

Bella Vista parishioners support their pastor and his order

written by Alesia Schaefer |



BELLA VISTA — Sometimes the vocations prayer is not answered under the roof of our own parish, but several continents away. The parishioners of St. Bernard Church in Bella Vista are pleased to see the answered prayer in the person of Father Barnabas Maria Susai, one of two Indian Missionary Society priests currently serving in the Diocese of Little Rock.

Father Susai, or Father Barnabas as parishioners call him, was born in the southern part of India and has served as the pastor of St. Bernard for the past two years.

Priests from the Indian Mission Society have been in the state of Arkansas for about 20 years, said Father Susai, but his time of service in Arkansas has been a little more than five years.

“In areas where there is a shortage of priests, the IMS fills a void with priests that are highly educated, multilingual and experienced in working with diverse groups of people,” Father Susai said.

Parishioners have responded to Father Susai’s missionary spirit by supporting the religious order with money raised in an annual general collection specifically for IMS needs. A small delegation from the parish also traveled with Father Susai to India in 2011 to learn more about the workings of the IMS, with each individual traveler paying in full for his or her own trip.

Father Susai began his ministry in the United States serving as pastor for parishes in Scranton, Morrison Bluff and Prairie View in 2006. After his time there, he moved to Bella Vista, and Father Josely “John” Kalathil, IMS, now serves as the pastor for that same area he served.

Fourteen IMS priests are assigned to the United States, said Father Susai, with the majority of them working in the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

The sixth of seven children, Father Susai was encouraged to consider a vocation at a young age. Growing up in a Catholic village and attending Catholic grade school and high school where priests and nuns were teachers, he said vocations were prayed for and expected. He and an older brother both entered the society.

“My mother and grandmother said rosaries and offered Masses for us to enter the vocations,” he said. “We had a French pastor who came to India as a missionary and he, too, always encouraged the students to enter the vocations.”

Upon entering the seminary, explained Father Susai, a seminarian spends 12 years training — two years learning languages, another year as a novitiate, three more years studying philosophy, one year at their spiritual center serving the needs of the people, one year in a

parish and then another four years studying theology at a seminary in south India. Because of this education, he said, priests in India are revered and respected.

"Our charism is really pioneering evangelization," Father Susai said of the IMS. "In India, we are sent to small villages to help with the physical needs as well as the spiritual needs. Once a parish is formed or established, then we give the parish back to the bishop there in India and he moves us on to another mission area."

Leaving his home country was not easy, Father Susai admitted, but his reception in the United States has been warm and welcoming.

"From day one," he said of his appointment at Bella Vista, "I have felt at home."

Yet, despite his absence from India, his work with the IMS has continued to be a part of his ministry. In 2011, eight parishioners accompanied Father Susai on a trip to his homeland in the Varanasi Province. That year, he was one of two delegates in America to attend the election of the provincial chapter president. A spontaneous, but curious, group of parishioners made the trip to meet members of the IMS and to visit the seminary where these priests receive training.

Chuck Fiebig, one of the parishioners who made the journey with Father Susai, said the parish as a whole has been supportive of the IMS.

"The Women's Club, with funds raised from their bazaar, the Men's Club and the Knights of Columbus all keep the IMS in their yearly charity budgets," he said. "To date, money raised has gone to the general needs of the IMS, such as building new parishes, developing schools and training seminarians," Fiebig said.

Other more specific projects have also been discussed since returning from India, Fiebig said, "but I think I speak for everyone when I say that we were all very impressed with the amount of missionary work the IMS does for the people of India."

"Asmita," Fiebig said, "is a program that takes children off the street, those that have been abandoned or who are beggars and gives them food, shelter and teaches them a trade. The IMS has also created a hotline phone number for children of the street, a center (ashram) that promotes Indian Christian spirituality and inter-religious dialogue, a clinic that cares for those infected with HIV and AIDS and a theatrical group (Vishwa Jyoti Communications) that goes into the villages and stages plays and does some street theater about topics such as literacy or health for the villagers," Fiebig said.

"Even though many of the people are Hindu, they practice Catholicism because of the work of the IMS," he added. "We watched about 9,000 attend an outdoor Mass and Stations of the Cross," Fiebig said.

What many do not know is that Father Susai sends his diocesan salary back to help fund these many outreach programs of the IMS. In fact, the society relies on his support and the support of its other priests serving in the United States to maintain the social outreach programs, train seminarians and build new parishes and schools in the Varanasi Province. He also does a mission appeal for the IMS once each year at St. Bernard and a few other local parishes that the diocese approves.

"We have a very good shepherd," Fiebig said.