

---

**Canon Jeremy Bath**

**PAKISTAN**

**June 11<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> 2023**

### **Sunday 11 June**

Just about to land in Faisalabad. Been travelling nearly 16 hours. Nearly did not get on the plane as I had trouble accessing my Covid passport. A man gave up his seat on the airport bus as he saw me as a senior citizen! I forget these things. Able to pray the office in the Airport and an air hostess from Lebanon greeted me as she saw I was a Catholic priest.

### **Monday 12 June**

Breathtaking heat at the airport. Fr Younis met me and we travelled through crowded streets filled. The city is truly vibrant; you notice the Mosques, but no visible sign of Churches. Eventually, we turned down a muddy side to the Seminary building. Staff and students of the Seminary gave me a warm welcome. Got some rest. There was a gun in the cupboard. Went to get fitted for specs and sandals.

### **Tuesday 13 June - Feast of St Anthony of Padua**

Special Mass for dedication of a new Church - St Anthony of Padua. We went in procession with many priests. There were drums beating, flower petals, doves, fireworks. The Mass was three hours long - Dedication of the new beautiful Church; Many speeches, power cuts, blessings and thanksgivings!

### **Wednesday 14 June**

Travelled to see Fr Younis's mum and family for lunch, after buying more Pakastani clothes; stupidly forgot to buy her a gift; she gave me many gifts; her love and goodness was touching. Went to a new church -St Joseph's Mahalam. The village was rural - there were animals, children, flies, heat and dust, but also smiles, joy, music, dancing, singing - the love of God. I made a little speech, translated, and the people were so warm and friendly. A man sang a song all about how Fr Younis built the church, it was captivating to hear and it nearly brought me to tears. Stayed in local convent.

### **Thursday 15 June**

Awoke in the convent. You get a sense that the sisters are a vital resource for these people and for the priest; providing education and pastoral care to poor people. I can't believe the teachers are paid as little as the equivalent of £4.00 per week.

Later in the morning we met with the local Muslim community leader, Mr Nassar, he was friendly and courteous. I was warned to be prudent on what I discussed; there are legal and religious sensitiveness about discussing issues such as blasphemy laws and the intolerance of Muslims becoming Christian. The consequences are serious for the person and their families. I mentioned the positive progress that is being made in interreligious dialogue in Scotland; that the Scottish First Minister is Muslim and we departed on positive terms. I now have Pakistani clothes to wear, which are much more comfortable in the heat.

### **Friday 16 June - Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus**

This beautiful feast of the Church started with Mass in the College Chapel, followed by a very restful day in the seminary. It was good to have time to read, reflect and journal.

### **Saturday 17 June**

At 4.30 pm we headed off Northwards to the Murree Mountain range north of Islamabad. It was a long haul at that time of the day - nearly 400 miles. On the way, we passed hundreds of trucks taking cattle and goats up for the Feast of 'Eid' - a big Muslim feast, when on the 29 June they slaughter the animals for a religious reason I'm not familiar with. The animals do not seem to be treated well - which is distressing to see. One truck with cows turned over on the roadside. Several dead from their injuries.

### **Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2023**

In the morning when you opened the curtains, you saw the beauty and grandeur of the scenery - mountain ranges stretching into the distance - even as far as India Kashmir. After breakfast and morning prayer we decided to venture out to visit the scenery - a profusion of colour on the roadside as the enterprising traders sold their wares; colourful umbrellas, coconuts, shawls of many colours and patterns, beautiful Arabian horses to ride; carpets, tea stalls, maize roasted on fires, candy floss - all at 8,000 ft on steep mountain roadside. Monkeys waiting for a banana; cattle and goats grazing, motorbikes with overloaded family; horns tooting all along the way - wild daisy flowers being knitted into crowns by little children - holding out garlands on their thin arms trying to earn a little money.

### **Monday 19 June 2023**

We headed off about 12 noon, after saying goodbye to all the hotel staff including Tohid, the manager who was gracious. The journey homeward took about eight hours in searing heat, thank goodness for the A.C. in the car. Again, all the way from the mountains to the plain of Islamabad was trading at the roadside. If you stopped, even for a few seconds in the village, people. The distinction between the elite and the destitute is there to see; even a woman begging at the roadside

while her small child lay in a wheelchair; Fr Younis said it was professional begging; even if that be so; it is a sad manifestation of human existence. Amongst the dust and heat of Faisalabad we journeyed on to the highway south. We came back to a warm reception from the students, clean clothes, shower, slipper and night prayer. Now time to reflect and prepare for the journey homeward.

## **Tuesday, 20 June 2023**

What have I learned from this experience? Firstly, the Catholic Church in Pakistan is, alongside all Christians, a subjugated minority who are not afforded the same rights, freedom and dignity of the majority Muslim community. The Blasphemy Laws are truly dangerous for Christians - with every possibility of an innocent person being put to death for spurious reasons.

They (the Christians) recognise the importance of dialogue in dealing with local disputes and giving reassurances that either party is not actively seeking to 'poach' people into their own religion. Though ultimately the Christians are much weaker from a juridical position in getting their appeals upheld. The army and police is dominated by the Islamic Way of life.

That in Pakistan, people work hard to survive, often with little or no resources. The stalls and trading reflect lives that will do anything to make a living; especially for the poorer and lower caste; many of whom are Christians.

Don't come here if you are sensitive to animal welfare - donkeys, dogs, cattle and birds are here to fulfil an essential purpose - sentimentalism does not really get a look in from what I see - please God there are some who care.

The Catholic Church in Pakistan struggles with similar problems and challenges to our own.

You see here a vivid expression of the call of Christ to carry your cross courageously. Remember the past Archbishop, John Joseph took his own life outside the High Court in 1998 in dealing with a Blasphemy case.

The Church like any institution of power is vulnerable to corruption, but must be careful to be a contradiction to the prevailing culture; to be a 'Beacon of truth, honesty, justice and compassion'; otherwise the faithful will lose heart and confidence in our Church leaders. They must always remember they are in a position of trust, that is sourced ultimately in their being an Ordained Servant of Christ. If we as priests, are met 'Persona Christi' to our people, then we are of no use to them and will lose our mandate to govern the Church on earth. As Jesus

says 'Be responsible stewards so when your Master calls, he will find you hard at work for the Kingdom'.

So overall, it's been an enlightening experience to come to Fr Younis' home country; the warm welcome has never left me; the kindness and thoughtfulness of the Seminary community.