

Responding Truthfully and Gently: A Tribute to Prof Noel Sheth SJ

Errol D'Lima SJ

St Xavier's School, Mumbai

Noel Sheth (31-10-1943 - 7-7-2017) journeyed through life with purpose. His Jesuit identity always before him, he applied himself meticulously to every task given him with the hope that it would benefit others. The eldest of four brothers, he lost his father when he and his siblings were still young. He felt responsible for the family. His mother hailed from Kandivali in Mumbai and with faith and fortitude looked after her sons and provided for their education through her earnings.

It was in St. Xavier's High School, Dhobitalao that Noel completed his schooling and then decided to join the Jesuits of the Bombay Province; he did so on June 20, 1960. His flair for languages showed in his knowledge of Gujarati—his father was a baptized Gujarati—Marathi, Hindi and English. After philosophy, Noel was asked to prepare himself in Sanskrit and Indian Culture to be part of the staff of St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. He performed brilliantly in his M.A. in Sanskrit from Pune University and was offered a full scholarship to Harvard to complete his doctorate in Sanskrit. At Harvard, he impressed both staff and students with his extraordinary competence in Sanskrit and on occasion was invited by the professor to teach his

confreres. Back in India, the wider needs of the Jesuit Assistancy decided his superiors into assigning him to Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth (JDV), Pontifical Institute of Philosophy and Religion, Pune. He resided in the Papal Seminary and functioned as dean of the Inchoate Department of Indian Studies and Social Sciences in the Faculty of Philosophy. Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism and Sikhism were the subjects he taught. His name is included in the *Who's Who of Sanskrit Scholars of India*.

Noel had the capacity to put together an immense amount of detail so that the knowledge of subjects he taught was almost exhaustive. His effort to excel in all he attempted also meant that he had high expectations of his students. Not only was his learning appreciated in JDV but also at the national and international levels. He was called to participate in and preside at international meetings and seminars. Throughout his teaching career, he came across not only as a scholar but also a simple and amiable person. With a mind for detailed planning as well as sensitivity for the views of others, he served terms as rector of the Papal Seminary (1991-94) and later of JDV (1999-2005). He helped bring technical modernization to the JDV campus and was presented the Dr. Sam Higginbottom award for the best principal (president) in India, 2004-2005 by the All India Association for Christian Higher Education.

His identity as a Jesuit priest characterized his commitment to the Church and the Society of Jesus. Ordained on March 23, 1974 Noel cherished the priesthood and the ministry that it implied. Because of his deep knowledge of Oriental Religions, he could appreciate the contribution of other faiths in understanding the world of religion and be pluralist while preserving his Christian identity. At the time of his death, Noel was a member of the International Sec-

retariat for Ecumenism and advisor to Fr. General in Inter-religious matters.

Noel had noteworthy qualities of both, head and heart. Gentlemanly in his actions and very humane in his dealings with others, he could listen, assess and respond truthfully, yet gently, to what was said to him. He walked tall yet made everyone feel that they mattered to him. He set great store on being impartial in his dealings with his associates, staff and students. It was easy to recognize the kindness that emanated from him. He enjoyed meeting companions and shared in the fun and food of such gatherings. When he returned from an overseas engagement, he brought something not only for his own community but also for others. For health reasons, Noel was careful about his diet and took few chances. Noel's friends are grateful to God for having him in their midst for 57 years; we feel his loss acutely.

It was my privilege to chat with Noel on the very day (June 26, 2017) he was to fly to Bogota, Columbia where he completed his life's journey in this world. We offer our condolences to his two surviving brothers and his many friends both in India and abroad. May God grant Noel eternal rest and may perpetual light shine on him.