kolkata province.



Fr. Peter Soraes gives spiritual comfort to the disheartened at an outdoor mass.





truckload of material: foodstuff, clothing, medicine and utensils. Thanks to the director of Shipping Corporation, we managed to bring everything in its entirety to HutBay. The people were waiting for us. For that matter, they were waiting for anyone who would come with food, for they were hungry and exhausted.

Our Fr. Pritam Toppo welcomed us with a big hug and tears in his eyes. He was the happiest man to see us. Our presence made it possible for him to revive his lost morale. He began narrating his horrible experience of Tsunami tragedy. He and others were happy to wear the clothes that we delivered. It took us a whole day to distribute the material, which we brought from Port Blair.

The Tsunami water and the dead bodies lying everywhere increased the mosquitoes and flies beyond imagination, which made life almost unbearable. For three nights, it was hopeless to try to sleep. During the day, the flies were a terrible disturbance. Eating food was a big challenge, for with so many flies around, it was nearly impossible not to eat a few along with the food. I immediately phoned Kolkata to purchase 3,000 mosquito nets to be distributed to the families. These nets would prevent much sickness, especially malaria and other epidemic diseases.

The survivors urgently needed basic necessities, such as utensils to start their lives again. Of utmost importance, they need huts to protect them from heat, rain, and other dangers, as well as the monsoon which begins in February. I also ordered tin sheets from Kolkata for roofing. We approached the forest officials to seek plots for the people to build their huts, and the government was very cooperative, even allowing them to cut trees to build their houses.

I anticipated that there would be much need for a jeep, in order to allow the Fathers to bring the material to the people, as well as give them mobility both day and night. This would eliminate the painful walk of kilometers from the jetty to the relief camps. Ships are the only means to transporting the cargo from Port Blair. Survivors are spread in camps at a distance of 12 kms.

I assured Bishop Dias of continuous support of the Pilar Fathers in the relief work and of rebuilding. The Bishop expressed his heartfelt gratitude for the wonderful service and ever-caring spirit of the Pilar Fathers. I further said to Bishop Dias that in all the islands where Pilar Fathers are working, the Society will take care of the needs of the people. We will rebuild schools and hostels for the poor children and the orphans, and also dispensaries to give medical aid.



Fr. Franklin and Fr. Pritam along with other religious Nuns share the plight of the people. They have nothing to call their own, but the smiles on their faces.

In the midst of this valley of tears, there is hope, there is life. It is an enormous task, but not impossible. Slowly but surely, people will start to live their lives again. It is unfeasible to think we can return to them all that they lost. But without doubt, we can give them our love to lighten their lives, our prayers to strengthen them, our warmth to comfort them, and our material gift to enable them to live their lives again, with a smile.



Please assist our work through prayer and contributions to:

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