

India's government honors Catholic religious

UCA News | Feb. 17, 2009



Sr. Nirmala Joshi, right, visits a camp for displaced people Oct. 4. (CNS)

At a time when Christians have been under attack in India, the country's government has honored two prominent Catholic religious, including naming the superior general of the Missionaries of Charity for India's second-highest civilian award.

On Jan. 25, the eve of India's Republic Day, the federal government named 133 people from various fields for three categories of civilian awards, all of which begin with the word *padma* (lotus), India's national flower. Sr. Nirmala Joshi, head of the order founded by Mother Teresa, is among 10 people selected to receive the *Padma Vibhushan* (lotus-ornate) award this year for her social work.

Joshi, 74, told UCA News on Jan. 26 that she received the news the previous evening. "I was completely surprised. The glory goes all to God."

Later, talking with reporters, she said, "This is not my achievement, but that of all the Missionaries of Charity who have helped us to serve the poorest of the poor."

Dolly Pereira, one of the onlookers, told UCA News tears came to her eyes when she heard "the great news." She said she was glad the country recognized the congregation for its work, especially at a time when Christians "are being so badly persecuted" in parts of the country.

Joshi said her message on the occasion is to trust in God and in one another. "We can only get peace if we remember who we are and [that] what God wants us to do is love one another," she added.

According to her, serving the poor helps people to serve God through people of all religions, cultures and economic status. "Without sacrifice, there can be no love," she asserted.

Joshi became head of the Missionaries of Charity in March 1997, after Mother Teresa, who founded the congregation, resigned due to failing health. The congregation now has more than 4,900 nuns, up from the 4,000 it had when Mother Teresa died on Sept. 5, 1997.

Another Catholic religious recently honored by the Indian government was Fr. Dominic Emmanuel, 57, the first Christian selected for the National Communal Harmony Award, instituted in 1996.

“Although we don’t work for awards, it will certainly encourage others to work for interreligious and sectarian peace, which is the burning need of the time,” the Divine Word priest said Jan. 27, a day after the award was announced.

The Delhi archdiocesan spokesperson won the award in the individual category, according to a government press release issued Jan. 26. It said the priest is “actively involved in resolving conflicts and differences” among various communities.

An Islam-based volunteer group won the award in the institutional category. *Anjuman Sair-e-Gul Faroshan*, established in 1964, has organized the annual weeklong *Phool Walon ki Sair* (procession of flower sellers) festival in the national capital for more than 40 years. The festival is “a symbol of solidarity among Hindus and Muslims,” the government press release said.

Besides a citation, the award includes a cash prize -- 500,000 rupees (US\$10,310) for an institution and 200,000 rupees for an individual.

The National Foundation for Communal Harmony, an autonomous organization under the federal Ministry of Home Affairs, instituted the award to promote sectarian harmony and national integration, the release explained.

Emmanuel called the award governmental recognition of “the church’s work for national integration and religious peace.”

It has special significance, he said, at a time when some groups are trying to “polarize society based on religion,” a reference to Hindu fanatic groups accusing Christians of using services as a façade for conversions.

“The award will prove the church is not involved in conversion activities but in building peace and harmony” among various communities to foster “peace and development of the nation,” he remarked.

Emmanuel has authored 14 books on subjects stressing interreligious dialogue and contributed “articles in national dailies for the promotion of sectarian harmony and national integration,” the press release said. It also highlighted his participation in peace rallies in the aftermath of Hindu-Muslim riots in Gujarat in 2002 and his being a founding member of the Parliament of Religions, a forum of leaders of various religions.

Printed in the National Catholic Reporter, February 20, 2009.

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