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A Big Heart for Little Hearts: An Interview with Dr Manoj Durairaj

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Programme Director, Heart and Lung Transplantation and
MCS, Sahyadri Hospitals, Pune, Maharashtra, India.

Abstract: The award “*Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice*” (“For Church and Pope”) is established by Pope Leo XIII, the founder of Papal Seminary, in 1888. The award is given for distinguished service to the Church by lay people or clergy. The “*Pro Ecclesiae et Pro Pontifice*” is a medal or decoration bestowed by the Holy See on lay people who have rendered exemplary service to the Catholic Church. The award is also known as the Cross of Honour or Decoration of Honour instituted by Pope Leo XIII in 1888 to commemorate his 50th year as a priest. It is the highest recognition the laity can receive from the Pope. We are happy that Dr. Manoj Durairaj M.S., M. Ch. (AIIMS, New Delhi), F.A.C.C., house doctor of Papal Seminary, has been recipient of this award on November 22, 2021. *AUC: Asian Journal of Religious Studies* is happy to publish this interview with him. –The Editor

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Keywords: Dr Manoj Durairaj, Heart Surgeon, Pune, Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice, Big Heart.

AUC: *Congratulations, Dr Manoj Durairaj, for having received the prestigious “Pro Ecclesia et Pro Pontifice,” which is conferred for distinguished service to the Catholic Church by lay people and clergy. How do you feel about it?*

It’s a great blessing to receive the *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* 2021 award from The Vatican. This award is also known as the Cross of Honour or Decoration of Honour and was instituted by Pope Leo XIII in 1988 to commemorate his 50th year as a priest. It’s a rare honour and has been awarded for the first time to a person from the Diocese of Poona. I feel humbled and overwhelmed by this recognition by the Holy See. It is a moment of happiness for myself, my family and the members of Poona Diocese.

AUC: *Thank you. We are truly proud of your dedication and service for the people. Can you elaborate on some of your works as a dedicated doctor?*

I thank God for this opportunity to serve the community at large as a doctor. I have specialised in Cardiac Surgery and perform both Adult and Paediatric heart surgery. Recently I led a team which performed the First Heart Transplant in the city of Pune in 2017. It was an important milestone. My father,

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Professor Manuel Durairaj, a father figure of Cardiology in India, established a charitable trust called Marian Cardiac Centre and Research Foundation, in 1991. Through this trust we have been able to help over 350 children undergo free open-heart surgery.

AUC: As a heart transplant surgeon, we are happy that you are the one to have performed the first heart transplant surgery in Pune. What are some of the challenges that you encounter when you perform such delicate operations and interventions?

Heart Transplant surgery is the pinnacle of heart surgery due to technical expertise needed by the surgical team and also the tremendous logistical exercise which is needed to pull off the surgery. The donor heart is harvested from a Brain-Dead donor. Once the heart is removed from the donor, it has to be transported in an ice box and implanted in the recipient's body within 3 hours. Hence, we utilise the state machinery like road traffic police or air services, to create a Green Corridor for express transit of the organ. At any given time, there are approximately 100 odd people required to carry out this feat. The sick heart has to be taken out from the recipient and the donor heart has to be sewn in meticulously in the given time frame. Before transport, the donor beating heart is stopped chemically and once the heart is implanted, it is a miracle to see the donor heart beating in the recipient's body. Numerous challenges are encountered during this exercise, including travelling to remote locations overnight and then travelling back by road or air and still remain within the time frame. Technical challenges during surgery are also encountered like children who have very body frames but heart sizes are big. We need to accurately choose hearts to fit these kids. There also challenges of managing rejection of the new organ after surgery. We have to use multiple medications for the same and be very vigilant post-transplant and during the follow up period.

AUC: Can you please enumerate some of your achievements and success stories?

As a doctor, each operation if performed well and a smiling patient coming for a long term follow up is a success story. Open heart surgery is not only a lifesaving procedure but also a life changing one. A very sick individual who was breathless and having exertional chest pain has dramatic improvement and can perform normal activities. A child who was born with a hole in the heart and is a blue baby becomes pink again and leads a normal life. These are the success stories for me. As far as awards are concerned, I have received the following awards:

1. Outstanding citizen of Pune award by Mayor of Pune, Mrs Mukta Tilak in 2018, for starting the heart transplant programme and also for charitable work.
2. Professor B B Dixit award 2019 by the Research Society of the B J Medical College and Sassoon General Hospital, Pune.
3. Hridayamitra Award by Deputy Charity Commissioner of Pune for Charitable work.
4. Governor of Lagos Award, for performing the First Paediatric surgery in Lagos, Nigeria.
5. Vocational Award of the Rotary Club of Poona 2020, for professional excellence.

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AUC: Congratulations! At the same time, are there any failures in your life? What have you learnt from them?

A major failure in my life has been not getting admission to the government medical college in Pune after 12th. I had to seek admission in the Medical College located in Chidambaram city, Tamil Nadu. It had weighed heavily on me, but I had immense support of my parents Dr M Durairaj, Mrs Valsamma Durairaj and sister Manju during this difficult time. The friends I met during this time in my medical college have become friends for life and I thank God for this. It was a blessing in disguise. I was able to concentrate well in my studies during under graduation and was able to perform well in studies. This period of my life where my family and friends supported me, helped me boost my confidence.

The atmosphere at home has always been that of prayer before every event including going out of the house or exams or occasions. I always say a prayer before any surgery which I perform. I call my mother and my wife Sheena before surgeries to pray. This has helped me perform very difficult procedures, with good results. God's presence has guided us in very difficult and trying times.

AUC: *How has faith in God been a guiding force in your life?*

My parents are extremely God-fearing people. The atmosphere at home has always been that of prayer before every event including going out of the house or exams or occasions. I always say a prayer before any surgery which I perform. I call my mother and my wife Sheena before surgeries to pray. This has helped me perform very difficult procedures, with good results. God's presence has guided us in very difficult and trying times especially during these Covid times.

AUC: As a charity NGO, you and your organisation has worked immensely for the welfare of the ordinary and poor people. Can you elaborate on some of your works?

Marian Cardiac Centre and Research Foundation, our charitable NGO, has been helping poor children undergo open heart surgery over the last 30 years. Our donors and benefactors have been contributing generously to our cause of “Saving Little Hearts”. We have been able to reach out to hundreds of children.

AUC: Your family has been supporting you in your ventures. That’s really great of them. What do you owe to your family members?

My family – Dr Manuel Durairaj (Father), Mrs Valsamma Durairaj (Mother), Sheena (Wife), James (Son) and Maria (Daughter), are my pillars of love, strength and hope. They have been a constant source of positive encouragement and have been tirelessly working behind the scenes to ensure I can realise my dreams. Without their support, it would not have been possible to do this kind of work.

AUC: You are still a very young and energetic doctor. Can you share with us some of your dreams and hopes for the future?

I hope in the coming years we can build a comprehensive health care facility to treat patients from all walks of life. The community at large should benefit with ethical and cost-effective medical care.

AUC: Thank you very much Dr Manoj Durairaj, for what you have been to the Church and the nation. Thanks for your time and for your committed service for the needy. May more professionals like you serve the country selflessly and uplift the poor and downtrodden!



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