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Jesuit Fr. Samuel Rayan, a pioneer of theology with an Asian perspective that colleagues and church leaders considered a "radical interpretation of the Bible," died at age 98.

Before his Jan. 2 death, Rayan had been living in retirement and dealing with dementia. Jesuit Fr. M.K. George, provincial of the order's Kerala province, told ucanews.com that Rayan had been under medical care for age-related illness for several years.

"Father Rayan was a pioneer who theologized from an Asian or third world perspective," George said.

The elderly priest became a professor at the Jesuit theology seminary at Vidyajyoti College in New Delhi in 1972. He also served as its principal from 1972 to 1976. After more than three decades of teaching there, he returned to Kerala in 2010.

"Until Father Rayan's rise as a theologian, the concerns of the people of India were not found in the theology that originated from Western Europe," said P.T. Mathew, a fellow theologian who worked with the Jesuit.

Bishop Paul Mullassery of Quilon, India, said the church in India always will "remember him for his radical interpretation of the Bible and as a man concerned for

the poor and marginalized."

Mullassery said Rayan's interpretation of the Bible could broadly be labeled as part of liberation theology, which has been called controversial for its perceived links to Marxism.

"But his was not the militant version of liberation theology. His theology came from his deep meditations of the Gospel," Mullassery said.

Rayan defended the poor, spoke for the environment and his theology was deeply rooted in Gospel values, the bishop said.

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In an interview with ucanews.com in 1999 Rayan said theologizing in India is "to bring our Christian faith and Indian reality face to face with each other. ... It makes Christian faith and people's life situations meet, interact and interpret each other.

"Rice is for sharing, bread must be broken and given. Every bowl, every belly shall have its fill, to leave a single bowl unfilled is to rob history of its meaning; to grab many a bowl for myself is to empty history of God," he said.

P.K. Michael Tharakan, chairman of Kerala Council for Historical Research, remembered the late priest for his simplicity.

Tharakan said that a visiting Prince Charles asked Rayan how the Indian people managed to peacefully coexist given many of them adhered to different faiths. Tharakan said that Rayan told the prince that "God cannot be understood with one religion and God is a phenomenon understood by different religious experience."

Rayan was born July 23, 1920, in a village in Kollam district. He was the fourth child among two girls and six boys.

He joined the Jesuit novitiate in 1939 and was ordained a priest in 1955. He began doctoral studies in Rome in 1960.

In addition, Rayan was a founding member of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians.