

A man, a woman, and their tryst with destiny

Some thoughts on the Joseph Vaz canonization

By George Pinto

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Three hundred years separate them but the Vatican's approval of the Goan-born Joseph Vaz canonization, inextricably binds possibly the greatest saint in Catholic history with his biggest promoter for sainthood, Filomena Sarawati Giese.

All credit for his canonization belongs to Joseph Vaz, whose saintly life (1651-1711) resulted last week in the one of the highest honors of the Catholic church bestowed on him (the formalities will be done in the near future). For 24 years he lived in Sri Lanka under harsh conditions: as a beggar, under Dutch persecution (could mean imprisonment and death if a Catholic priest was caught preaching), without food for days, sometimes in chains, his life often in danger, he even walked barefoot across Sri Lanka. Without ANY forced conversions, he grew the church substantially in Sri Lanka while he was there. Fr. Roger Lesser (who unfortunately is very sick at the time of writing) referred to him as one of the greatest saints while discussing his book "Sages and Saints of India". In the spirit of inter-religious harmony (much needed today) Joseph Vaz had the blessings of a Buddhist king to preach. His life as a priest is a model for today's priesthood: humble, serve the poor, comfort the afflicted, live simply. An agnostic, even an atheist, can objectively appreciate the greatness of the man.

Fast forward to the late 1970's and two Goan sisters in Berkeley, California, discover Joseph Vaz's work and decide his story must be told. Filomena Giese and Ligia Britto founded the Joseph Naik Vaz Institute and Filomena primarily has carried the torch for 35 years. For any number of historical reasons, not the least of which is colonialism, she realizes that Joseph Vaz has been denied the "glories of the altar" as Archbishop Henry D'Souza alluded to in his heroic speech in Rome to the General Oratorian Congress in 2000. For Filomena, it has been a long, sometimes lonely struggle, trying to convince the Vatican to do the right thing and canonize Joseph Vaz - a matter of justice. It has meant trips to Rome, writing to and meeting with Ambassadors, Cardinals, Bishops, petitioning three Popes, and organizing events to publicize the work of Joseph Vaz. She watched European candidates fast-tracked to sainthood and European saints imposed on colonized peoples throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America, while Joseph Vaz was unjustly made to wait for three hundred years. But the struggle ended last week, when Filomena triumphantly arrived in Rome on September 17, 2014, the same day the Vatican announced approval of the canonization.

Why, one can ask, have some Goans been so docile, even uninterested in one of their own? Many Goan clergy were indifferent, asleep, and in a few cases hostile to a Joseph Vaz sainthood while promoting non-Goan saints. Perhaps Goans really do not deserve their own saint. But colonialism is formally over (although it has morphed into other forms of discrimination) and a new Pope understands historical wrongs can be made right. Pope Francis did the right thing.

As the Vatican shuts its doors this evening and the sun sets on a fairly deserted St. Peter's Square, Filomena goes by the Vatican one last time on this important trip before she returns to California tomorrow. Rome is the epicenter of Catholicism and the city has gone to bed tonight little realizing that one woman in their midst with tremendous tenacity and dogged determination took on a 2000 year (male) bureaucracy and won. From St. Peter to St. Joseph Vaz, a door was finally opened for a Goan - Joseph Vaz now belongs in the universal calendar of saints.

Filomena scaled Mount Vatican, far bigger and more challenging than Everest. It took 35 years and every young Goan woman, every young woman, must take her example - long odds and a tough road are not obstacles but opportunities to succeed even in a man's world. No, especially in a man's world.

Joseph Vaz and Filomena's paths will no doubt cross some day in eternity. A humble, saintly soul and a woman activist who refused to give up on justice for his well-deserved sainthood. One can only hope to be a fly on that proverbial wall when that meeting occurs.

Welcome back Filomena. Well done. You won one for Goans (and Sri Lankans). Thank you.

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The writer lives in the San Francisco Bay area and his views above do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization he belongs to, including the Joseph Naik Vaz Institute which he has strongly supported since 2000.