

“WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED” THE CHURCH IN NEPAL

Of all religious orders in the Catholic Church, the Jesuits have arguably had the most interesting (at times turbulent) history of all. It is equally true that they have been unquestionably the most influential in the life of the Church simply due to their sheer size and scope of their pastoral and educational activities. They may be found in virtually every corner of the globe, including where I am now.

The first Catholic priest to enter Nepal was the Portuguese Jesuit Father Juan Cabral, in 1628. In 1670, King Pratap Malla invited the Jesuits to settle in the country. In 1703, the Italian Capuchin Franciscans carried out their work of evangelization in the central and eastern part of Nepal. The conquest of power by the Gorkha, in 1769, stopped evangelization for almost two centuries. Only in 1951, in fact, did some Indian and American Jesuits manage to enter Nepal to teach, but without exercising pastoral ministry.

In 1968, the first Nepalese Jesuit was ordained a priest. In 1973, strict measures were adopted by the authorities to prevent conversions to Christianity, and dozens of Christians were imprisoned without trial. On 7 October 1983, the territory of Nepal, until then under the jurisdiction of the Indian Diocese of Patna, was erected as an independent mission territory based in the capital Kathmandu, and entrusted to the Jesuits. In the 1980's, different male and female religious congregations opened their homes in different parts of the country. On 8 November 1996, the mission in Nepal is raised to Apostolic Prefecture, and on 10 February 2007, to Apostolic Vicariate, with the first Apostolic Vicar Fr. Anthony Francis Sharma, SJ, a native of Kathmandu. Not quite on the level of a full diocese, its bishop exercises his jurisdiction as the “vicar” of the pope.

The present Apostolic Vicar, appointed on April 25, 2014, is Bishop Paul Simick is a priest of the Diocese of Darjeeling, India. Out of a population of **26.6 million people in Nepal**, 0.4 per cent or 150,000 are Christian. Of these, **7,200 are Catholics**—7,202 to be exact for the past two weeks! There are 11 parishes, 60 mission stations, 1 Bishop, 18 diocesan priests and 58 religious, 13 religious brothers, 165 religious women. That is actually a fantastic ratio of priest to Catholics! The church manages 17 assistant centers and charities, 28 primary schools and 23 junior/secondary schools.

One such school is St. Xavier's School in Godawari, ten miles southeast of the Kathmandu. It was founded jointly by Indian and American Jesuits and serves students in grades 1-10. It was significantly damaged during the **April 2015 earthquake**, which registered 7.9 on the Richter Scale. The quake killed **nearly 9,000 people** throughout the country, three times the number of lives lost on 9/11. Eight of its ten buildings were damaged in the Quake. Its motto is “Live for God. Lead for Nepal.”

Jesuits also work with older students. A Pittsburgh native and Jesuit priest by the name of **Fr. Gregory Sharkey** is director of the Boston College Nepal Program (a Jesuit institution), providing immersion opportunities to college aged students and teaches courses in Nepalese culture and comparative theology. He is a leading Catholic expert on Hinduism and Buddhism, topics about which I am woefully ignorant. Thanks to a letter of introduction from Archbishop Hebda, my brother Andy and I will meet with him later this week on our final day before flying home. In addition to showing us around Kathmandu, perhaps Fr. Sharkey will absolve each of us for the times we snipped at each other while sharing close quarters!

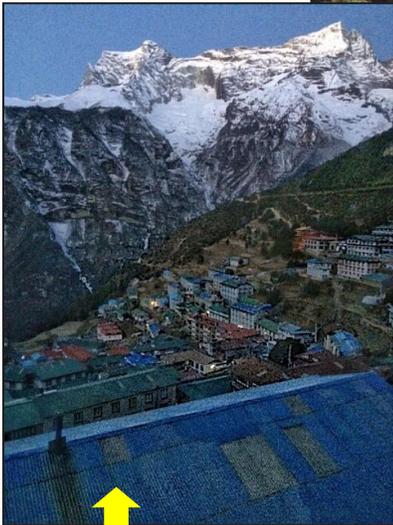
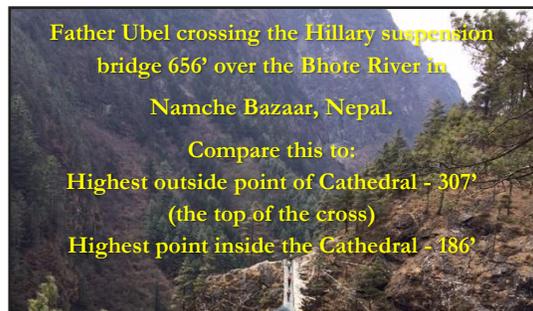
But the fact remains that **Christians in Nepal** are still treated as second-class citizens. There are no laws in Nepal for registration of Christian Churches and organizations. In 2009, a bomb went off inside the Church of the Assumption in Kathmandu. The group behind the episode is the Nepal Defense Army, a movement linked to Hindu fundamentalism. It went off fifteen minutes before Mass was to begin. There were approximately 400 in attendance, and two were killed, including a teenager.

- If I have not collapsed from exhaustion, or (more likely) from altitude sickness...by the time you read this I will have just reached the highest point of our trek. Everest Base Camp (17,500 ft.) was scheduled for Saturday. Today (Sunday) brings Kala Pathar (18,200 ft.), the best viewpoint for the summit, the coveted money shot. We'll see!

- **The Art of the Deal** indeed! It was 150 years ago this coming Thursday (March 30, 1867) that the USA purchased **Alaska** from the Russian Empire for \$7.2 million, approximately \$0.02 per acre. It is a land of untamed and immense beauty. Perhaps President Trump should call Vladimir Putin, just to say “Thanks!”
- I am grateful to all the priests who assisted with confessions over the twenty-four hour period that ended on Saturday. It is a big sacrifice this time of year, but so many answered the call. I am especially grateful because my trip was planned long before this event was arranged. Thanks for stepping up to the plate.
- After reaching as high to the heavens on foot for divine inspiration (for me anyway!), I will be giving my Minnesota Twins prediction next week. I am disadvantaged from not being able to follow spring training, but I am not thinking that it is going to be an optimistic prediction.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector



View from the window at 5:15 a.m.
Father Ubel with Mount Everest in the background.

