Columns
Spirituality



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Having recently celebrated the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, there seemed to be joy and hope in the air, especially among church and religious communities. However, this joy was not long-lasting as we gradually began to get news of many priests and religious testing positive for COVID-19.

How did this happen? Our beloved country began to lose many who had dedicated their lives to the service of those on the margins. As the news began to spread, suddenly it became normal and we began to hear of deaths around the country.

Most of them were young people, and that was all the more shocking. Women and men on whom, perhaps, the future of dioceses and congregations depended. Some of this is still unbelievable; it is still difficult to let go; difficult to accept. This thought always keeps nagging at the back of my mind: *I wish I had made a last phone call, a last visit.* Who knew what would befall us? Who knew that they would slip away from us so soon?

When you lose people whom you cherished, what hurts most is knowing that you will never hear that voice again; experience those light and happy moments.



Fr. S. Christu Das (Courtesy of Dorothy Fernandes)

On April 23, a little after 2:30 p.m., Fr. S. Christu Das — whose hometown was Kanyakumari, at the tip of India — breathed his last in Dumka, the tribal diocese of Jharkhand. The news shocked me and with great disbelief I hoped it was a mistake … but as the messages kept trickling in, I knew it couldn't be reversed. In my distress, I called Bishop Julius Marandi of Dumka and he said, "Yes Dorothy, it is true." Christu — as he was fondly called — was the bishop's right hand, and I know for sure he will miss him a lot.

As I sat in grief, memories of my association with Christu arose: the news headlines in August and September of 1997 — "A Catholic priest stripped naked and paraded

in the streets of Dumka." I had arrived in Patna in June 1997 and had joined the Regional Pastoral Center — Navjyoti Niketan, in Patna — and lived in a mixed community of men and women religious. I was teaching social justice and women's empowerment, and I knew we had to do something about Christu.

So, the next morning a Jesuit companion and I left for Dumka. After meeting with the bishop and some priests we moved into action. I suggested that all schools should close in Dumka until Christu could be released. At the same time, we worked in the Patna high court for his release. We sat in dharna (a nonviolent Indian act of protest) in Dumka, organizing women in rotation for 60 days till Christu was out.

From then on, our relationship grew stronger, as we took up justice issues, because he was a trainer with the ability to discuss and dialogue on an issue. Christu was a multifaceted person, who kept himself abreast of current happenings. Generous, hospitable and so dedicated to the Santhals — a tribal group — that he mastered the language and was able to do training with them. He was a gem for the Santhal church.

My association with him grew deeper when I was on the Provincial Leadership Team. He helped us to move ahead as a province, with two of our communities in the Dumka region. Whenever he visited Patna, we would always meet and share about what was happening in our ministries. He was very insightful and helped me personally through some rough waters. His phone calls were so vibrant with his hearty laughter, and he would say, "So Doro, how are you?" That voice will never be heard again. Thank you Christu … miss you, dear friend.

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On April 24, at night around 9:45 p.m., another friend — Jesuit Fr. Sushil Sah — breathed his last. More than a year ago he was struck by paralysis, but had conquered it and begun to walk. Unfortunately, Sushil had an existing health condition, and his oxygen level went down. A simple priest from Bettiah (North Bihar), a person whom I came to know during my years in Patna, he had a zest for life and later visited my home in Goa. So, in a way he was a friend of the family. I recall very happy moments when he was the celebrant for my sister Inez' silver jubilee as a Presentation sister. Goodbye to yet another friend.

On the morning of April 25, more sad news shocked our entire family: Inas Caitan D'Costa, at 48 the youngest brother of my brother-in-law, passed away in his sleep. It was shocking to see one so young just slip away. He was a very kind man — always ready to help out. Some happy memories flooded my mind from our recent family gathering on Jan. 7. Realization of the fragility of life hit me hard.

We suffered yet another loss when on April 29 around 10:23 a.m., 65-year-old Jesuit Fr. Joy Karayampuram was called home to God due to COVID-19. As his name signifies, Joy was always a joy-filled person. An advocate by profession, he was the provincial of the Patna Jesuits about eight years ago, and a very simple, helpful priest, very resourceful and unassuming. He reached out to many of us — especially to people on the margins — always attentive to needs.

I recall attending a meeting at his place, and when we were about to leave he came to me asking gently, "Dorothy, how will you go, do you have transport?" He was that caring, silently ensuring that all was taken care of. He was the rector of the community and worked very hard for the closing celebration of the Jesuit centenary on March 3, with meticulous planning and quiet completion of what was expected of him. Will miss you Joy, that smiling lovely face … thank you Joy for your giftedness. It has been a sad day for the Patna Jesuit Society.

As I sit in silence recalling all those happy moments, I carry within me a sense of gratitude for having been part of the life journey of these four persons whom I knew on a personal level. They have gone ahead, leaving a vacuum in the hearts of many. *You have fought the good fight and have won … adieu my friends until we meet again.*