

KURISUMALA: A PLACE FOR GLOBAL HOLISTIC RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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Abstract:

Kurisumala is a serene abode of spirituality. Vegetarian food, bare foot walking, saffron clothes, incense, are the symbols of simplicity and depth of sacredness that pervade over the Ashram, a Catholic Monastery integrated with Indian Sanyasa. Ann-Ida elaborates her in depth experience she encountered in the Ashram.

Key Words: prayer, faith, friendship, monk, poverty, Benedictine, Cistercian, Satsang, Acharya, charism.

Arriving after sunset at Kurisumala Ashram in the Vagamon hills, peace and silence, yet vibrating life is in the air. A saffron coloured monk who moves swiftly greets our group, counts the heads and quickly takes the ladies to one house and the gentlemen to another. This is one of my vivid memories of my visit; monks moving swiftly across the Ashram. Silent, happy and decisive in their steps. Not in a hurry, but somehow walking with a purpose. And the Kurisumala Ashram really has a great purpose, that is to unite the spirit and cultures of the East and the West. In faith, friendship and prayer (or maybe in the opposite order, beginning with prayer). And looking around this is what you see; people from all over are here, sisters and monks, lay people and priests, Hindus and Christians and others, too.

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The place is simple in every way. This unique experience of integrating the East-West Spiritualities and imparting the ecological balance through the Gandhian economical paradigm of the cottage industries is established at Kurisumala Ashram, a unique experiment spearheaded by Francis Acharya in the Kottayam district of Kerala, India from 1958 onwards. And so maybe this explains the movement pattern I see in the saffron clothed men, the blend of Sannyasi and Monk is seen even in the walk! The sannyasi has renounced everything and is a wanderer, the monk too has given his vow of poverty, yet, as the monks at Kurisumala are Benedictines, also of stability. They live their whole lives in the same community, and yet they seem to be always on the move.

Kurisumala Ashram is an embodiment of a unique religious experience; the Western Monastic tradition of the Benedictine Cistercian way of community life is integrated with the Indian spirituality of renunciation and simplicity endowed with the West Syrian Liturgical celebration. Kurisumala is therefore a global holistic religious experience and hence an antidote for the capitalist third millennium, namely, a globalized flat world driven by the engines of secularism and market forces alone. Kurisumala introduces a spiritual capital, emphasizing the inner essence of humanity, namely, spirituality and religiosity. The initiator of Kurisumala is none other than Francis Mahieu, a Belgian businessman, who was succumbed by the impact of Gandhian simplicity, spirituality and sarvodaya and became a Cistercian monk who was driven by the single minded life goal of a new spiritual synthesis of the East and the West, amalgamating the best from both. This holistic paradigm for the third millennium has come of age, because of its successful and exuberant existence for more than half a century by continuously shining its benign light of spiritual awareness over the seekers.

The integration of Benedictine monastic community life and that of a Sannyasi renouciant is quite evident when you visit the place. In the farming area you see the cows, the barn and the trucks. There's lots of hard work at this Ashram every day. And among the barn houses and guest quarters you'll see the barefooted monks, serving all who come while returning several times a day to the chapel for prayer. Owning nothing they have chosen a life of love and service to the people, whoever comes - all are welcome - and seeking to unite the central elements of spirituality in the Christian and Hindu traditions. This is also visible in the prayer book; Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit, where texts from both the Bible as well as from the *Bhagavat Gita* and *Upanishads* are read daily.

The most important feature of Kurisumala is the silence which truly pervades the Ashram. The silence is broken only by the sweet sound of wind and birds or a guest who asks a question to one of the monks.

The day to day life of the Ashram is strictly regulated, as for all Benedictines. Their life is one of meditation and devotion, study and service.. A day is divided almost equally in hours for prayer, study, work and rest. Prayer starts at 4.00 a.m. in the morning. As was common in the early monastic tradition they maintain the spirit of prayer in the various works of the day. Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit, in 4 vols., is as mentioned their main prayer book. Immersed in asceticism and prayer for 25 years, Acharya translated this from the Syriac *Penqitho* of Mosul in the *Anthiochen* liturgical tradition. *Satsang*, in the evening is a common feature in Indian Ashrams long practiced at Kurisumala. This is an occasion for all, monks and guests, to join more freely in *bhajans* and spiritual songs.

So, a communitarian way of life has continuously grown here since the foundation in 1955 by Father Francis Acharya (formerly Jean Mahieu), a former businessman who was inspired by Gandhi on his visit to England. He was driven by the inner urge to seek a simple life built on spiritual truths. Without anybody's knowledge, at the age of 23 he contacted the novice master of Scourmont Cistercian Abbey in Belgium. He already conducted retreats there and they had already accepted him as a novice. Jean's other reason for joining the Scourmont Abbey was that they were planning a foundation in India. His encounter with Gandhi was still vibrant in his mind. Through many setbacks, he kept the dream alive within and finally, through Divine intervention, he was allowed to leave his monastery for a time and finally got visa to India in 1955. So the journey had begun. Several other monks from the West were also in India on a similar quest, Henri le Saux and Bede Griffiths to mention two of them. For Francis the journey from West to East, finally brought him to Kurisumala. There was just a piece of land, which he in prayer and work built up to a thriving Ashram with farming and community life, both at the Ashram and for the surrounding villages.

The life of the community is organized according to the Cistercian Order while the liturgical celebrations are conducted according to the Syro Malankara rite. On the 21st March 1958, on the feast day of St. Benedict and the 860th anniversary of the foundation of Citeaux,

Francis, Bede and two Indian postulants, Sylvester and Varghese and their young liturgy professor started their Indian Ashram. After years of toil and disappointments, the dream became a reality. On September 14th the chapel was blessed by the bishop Mar Athanasios and thus a full fledged monastic life started. Then followed years of prayer and hard work. Setbacks and encouraging signs. In the late 90's the outer affirmation from the Cistercian order was given and on October 14, 1999, the Abbatial Blessing was held. Dom David Tomlins, the Father immediate from the Tarrawarra Abbey was the main celebrant at this function along with the other Cistercian congregation officials and proclaimed Kurisumala as the first Cistercian Abbey in India. With a life full of satisfaction and happiness, Francis Acharya completed his work, realized the dream that many were dreaming and went to the Lord for his eternal reward on January 31st 2002. He is buried in the Resurrection garden of the Kurisumala Ashram visited by thousands of spiritual adherents.

Now the Benedictine Order in general consider Kurisumala is a gift the Lord is preparing for the Order. The authorities perceive that "It is for us to receive this gift and not to conquer it. To serve it; Not to enslave it. It's not a question of imprisoning the spirit in law, in the Order, but of enriching the order with the spirit that lives in Kurisumala. The Cistercian charism must be able to express itself in each culture. It is not a question of imposing western expression on all the cultures but of favoring the proper cultural expression of the original charism of our founders. We have perhaps more to receive than to give in welcoming Kurisumala"

While I was being shown around the Ashram I was struck by the beauty and simplicity of the whole area. Buildings and structures have been built in complete harmony with the surrounding nature. On one side is a small hill for meditation, Francis Hermitage is close to the Ashram yet set apart in a small valley. The flowers and garden area bring beauty and joy to the heart and the newly built chapel is kept in style with the humble and unadorned buildings of the Ashram. So even if the Ashram has been planted here, it's roots are being nurtured by the Indian soil and the life so becomes a wondrous manifestation of the possibilities of deeper integration of the eastern and western spiritual traditions in a world torn by conflicts and strife, the Kurisumala in all humility and silence is proving to be a great model for unity amidst diversity in today's globalized world.