

# **Native of India served most of his 25 years in Arkansas**

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



Father Ravi Gudipalli needed four tries to pass his driver's license test when he was first assigned to Arkansas from his native India, but just one time to hear God calling him to the priesthood.

His faith journey began as a middle school student at St. John's Minor Seminary in the Diocese of Nellore, India, and hit a significant milestone last month at St. Mary of the Springs in Hot Springs.

Father Ravi, as he is known, celebrated the 25th anniversary of his ordination during a Mass, reception and dinner April 25. More than 250 people attended, including 17 priests and parishioners from other churches Father Gudipalli had served in Arkansas.

Father Gudipalli, 52, laughs heartily when recalling what it took to secure a driver's license when he first arrived in Arkansas in 2009.

"I went for driving tests, and I failed three times," he said. "I was thinking, 'I'm not fit to be here. Let me go back to India.' Then, at the end, after Mass, I went a fourth time and thank God I passed. This is what God had planned for me. No turning back."

Father Gudipalli was born in a remote village in southern India, the youngest of five children. He was also a bit of a troublemaker in his youth.

"I was not listening to my parents," he said. "I was doing what I wanted, so they worried about me. In seventh grade, two brothers came to my house, and they said, 'Put him in the seminary, he'll be OK.' So, I joined the minor seminary in eighth grade — for education."

It was a six-hour bus ride from his home village. But he was not alone as his older brother, Dava, was enrolled in the seminary and in time became a priest, who now serves in Munich, Germany.

"The first three months, I struggled," Father Gudipalli said. "It was discipline, getting up at 5:30 a.m. I slowly got used to the formation. When I was in 10th grade, my parents said, 'Come back home. One (from a family) is enough to become a priest.' And I said, 'No, I want to continue.' Then, after 12th grade, I said, 'I want to become a priest.'"

Father Gudipalli earned bachelor's degrees in theology and philosophy. He was ordained April 24, 2000, and returned there for a reunion in January.

"All my classmates came together so we celebrated a Silver Jubilee, 25 years, thanking the Lord for all the blessings," he said. "It was a good celebration with my family, my friends, with my village people, and all the different priests that came."

Father Gudipalli spent the first nine years of his ministry working in parishes in India.

"In 2009, my bishop said, 'Would you like to go to America?' I said, 'Yes, I want to go,' even though I knew English is very difficult, the weather is different, the culture is different. But still, I wanted to see the place."

Father Gudipalli's first assignment in Arkansas was as an associate pastor at St. Joseph in Pine Bluff. He has also served as associate pastor at St. Raphael in Springdale and pastor of Our Lady of the Assumption in Booneville and St. Jude Thaddeus in Waldron.

Father Guidpalli returned home in 2016 to continue his ministry but was called back to Arkansas in 2019 and briefly served as pastor of St. John the Baptist in Hot Springs before moving to St. Mary of the Springs.

The 154-year-old church sits in the heart of a tourist-filled downtown district.

“It’s a great honor for me to be part of this historical church,” he said. “When I came here, it was the 150-year jubilee, and I was so blessed to be part of the celebration. More and more people are coming, appreciating the beauty of the church, the architecture. People from downtown love to be part of the celebration. And they come from so many different parts of America. It is a treasure for our Catholic faith.”

Father Babu Battula of Stuttgart opened the anniversary Mass, saying, “With all the confidence in the world, I can say Father Ravi is a faithful priest and that’s what we celebrate today — his love for his people, his love for his God.”