

Kerala Reflections

On my way to Rome, I took the opportunity to visit the region of Kerala in India, the home of our priests, Frs Jomon and Alex, and soon Fr Gasper. Earlier this year our Diocese was visited by Bishop Joseph, so it was wonderful that I was able to visit his Diocese of Cochin. I'd like to share with you my visit.

Tuesday 11 June

This day began with an early start to the airport and soon, the Singapore Airlines Airbus 350 was flying over Emerald on the way to Cochin. Arriving at 10 pm, Frs Jomon and Gasper welcomed me to Kerala and soon we were on the way for the 95-minute drive to the Bishop's House in Fort Kochi. The airport is a far way out of town and heavy traffic all the way to the Bishop's House. We travel over many bridges as Cochin is built on the waterways. Bishop Joseph greeting this weary traveller and settled me into Bishop's House. The rain has broken the heat of the past months and the welcome Monsoon was watering the earth ensuring regenerating of the tropical flora and the next crop of fruits and vegetables in abundance. It was still a very warm evening.

Wednesday 12 June

An early start to the day with a breakfast of lightly spiced curries and so prepared me for the day to unfold. The first stop was to Sienna College run by the Diocese providing tertiary education to many young people. Alongside are the Colleges of Aquinas for Commerce, Science, Arts and IT and Avila for teaching training. After meeting with the professors and the



staff of the three campuses, it was then a visit to the Fatima Hospital. Fr Sijo met us there after a long bus ride from his home. Fr Sijo is on holidays and it was good to connect. This hospital is administered by the Diocese of Cochin providing health care for the community.

A visit was made to the wards, the operating theatre and the various parts that make up a hospital. One of the units visited was the dialysis unit where 5 donated machines (\$AUD 19,000 each) assist each day with the many people needing dialysis. The Diocese provides this service free to all who are in need of this specialist medicine.



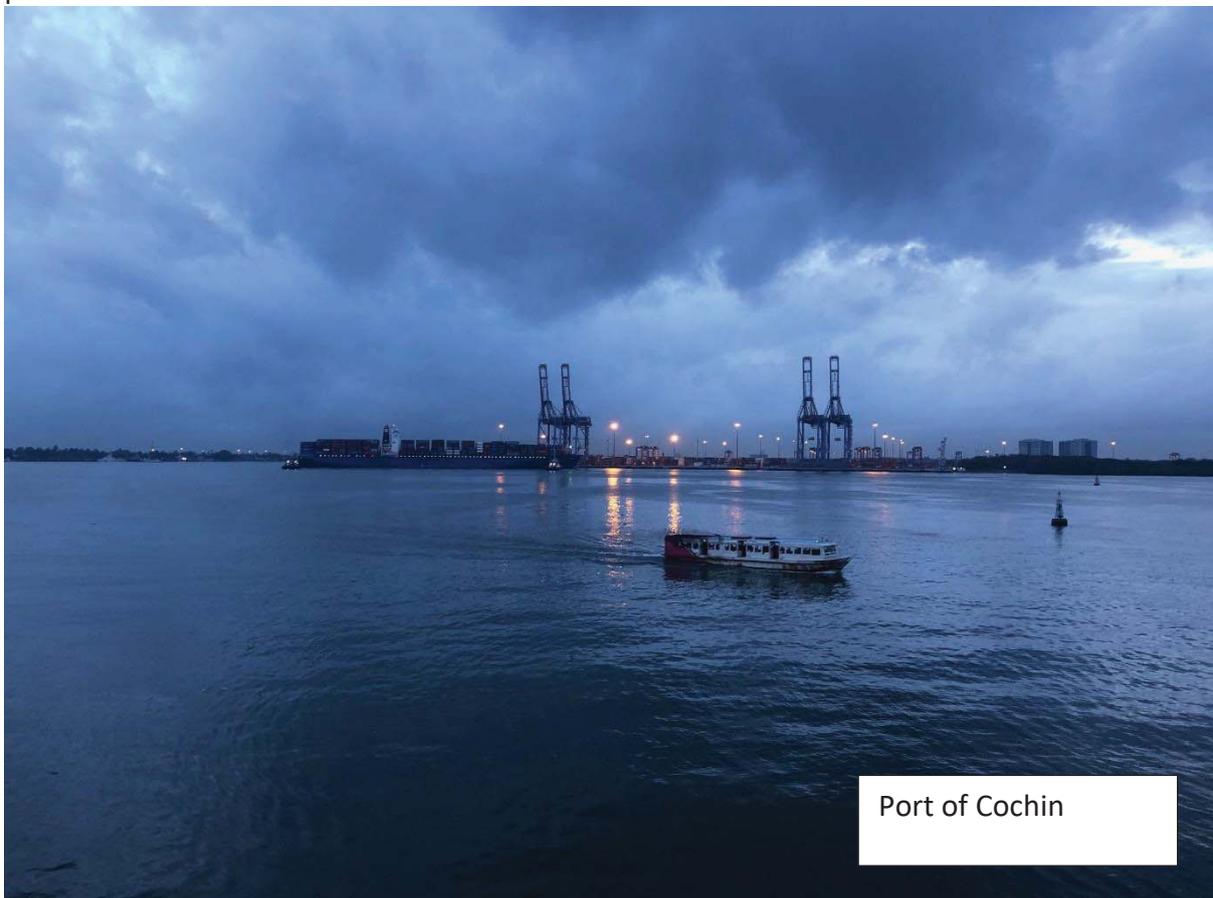
Photo: At the hospital dialysis unit with Fr Johnson and dedicated staff.



Then it was lunch at one of the many fish farms around Cochin. A demonstration of fishing with the ancient fish apparatus and a hand net, ensured many prawns and fish for our lunch and cooked by London trained chef, Rocky who had returned home to run his family business. We enjoyed these fruits of the sea with a Kerala flavour.



Later in the afternoon, we caught up with the Port Chaplains, Fr Augustine and a quick tour of the Port and taking in the great expanse of water and the easy access of shipping. At the hospital, we had met the priest director of the Hospital, Fr Johnson who incidentally is the Director of the Apostolate of Sea for most of the Asian region and who connects with the local port of Cochin.



Port of Cochin



Fr Jomon with the statue of Mary, Star of the Sea



Waiting for my return to Bishop’s House was Edward and Audrey Edezhath, the co-founder of Jesus Youth. It was such a privilege to meet Edward and listen to his vision of how Christ works in and through our young people. Jesus Youth has become an incredible movement throughout the world and in Australia. Our Fr Jomon has been connected with Jesus Youth here in Kerala. It was from Jesus Youth that the Rex Band was founded.

Thursday 13 June

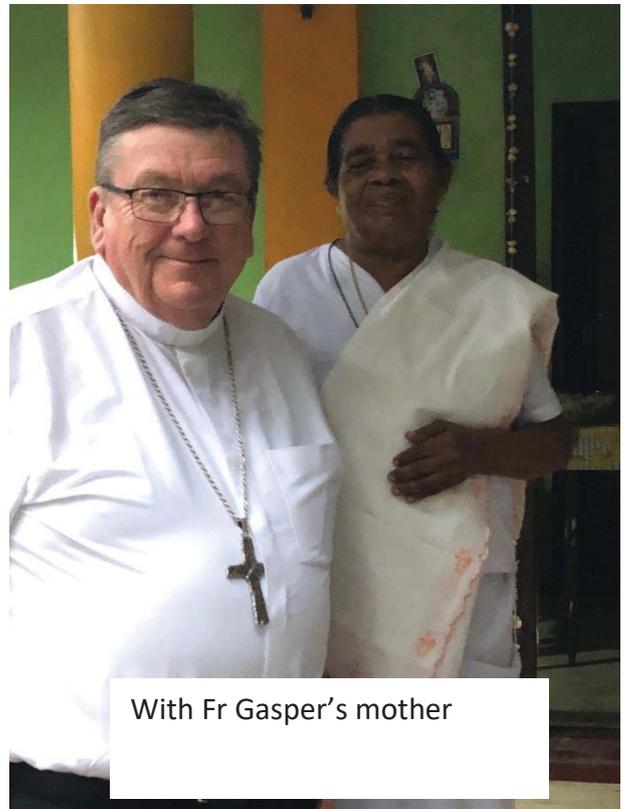
This day, I realised what an incredible gift the mothers of our priests give to the church with their sons. Fr Gasper drove us to his mother’s house and there we meet his mum and brother and sisters and nieces and nephews. It was evident how much they loved him as their brother and uncle and son. In a few weeks’ time, when his visa is approved, Fr Gasper will be saying farewell to them and setting out for our diocese. As Fr Jomon remarked, ‘at 15, I left home and went to the seminary and so we began to give ourselves to the priesthood and becoming a missionary priest’. Our three priests from Cochin are very much loved by their families who miss them so much and in faith they give their sons to the Church. On your behalf, I have thanked their families and people of the Diocese of Cochin for this gift to us in the Diocese of Rockhampton





During the day, Bishop Joseph took the day away from his busy schedule and together with the Priests of the Curia, we sailed on the Kerala Back Waters.

The Kerala Back Waters are known as one of the wonders of the Natural World. They teem with life and fish and birds and close settlement of people who live from the fruits of the sea. The house boats that ply these waters bring tourists and people into these waterways.



With Fr Gasper's mother

It is also the birth place of St Chavara, the founder of the CMI priests, Frs Sijo and Francis. We stopped at Charava's birth house and a candle lit at his birth place. Another feast of freshly caught sea food for lunch was our treat and set us in good stead for the journey home. It was

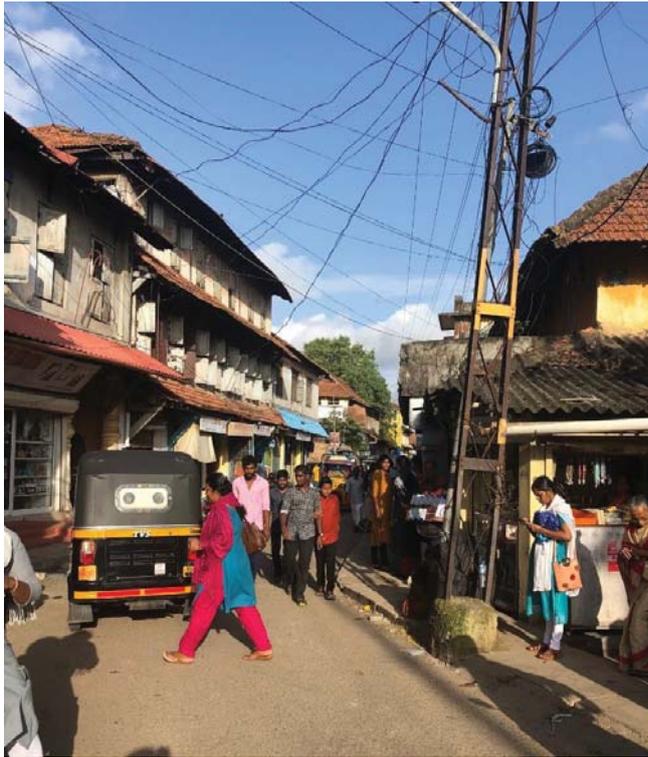
good catching up with Fr Alex's family who ensured Kerala and the waterways would be our day of relaxation.



At the birth house of St Chavara, founder of the CMI priests

Friday 14 June

All night, it rained, and it was heavy as the monsoon season is upon this tropical land called God's Country. And yet by morning, the sun was out, and it was a steamy introduction to the day. Frs Jomon and Gasper



set a cracking pace as today was the visit to the family of Fr Alex. We set off after breakfast and travelled through Cochin to the pilgrim church of St Anthony's Church at Arookutty. Wending through the endless traffic and traffic snarls, expertly guided by soon to join us in Rockhampton Fr Gasper, we arrived in time for a gathering of the people at a prayer day arranged by the Parish Priest, Fr Anthony. Father Anthony has been in the parish for four years, and today, they were expecting the visit of an Australian bishop. A beautiful church on the side of the river and a gathering place for many thousands of local parishioners who come to find God and peace. St Anthony's is the Parish Church of Fr Alex and we met Fr Alex's brother Robert at the church.



Robert then took us to the family home and there I met Fr Alex's mum and dad and many nieces and nephews and cousins and sisters. After praying and blessing Fr Alex's mum and dad, we sat and chattered. I thanked Alex's mum for the gift of her son and mentioned to the family about the great work he is doing in Mackay and for us in the diocese. His nieces and nephews spoke so glowing of their uncle and showed me wedding albums and baptismal

videos where he had looked after his family. It was easy to feel how much they miss him but as a faith-filled family, they are happy for us to share in his priestly ministry. After saying farewell to his mum and dad we were hosted at dinner at the house of Alex's brother Robert and the family and the yummy taste of Kerala cuisine. Quality Spices of Panavally, the family business, was our next stop.





The family business supplies spices to India, USA and Europe. This family factory gathered spices from all over India and they are processed here and made ready for the market. We were so cared for during this day and I realised how much Alex's mum and dad miss their son and look forward to his coming home each year. Before we said farewell to the Varghese Family, nephew Nithin insisted one more look at the Back Waters. The day before, the family of Fr Alex organised a trip to the Back Waters of

Kerala for me and Bishop Joseph, the Bishop of Cochin and his Vicar General, Fr Peter, Seminary Rector, Fr Augustine, Chancellor, Fr Shaiju and secretary, Fr Paul and Frs Jomon and Gasper. We spent this day enjoying one of the wonders of the natural world, the Back Waters of Cochin or as it has been aptly named, the Venice of the East. Thank you to the family of Fr Alex for your generosity.

Fr Alex's family (below) and his nephews (above)



After saying farewell to the family, Fr Gasper showed his driving magic as he negotiated the Kerala traffic. The next stop was to Holy Cross Shrine at Mattancherry. The Mahindra KUZ was squeezed down the narrowest of streets and negotiated the most interesting of traffic combinations. I just closed my eyes at times and prayed for safe journey! The people gathered at the Holy Cross Shrine were waiting as it had been advertised as an English mass to be led by this Australian Bishop. A mix up with the Visa prevented that from happening, but a candle lit for all of our diocese and pilgrims blessed ensured that our pilgrimage was complete. A few hundred visited the shrine this afternoon and many prayers were sent to heaven. Frs Dominic, Prasad and Prince treated us to a cup of tea and we heard of their work. Fr Prasad is the head of trades school for the young and providing them with a future. Fr Prince has just received notification that he has been accepted into the film and communication course. Finally, a quick visit to another church and a catch up with the Missionary Sisters of Charity and their work, caring for a group of young people intellectually and physically disabled. My thoughts were cast back to the work of Jean Varnier and his work with those severely handicapped and here these women of God, love and care for God's people. It was in 2016, that Fr Don White visited the Sisters in Calcutta and celebrated mass at the Tomb of St Mother Theresa of Calcutta and here in Cochin, her work continues through the Sisters.

Saturday 15 June

An excited Fr Jomon greeted the day as this was the day when his nephew was being baptised at the family church of St Lawrence. St Lawrence Church is celebrating 900 years when the first wooden church was built on the site and continuously been a centre of Catholic devotion. Nephew Joseph was baptised in the presence of his uncle Jomon, grandmothers and uncles and aunts and nieces and nephews. After the baptism, it was back to the Fr Jomon's home and another



incredible Kerala feast. On behalf of the Diocese, Jomon's mother was thanked for the gift of her son and given a gift from the Diocese, a Tambo Teddy as all mothers received a similar gift of a Tambo Teddy made in the Diocese from materials produced in the Diocese, Tambo Wool.

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Fr Jomon's family at the Baptism of Joseph.

Reflecting in the car after our visits to each of the priests' parents, Frs Gasper, Alex and Jomon, this was the highlight of my trip to Kerala. It gave me the opportunity to meet with their families and thank them for their family priest.

The evening was spent dining with the bishop and the priests of his office and time for farewells, and a quick hello to the 30+ seminarians at prayer and the retired priests. It was four days of incredible visits to parishes of the Diocese.

Sunday 16 June

An early start to the day and Frs Gasper and Jomon accompanied me to the airport for the final drive Cochin. Early on Sunday Morning, the streets are not as crowded and a farewell to my hosts and 'see ya later'.

Rome is the next stop and now ready to board the Emirates flight.



Frs Paul (Bishop Joseph's Secretary), Fr Gasper (who will come to Rockhampton Diocese later this year), and Fr Peter, Vicar General of Cochin Diocese.