News

A brown man wearing white has a large drum slung over his shoulder. Another man wearing w

Then-Archbishop Telesphore Toppo beats a traditional drum in the eastern Indian state of Ranchi Sept. 29, 2003 to celebrate being named a cardinal by Pope John Paul II. Toppo said the honor is a "mark of distinction for the tribal church in India." He was member of the Kuruk tribe. (CNS photo from Reuters)



by Catholic News Service

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Vatican City — October 5, 2023

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Retired Cardinal Telesphore Toppo of Ranchi, India, whose induction into the College of Cardinals was seen as recognition of the Catholic Church's growth among the tribal peoples of India, died Oct. 4 at the age of 83.

According to the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India, which he twice led as president, Toppo "was the first and only Asian tribal to have been accorded such a distinguished ecclesiastical office."

A member of the Kuruk tribe, he was named a cardinal in 2003 by St. John Paul II.

"God willed that I should be the first tribal priest to become a bishop, and now he wills that I should be the first tribal bishop to become the first tribal cardinal. Praise the Lord," Toppo said at the time.

India's population of more than 1 billion people includes about 104 million tribal peoples, also known as "Adivasis." The tribal community, mainly a rural population,

was excluded from access to education and to economic development for decades.

In a telegram of condolence to the Archdiocese of Ranchi, Pope Francis said, "I recall with immense gratitude the late cardinal's years of dedicated priestly and episcopal ministry."

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"His service was always marked by zeal for the spread of the Gospel, devotion to the holy Eucharist and generous pastoral care of the poor and those in need," the pope said.

Born Oct. 15, 1939, in Chainpur, the future cardinal attended high school at St. Xavier College in Ranchi before entering St. Albert's College, the regional seminary. He earned a license in theology from the Pontifical Urbanian University in Rome.

Ordained to the priesthood in May 1969, he later earned a master's degree from Ranchi University.

Ordained a bishop in October 1978, he served as bishop of Dumka for seven years before being named coadjutor archbishop of Ranchi in 1984 and taking over leadership of the archdiocese the next year. He served as president of the bishops' conference in 2001-2004 and again in 2011-2013. He retired in 2018 after 33 years leading the archdiocese.

Toppo's death leaves the College of Cardinals with 241 members, 136 of whom are under the age of 80 and eligible to enter a conclave.