

# A truly Indian Christmas

by Kathy Tretter

Christmas, Catholic, India, carols and the North Star.

If those five things were listed in one of those quizzes made famous in Highlights Magazine under the title, "Choose the one thing that does not belong," most children would probably go with India.

But this is not Highlights Magazine and this was a trick question — they actually all belong — and a recent interview with Ferdinand Parish Priest Fr. Anthony Govind is proof.

Fr. Anthony was born in Alixajpet in the District of Siddipet and State of Telangana, Indiana.

His was one of about 220 Catholic families in a village of around 800 families, the others being Hindu or Muslim. "We are a small village," he explains, "and we peacefully live together. There is more unity in our diversity among religions, more understanding."

So how did an Indian Catholic Priest find himself tending a rather, let's face it, homogeneous community of which the majority of residents take pride in their German ancestry?

Ahhh, that's an interesting question and you may be surprised by the answer (this writer was).

Fr. Anthony is a member of the Heralds of Good News, a Catholic order headquartered in India. "Our mission is to supply priests wherever there is need and the need is greater here." In recent times 16 priests have come from Fr. Anthony's village.

Ironically, Ferdinand was founded by a missionary priest in 1840, and the community grew to include a convent (now monastery), founded in 1867 with a seminary and abbey (now Archabbey) just a few miles away, but American priests are in short supply.

"Anywhere priests are needed, we [Heralds of Good News] are happy to send," he added.

Putting it in perspective, the population

of India is three times larger than the population of the United States; however, the physical size of the United States is three times larger than India. Within the nation of India only 2.6% of the population is Catholic. In the United States, an estimated 22% of the population is Catholic. So while there are far more Indians than Americans, there are probably a similar number of Catholics (although the rule is, never let the reporter do the math). The long and the short of it is this — priests are in short supply in the United States, which is how Fr. Anthony found himself in a state that partially bears the name of his native land, seated across from a journalist on a recent Thursday afternoon asking how Christmas is celebrated among Catholics in India (but the other stuff is too fascinating not to share).

By the way, Fr. Anthony recognized his call to the priesthood when he was in the fourth grade. He attended a boarding school run by missionaries through the 10th grade, then joined the seminary where he spent the next 14 years studying, with heavy emphasis on English. He received his masters in Christian Studies and arrived in the United States in May of 2014.

So finally, to the question at hand. How do Indian Catholics celebrate Christmas?

First of all, while not all faiths celebrate the religious aspect of the season, Christmas is a public holiday, so people are generally off work.

"At the start of Advent," he explains, "everyone puts one star on top of their house. The crib [nativity] is made of hay and sticks, natural, very simple." The families put up a Christmas tree of sorts, cutting off one tree branch and adorning



Father Anthony in the rectory kitchen.

— photo by Miriam Ash

it with cards and stars. It only stays there for Christmas day.

Santa Claus is a figure known to Indian children but presents are not a big feature of the holiday. If given they are practical items like clothing. Santa does have a big role, however. "Before Christmas Eve, at the start of Advent, Santa Claus and a group of youth go house to house singing carols with a Baby Jesus in the spirit of community." Some

of the songs are in English, but many are in Father's mother tongue, Telugu.

On Christmas day they feast on goat and special rice, but no turkey, and drink a special white beverage made from palm trees. Other families may opt for mutton or pork or even chicken.

On December 6 the temperature was 86° (even on the coldest nights the low is only 48 or 50°) so snow is never a factor and dreaming of a white Christmas unheard of.

Fr. Anthony has three sisters and one brother (he is the baby) and all his siblings and his parents still live in India. Fortunately, he is allowed a month at home every year and recently visited his family.

So how does Fr. Anthony Govind plan to spend his first Christmas in Ferdinand?

"I'm having my second cousin and his family from Columbia, South Carolina," adding with a sheepish smile, "if weather permits."

**Wishing everyone a safe and very Merry Christmas**

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