A TRIBUTE TO ARCHBISHOP
ABRAHAM VIRUTHAKULANGARA
1943 – 2018
HEART TALK

Often, the assurance of eternal life and the conviction that the person is now interceding for us in heaven are things that keep us going while mourning the loss of a loved one. The news of the passing away of our beloved Archbishop Abraham was such a moment. For many of us, the news came as a terrible shock, and it took quite a while for it to sink in.

The Archbishop, one of the strongest supporters of our movement, had journeyed along with us across many an important milestone. The approval by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, the Pontifical approval, and the incardination of Jesus Youth Priests are some of these milestones which define who we are today. Thus, his fatherly guidance has played a significant role in truly defining Jesus Youth as a missionary movement at the service of the Church.

In a profound letter to the movement in the context of the Commitment Day of 2015, he challenged each one of us to take up a visible commitment. "I urge you to make this feast of Pentecost so very special in the history of Jesus Youth by taking a visible and active commitment, which," he said, "will engage us in spirit and in truth in various initiatives like Mission and Formation." Each time I think of the Archbishop, I am reminded of his simplicity, wisdom, and grace, which helped him keep a calm and loving demeanour at all times. He always wore a smile; even the last picture he sent me was one where he was standing with the Holy Father, sporting his signature smile. During meetings, I remember many instances when his simple wisdom would bring a completely fresh perspective to some complex issue at hand. Often, with a simple thought and a smile, he would easily unravel issues over which we had been breaking our heads for hours.

My last trip with the Archbishop was in January. We were travelling to Sri Lanka and as we were waiting for our luggage by the carousel, it struck me that I had left the Archbishop’s cabin bag near the immigration counter. I was very uneasy and disturbed until we found the bag, whereas the Archbishop was calm, composed and smiling all the while. This is an image of his that will remain etched in my memory forever. In his passing, our movement will greatly miss a zealous missionary, a visionary leader, a humble pastor and above all a most loving father.

C. C. Joseph
Jesus Youth International Co-ordinator

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During the last 20 years of my association with Archbishop Abraham, both the priests of the diocese and the Vicar General have found him deeply involved with the youth of the Archdiocese. Wherever he went, his mind was always geared to the youth of the Archdiocese. He was personally involved and he encouraged youth ministry in all the parishes. He was personally involved in these ministries and showed great love and care for a special vocation in the church called Jesus Youth. He got deeply immersed in this movement, attended all their meetings wherever they were held and worked tirelessly to get them the ecclesiastical recognition. And he had the unique distinction of being appointed as the first Ecclesiastical Advisor to the Jesus Youth. He also had men joining the priesthood for Jesus Youth, incardinated to the Archdiocese of Nagpur, and set apart solely for the movement. To all the Jesus Youth who deeply mourn the demise of Archbishop Abraham, who feel they have lost a father, I’d like to say, treasure all that he said and did, and continue working for the greater glory of God and the good of the church, particularly for young people across the world.

Fr Jerome Pinto
Diocesan Administrator, Archdiocese of Nagpur
A MAN OF GOD WHO FOLLOWED HIS HEART

A third time in my life, here I am, writing about Archbishop Abraham Viruthakulangara. The first was around ten years ago, in the Heart Talk column of the Jesus Youth International Newsletter. Fresh from the experience of a trip to visit him in Nagpur, I quoted the chorus of a popular Malayalam hymn. Even though I knew the hymn was about Jesus, I wrote: “Whenever I return from a meeting with the Archbishop, I ask myself: “How much must I grow to become as small as you? What must I do to love like you?”

The second time I wrote about him was in July 2017, on my return from the Ruby Jubilee celebration of his Episcopal Ordination. He was the first Indian blessed to serve 40 long years in office as a Bishop, and definitely one of the very few who could lay claim to such a privilege in the universal Catholic Church itself. At the young age of 34, Archbishop Abraham was ordained as Bishop of Khandwa, and after 21 years, elevated as the Archbishop, he moved to Nagpur, where he had been living in the service of the people for the last 20 years.

Never for a moment did I imagine that I would be writing about him so soon. On 19th morning, several of us woke up to be greeted with the shocking news of the demise of our Archbishop Abraham. I wonder if he knew that it was His Master’s night — and that his Master was going to visit him and take him with him to that night. Even though he had had a massive heart attack and an open heart surgery 14 years ago, he was quite healthy and active — perhaps even more active than many of us. After his heart surgery, he used to often say, “Now you can’t say that I don’t have a heart”. It was typical of the Archbishop to find humour even in the most difficult situations of life. Though it seems so sudden to all of us, one thing I know for sure — Archbishop Abraham was always ready to welcome his Master, his lamp brimming with oil, and burning brightly. And the Lord in His mercy, granted him a blessed death — a peaceful passage.

As I try to write, words fail me. It is not easy to express what he meant to all of us personally, or to our movement. Nevertheless, let me try to pen down a few memories — beautiful memories I have of him across the last 30 years.

An ‘Apostle of Presence’, he was a tireless traveller who constantly loved to be with people. I have known him travelling to the remotest corners of the country to bless marriages of young people active in the ministry. I still marvel at the way he took time to meet almost every participant during each youth programme — bringing his own brand of love and care — from the programme hall right down to the kitchen. Each time he visited a family, the way he spoke and interacted with the parents, the kids or even the housemaids and drivers was amazing. He unleashed a tsunami of joy wherever he went. Anyone with a burdened heart would undoubtedly go back with a broad smile on their face after an encounter with the Archbishop.

Even after living as a Bishop for 41 years, he was recognised as a man of God living the ‘sacrifice of ordinariness’, and was known widely for his humility, approachability, simplicity and readiness to serve. I remember my first encounter with Archbishop Abraham way back in 1983. My father and I were on our way to Mhow for the National shooting
I always wanted to live a missionary life. The first 9 years of my priestly life, I lived as a missionary priest; now for the last 40 years as a Bishop, I try to live my life as a missionary Bishop.
of the first set of seminarians and in 2016 he ordained the first two priests for Jesus Youth – Fr Das and Fr Ditto. More than anything, we always took courage knowing that we had our Archbishop to stand with us; to correct us and to defend us before others – this always gave us the confidence to work for His kingdom.

The Archbishop who loved music, was very close to the members of the Rexband. He used to be right in the front, dancing and singing at all the concerts of the Band during the World Youth Days. Twice, he invited the Rexband to Nagpur – and both the concerts were attended by a huge number of people from diverse communities. Let me share an experience we had in Nagpur soon after the first Rexband programme 11 years ago. Since most of the band members were travelling home right after the programme, one of us asked about the possibility of celebrating Mass after the concert. Archbishop Abraham overheard this and offered to celebrate Mass for us at 2 a.m. in the morning. Knowing how fatigued he was, we tried our best to dissuade him, particularly as we had several priests there at the conference who we knew would oblige. However, the Archbishop gifted us with a most beautiful experience that night. As we entered the chapel at 2 a.m., His Grace, as sprightly as if he’d just woken up from a good night’s rest, greeted us and offered Holy Mass. When it was over, he said, “Your commitment and love for the Church and the Eucharist has inspired and touched me and I wanted to tell you how much I love you. Being a priest and a bishop, I thought the best way of showing my love would be to celebrate Mass with you.”

His favourite songs were ‘Karunamayane’ and ‘In the Spirit’. During our second concert which took place two years back in Nagpur, we sang both these songs a second time at the request of the Archbishop, after the concert was officially closed. The thought that repeating songs at the concert was unprofessional never once crossed our mind, faced as we were by the great love of our beloved Archbishop. We had a beautiful time of sharing and prayer before we left for the airport the next day. As usual, His Grace accompanied us to the airport. After we checked in, he asked us to wait till the check in counter was closed – and then he gathered all the employees of the private airline by which we were flying, introduced the band, asked us to sing a few songs for them right there at the airport and finally, he asked us to make a short prayer for the airline and the staff. Soon after that, we were accompanied by the crew to the flight that was waiting for us! Perhaps we will never have another ‘dancing Archbishop’ when we sing ‘In the Spirit’. Our beloved Archbishop, we will really miss you!

Archbishop Abraham was a person who lived life in its fullness, constantly on the move. I had the privilege of travelling with him several times – and even though he was much shorter than me, I often had to run to keep up with him. He never believed in wasting time and found joy in the little things of life. The speed and momentum with which he ran his race helped the Jesus Youth movement to gear up and follow our call and mission.

He was a man who always followed the inspirations of his heart. In the days following his demise, I heard several people say, “I feel like I’ve lost my earthly father once again”. Yes, his return to heaven is a loss for us. But he will continue to accompany and intercede for us from heaven.

Personally, I know I am going to miss him every day of my life. But I do have enough beautiful moments to keep me going all my life – the way he accompanied me to the airport every time I visited him at the Bishops’ house and how he stayed with me until I proceeded for security check; the sweets, oranges and mangoes that he would specially send with me for Beenaa and our children; his two-minute phone calls if I hadn’t called him for a few weeks (just to ensure that I was keeping fine); the trust he had in me; the way he took care of me on our long journeys around the world; the way he graciously invited me to be part of his own family; the several occasions when I was blessed to be felicitated by him with suitable and moments; the way he prayed and danced with joy in Uganda while celebrating my 25th wedding anniversary; the memories go on and on.

‘Pithave’, we are going to miss you. But we are glad that you are in your Father’s house. On that ‘Master’s night’, when you met your Master face to face, you would have said like St. Paul, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” Today, we too run the race not knowing when the Master comes. Please pray for us, that in following your footsteps, we may say the same words when we meet our Master face to face. Amen.
ARCHBISHOP ABRAHAM WAS THE YOUNGEST PRELATE IN INDIA TO BE ORDAINED A BISHOP AT THE AGE OF 34, AND THE 100TH INDIAN BISHOP. AT EVERY STAGE OF HIS LIFE HE WAS BLESSED THUS WITH SPECIAL GRACES MANY TIMES OVER. HERE’S A QUICK Glimpse at the HigHPOINTS OF A LIFE LIVED FULLY FOR THE LORD.

BORN
5 JUNE 1943

To a devout couple Lukose & Threslamma Vinuthakulangara in a village called Kallara in the district of Kottayam, Kerala. He was the fourth child of his parents and had nine siblings.

ORDAINED
28 OCTOBER 1969

His basic studies were done in NSS High School Kallara, after which he set his eyes towards North India desiring to become a missionary for Christ. After his B.A. from Sagar University, M.P. and his theology and philosophy studies from St. Charles Seminary, Nagpur, he received sacred ordination at the hands of His Excellency Late Rt. Rev. Kuriakose Kunnacherry bishop of Kottayam on 28th October 1969.

CONSECRIATED
AS BISHOP OF KHANDWA IN M.P.
13 JULY 1977

At the age of 34 he was appointed by Blessed Paul VI to be Bishop of the newly erected Diocese of Khandwa in M.P. He was the youngest prelate in India and had the distinction of being the 100th Bishop of the Indian Catholic Hierarchy which was created in 1886. The Diocese of Khandwa grew in leaps and bounds under his dynamic leadership. New missions were established, institutions sprang up, giving the diocese of Khandwa a missionary identity. He was a pioneer in interreligious dialogue, building bridges with people of different faiths.

DEMISE
19 APRIL 2018

He was active in the Lord’s work till the very last day and peacefully entered into eternal rest, ensuring a fervent intercessor in heaven for our mission and our movement.

TIMES OF GRACE

He was instrumental in establishing a commission for the youth in India and became its first Chairperson in 1986. He was also the Chairperson of the Western Region Bishop’s Council from 1998 to 2004, which included the states of Goa, Maharashtra and Gujarat. The responsibility which he loved and enjoyed the most was to be the Ecclesiastical Advisor to Jesus Youth. He would often say “I am a Jesus Youth”. He had the privilege of meeting five popes and two saints on many occasions. He was instrumental in establishing the 40 hours Eucharistic adoration to celebrate the Solemnity of Christ the King and encouraged the establishment of Eucharistic adoration chapels. An admirer of Pope Francis, he was granted the blessing of meeting him for the last time as recently as 4th April 2018.

INSTALLATION
AS ARCHBISHOP OF NAGPUR
22 APRIL 1998

Archbishop Abraham led the Archdiocese of Nagpur for 23 long years. He was true to his Motto “Radiating Christ’s Light”. Being a missionary at heart, his first act was to meet the shortage of priests. During his time as Archbishop of Nagpur he ordained 36 priests for the Archdiocese. He invited 53 missionary congregations of men and women religious to give thrust to missionary activities of the diocese.
The Lord gave Archbishop Abraham Viruthakulangara the grace to be fully alive and active until his very final moments. The previous night saw him in the capital of the country, in the midst of other bishops and leaders of the church at the forefront of a public rally seeking justice for the family of a child. As always, the next day he had an early morning flight to catch. By 5 a.m. when the cab driver arrived, knocking on his door, he had already bid goodbye to this world – peacefully, in his sleep.

Later his body was taken to the Holy Family Hospital where a cardiac arrest was certified as the cause of his death. His mortal remains were kept for a brief exposition in Sacred Heart Cathedral, New Delhi and then shifted to his home diocese, Nagpur. This was followed by a public veneration for the next four days in the Archdiocesan Pastoral Centre. Bishops, national political leaders, state dignitaries and various religious heads and faithful paid tribute to the late prelate – a testament to his influence and relationships across diverse communities.

There was a great outpouring of love and grief over the next few days until his funeral. On the 23rd of April, the day of the funeral, the mortal remains of the Archbishop were shifted to SFS Cathedral Church, Nagpur, where arrangements were made for public veneration and live video on online platforms. More than 10,000 people travelled from different parts of India and the world to pay tribute to their beloved Archbishop.

The solemn funeral mass and the burial service were led by His Beatitude Moran Mor Baselios Cardinal Cleemis, Major Archbishop-Catholicos of the Malankara Catholic Church, His Beatitude Mar George Cardinal Alencherry, Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church and His Grace Archbishop Philip Neri, Patriarch of East Indies & Archbishop of Goa. Besides the members of the Archbishop’s own family and relatives, almost 50 bishops along with many priests, religious, superior generals and provincials and thousands of men and women whose lives he had touched were present for the final mass. The body of the Archbishop was laid to rest in SFS Cathedral Church, Nagpur, the city that was blessed by his mission.
It was a crowded, solemn, funeral ceremony. Thousands from across the country had gathered around to pay their final respects to the Archbishop of Nagpur. And there I was in the midst of the crowd, eagerly waiting to offer a kiss of farewell to the man who lay so peacefully before me. As I stood there, the numerous expressions of love, peace and comfort that I had experienced from the Archbishop were flashing through my mind. Suddenly, as my eyes clouded over with tears, I realized that this kiss of farewell would be my final response to the countless hugs, kisses and embraces that he had showered on me over the years.

While writing this is painful and difficult, I feel it is the least I can offer as a tribute to him at the moment. Somehow, though I least deserved it, I realise that I had been blessed with the privilege of experiencing an inspiring, life-changing personal relationship with the Archbishop across these years. Now all I can do is cherish it deeply for the rest of my life.

My first interactions with the Archbishop were in my official capacity as National Coordinator of the Jesus Youth in India. It was a difficult time for the movement and we were seeking the help of the CBCI to develop a process for direct accountability to the bishops. Then out of the blue, the Lord providentially sent our Archbishop as a true shepherd and guide. Gradually, his presence instilled courage in us and deepened our love for the Church. His mature, fatherly advice and guidance helped us to persevere, and in the course of time, place our movement at the heart of the Church.

In a short while, as we interacted, he drew me closer and his affection and care transformed our formal relationship into a joyful, personal one. In fact, the Archbishop was never a man of formalities. He always spoke and acted from the depth of his heart. Though he was one of the most approachable of all bishops, he perhaps let...
me have an extra bit of freedom with him. He practically became a father to me, with his concern and care for everything I did. He let me call him at any time, day or night and he would always respond. Mostly I would be calling him for official matters of the movement. The Archbishop would deal with these issues quickly and invariably switch over to a personal conversation, enquiring about me, my family and about what was happening in our lives. Each time, I would be surprised that he knew everyone of us by name.

Often, as we travelled together or were involved in Jesus Youth programmes, the Archbishop would allow me into his room as he packed his bag for the journey. Each time, I would be touched by his simplicity and ordinaries. He had very few personal belongings and all of them would fit easily into a small bag. A large part of his bag would be filled with sweets and little gifts from Nagpur which he would give away to those he met on his journey. On my last visit, I came back home with a mango treat that he had sent specially for my wife, Deepa - a gesture that she remembers and treasures. I have often had the privilege of sharing meals with the Bishop - he would eat very little and, like a concerned mother, he'd turn his attention to whether I was eating enough. Forgetting about himself, he would be peeling and cutting fruits for me. Once, as we were travelling, the bishop let me share a meal from his own plate.

Today, as I think back, I am overwhelmed by the privilege and the love that God let me experience through the Archbishop.

When the Archbishop visited my home, he came as a family member, not as a visitor. Once, when he stayed over, he spent all the time talking and laughing with the family, joyfully accepting the limited facilities in my small house. He would always insist that we should not prepare anything special for him. “I am happy and more comfortable eating what you eat at home,” he would say. My family and the neighbourhood were deeply touched by his loving presence and humility.

Like a child with his loving father, I knew I could speak about anything with the Archbishop. Twice in my life, as I underwent extremely difficult and painful situations, His Grace took the time to sit with me, listened to me carefully and comforted me with his fatherly love. Somehow, he could always bring in a new angle to any situation - bringing hope and comfort. Recently, as I started a new business, he wanted very much to come by our office. Finally in the midst of a busy schedule, he travelled at dawn to reach our office at 6.30 a.m., to pray and bless the place before he continued his journey to catch the first flight. Such was his concern that he always set aside his personal comforts to be there for me.

Somehow, in time, he began to consider us as part of his own family. In fact, it was such a privilege, as we were often invited to the private functions at his ancestral home in Kallara. Over the years, we drew close to the family and they to us – in fact, each time the Bishop came down we would be part of his family gatherings. As some of his nieces and nephews were already part of the movement, the Archbishop thought of us in the Jesus Youth too as a part of his family. I was deeply moved when, after the funeral of the Archbishop, his brother, with tears in his eyes, reminded me that I was always welcome in their house, and that I shouldn’t hesitate to visit because the Archbishop is no more.

When I heard of his passing away, perhaps for the first time in my life, I went blank, not knowing how to respond to the news. I am still coming to terms with the reality that he is no more on earth but watching over me from above. During the funeral, Most Rev. Bishop Lumen Monteiro of Agarthala said, “Archbishop Abraham was your father, your grandfather, your everything!” I know he was talking about the Jesus Youth movement and what he said is certainly true. But in my grieving heart, in gratefulness, I echoed these words, for that’s just what he was to me.

Fr Abraham Pallivathukal SJ
Kerala, India

Former International Co-ordinator of Jesus Youth
My close association with Archbishop Abraham began when he prayed over me and appointed me as the National Chaplain of Jesus Youth, India, in 2007. Although I had had very few interactions with him before that, when he prayed over me, he looked into my eyes and said, “You are to shepherd the Movement,” I was in tears. I was moved by the confidence and courage he instilled in me. A decade later I can still recall his elevating presence with deep sentiments.

In 2016, while in Uganda, Africa, for the Jesus Youth trainings and meetings, His Grace shared an anecdote from his journey to Uganda to be with us. While on the flight he befriended one of the cabin crew members and came to know that though he was born and raised a Catholic, in recent years he had stopped going to Church. His Grace spoke with him for a bit and concluded his conversation with a little prayer, gifting him pictures and medals of St. Teresa of Calcutta. The man was so moved by the loving and motivating presence of the Archbishop, that he promised he would go back to the Church that weekend.

His Grace’s words carried wisdom and weight and he was uninhibited when it came to expressing his thoughts and inspirations at any meeting with any of the dignitaries present. Everyone marvelled at the Archbishop’s spirit of freedom to speak his mind clearly and persuasively at every meeting.

Certainly, we will miss him terribly at every Jesus Youth event. Yet I am confident that his spiritual presence will now be more powerful than ever before, going beyond barriers and boundaries, reaching every heart across the world.

Fr Bitaju Mathew, O.Ss.T.
Former Chaplain of the Jesus Youth International Council, presently Chaplain of the International Formation team.

Archbishop Abraham identified himself with the ‘poor’ Jesus in his simplicity and followed him as the “poor of the Lord” (Ps. 34:6). This simplicity radiated through every aspect of his life. My first encounter with him was in Köln, Germany, when he visited his sister, Elamma and her family. I couldn’t understand how such a senior Archbishop could walk, talk, dress and behave like ‘ordinary laity’. He enjoyed spending time with people, dined with them, cracked jokes, and interacted with every one like an ‘ordinary’ person. His visits were always a ‘festive occasion’ for everyone around Rondorf [Köln]. His heart was full of the compassion and humility of Jesus. I experienced him as a great Shepherd, who walked on the ground with his sheep and his life bore the fragrance of the soil, because he humbled and identified himself with his Master. I cherish all those moments with ‘Pithavu’ as a precious time of learning how to be humble like Jesus.

Fr Ajy Jacob CMI, Germany

My first meeting with Archbishop Abraham on 19th June 1988 is still fresh in my memory. After my philosophical studies at St. Charles’ Seminary, Nagpur, I was sent to Khandwa diocese for my regency. I arrived at the Bishops’ house during lunchtime and was invited to join the priests and visitors for lunch. I asked the person seated on my right, “Where’s the bishop?” With a witty smile he answered, “Don’t worry, have your lunch. You’ll meet the bishop afterwards.” Little did I know that I was speaking to the bishop himself! He received me with warmth and care and would often come to the Cathedral riding a bicycle to meet me and enquire about my well-being.

In July 2004, while I was the pastor of JY Nagpur, we desired to host a central India Jesus Youth convention in Nagpur. “Go ahead, I’ll give you all my support,” was his quick response. Though not in charge of Jesus Youth then, he gave us official letters addressing all the bishops in central India to welcome and support us in organising “Golgotha – 2004.” While we were busy with the preparations, His Grace had had a massive heart attack in Chicago. A week before the event he was brought back to Nagpur, weak and fragile, unable to even walk on his own! He encouraged us to go ahead with the programme as planned and said, “The Lord has granted me a second instalment of life; that’s why I’m back here. How I long to be with you all as you prepare for the convention.” Such was his determination that we carried him to the auditorium to light the lamp and inaugurate the convention, and carried him back immediately, for he was exhausted. Looking back, I am amazed at the way he carried on with his ministry even after such a major heart attack. It was his passion for the Lord and His church that urged him to march ahead with such commitment. May the Almighty grant him fullness of life!

Fr George Kumblumoottil, O.P., Nagpur, India
His Grace was like a father to me. In 2014, when we were expecting our second child, the doctors advised us to terminate the pregnancy. When I shared this news with His Grace, he prayed for us and bolstered my faith through his words. Today we have a healthy baby boy named Abraham and our Archbishop loved him lot. In 2016 the Archdiocese of Nagpur celebrated the canonisation of St. Teresa of Kolkata in a big way with the Chief Minister and Union Cabinet Minister as guests of honour. The celebration was to be in the evening, but the weather that day was not favourable. When I met His Grace, he invited me to pray with him, and the celebration was one of the best in the history of the Archdiocese! His Grace had a child-like joy in doing small things. After blessing my new car, we were surprised when he asked for the key and took the car for a short spin. We then noticed the registration number - MH31 FA 1998. Was it a coincidence that 1998 was the year he came to Nagpur and FA could stand for ‘Father Abraham’? Not for me. I believe God still keeps me connected to him in many ways.

Thomas Ronald, Nagpur, India
We were at a retreat house in Bangalore, participating in the triennial Jesus Youth National Council reconstitution. Leaders from all over India had gathered for two days to select the new team leaders and Archbishop Abraham was leading the discernment process with the help of other senior leaders. He said, “I wish others would see how Jesus Youth elect their leaders. I have seen many elections in the Church. People fight for positions. But here they go about it so beautifully, preparing with much prayer and without any negative competition.” His deep appreciation and love for Jesus Youth was quite evident.

Archbishop Abraham was always known as a good friend of young people. He had a big part to play in building up the Youth Commission of the Indian Catholic Bishops. His involvement with the Jesus Youth movement began in the second half of the 90s. Among other initiatives, the Jesus Youth Fulltime Volunteers’ Training had a special role in making him an ardent lover of the movement. I recall the Archbishop speaking of one committed fulltimer placed in Nagpur who brought a large number of young people to the Lord. That youngster’s commitment had challenged him to take a close look at the movement and he pointed out, “Only young people touched by the Lord and moved into mission can bring other young people to the Lord and His Church.” I am sure Archbishop Abraham found several avenues for youth ministry in the different initiatives of the movement. In the early years of the new millennium, he started interacting actively with the leadership of the movement and since then became a great friend of all Jesus Youth.

His Grace found time to be present for all major gatherings and made it a point to connect with as many Jesus Youth as possible. From the outset, whenever there was any national Catholic event, he ensured that the movement had some significant role to play and he too would be there to give guidance and lend a helping hand.

Archbishop Abraham played a vital role in the canonical recognition of the movement. Though the movement was already active all over the world, the formal process required its recognition in one diocese. In a meeting of Bishops, Archbishop Abraham readily volunteered to do the needful and in early 2007, Jesus Youth was formally approved for the first time in the Archdiocese of Nagpur. Soon Archbishop Daniel also accorded recognition in the Archdiocese of Verapoly in Kerala. Based on these, in 2008, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India approved the movement and appointed none other than Archbishop Abraham Viruthakulangara as its National Ecclesiastical Advisor.

May 2016 saw yet another momentous occasion with the Vatican approving the movement as an International Catholic Association with Juridical Right. During the complex preparatory phase leading to this, the loving and zealous mentorship of the Archbishop was of immense help for the JY leaders to manoeuvre through the intricate ecclesiastical procedures. Two beautiful images from the handing over ceremony at the Vatican will remain etched in the memories of all Jesus Youth: Archbishop Abraham standing beside a smiling Pope Francis who was holding the JY Statutes and the other of the Archbishop standing close to the leaders as they received the cherished documents from the Vatican officials. On 2nd February 2017, the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life approved Archbishop Abraham as the Ecclesiastical Advisor to the Jesus Youth International Council. Another historic milestone for Jesus Youth!

These are days when the Church recognises youth ministry as a “call to collaborate in the joy of young people” rather than give in to a temptation to control them. Archbishop Abraham has done this in the best manner possible. Often he used to tell people during conversations and also from several stages, “I am a Jesus Youth”. He loved the movement and looked for opportunities to join hands with the young and old in it. He knew intimately, the leaders, all the major projects and the core spirit of this worldwide movement and he was immensely proud of them. In return the whole Jesus Youth family loved him dearly. Though his vibrant joyful presence along with his encouragement, wisdom and guidance will be deeply missed, his influence as a powerful formative example will remain. Some memories never die and I am sure Archbishop Abraham will continue as a deep spiritual presence in the Jesus Youth movement.

Dr. Edward Edezhath
One of the pioneering members of Jesus Youth and the present Animator of the International Council.
As an animator in the Jesus Youth movement, I am blessed to have known Archbishop Abraham for 28 years. I’ve often wondered how the Archbishop of such a large diocese could be so generous with his time when it came to young people who were so very dear to him. His simplicity was striking and I remember once seeing him riding pillion on a young priest’s motor bike. He gave mission high priority, often disregarding his own comfort. I have seen him interacting with youth from different linguistic backgrounds, though it seemed to me that he had a personal preference for the Hindi speaking youth. Always cheerful, zealous, and above all simple, our dear Archbishop is an unfading memory.

I firmly believe that Jesus Youth will flourish through his powerful intercession!

Baby Chacko, Kerala, India

My encounters with Archbishop Abraham have humbled me as a person and as a JY leader. I remember how at the end of my tenure as the National Coordinator, right after blessing the new National Team, His Grace called my wife and me onto the stage and put a shawl over both of us, thanking especially my wife and children for their contribution during my time as Coordinator. What struck me was his gesture of bringing a small token of love for us all the way from Nagpur. Though I had gone to many reconstitutions before, it had never once occurred to me to thank former coordinators with gestures like this. Another time, during the tea break at a CBCI standing committee meeting, where another team member and I were to present a report for the renewal of the CBI recognition for Jesus Youth India, His Grace took us to the refectory and introduced us to all the bishops in the Standing Committee with great enthusiasm and eagerness. What an Ambassador for the movement!

Antony A. J., New Delhi, India

I have always been amazed at how closely our dear Archbishop Abraham walked with his flock and how humble he really was. I was once asked to share a reflection on Scripture during a small gathering of JY leaders in Nagpur. The Archbishop was among the first to come into the hall and took a seat right up front. As I started the reflection I could see him focus on me completely and hang on to every word I was speaking. What humility! What grace!

His passing away has left a void, not just in me, but in countless Jesus Youth from all over the world. He had always welcomed me with such love and joy. When I heard the news of his demise I felt like I was losing my earthly father once again. A blessed soul, with his simplicity and pastoral love, he made a difference in all the lives he touched.

Adolf Goldwyn, New Zealand
The year was 2016. Thousands of young people had gathered in the historic city of Krakow for the World Youth Day celebrations. It was our sixth WYD, and we were gearing up for our performance in the Szczepański Square in Krakow. As this was a famous public square, there were young people from different countries ambling around – curiously watching an Indian band setting up. As the crowds were coming in, it started to drizzle, and as we were into our song, it began to rain. Slowly, the crowds moved out to the sides, except for one person in the middle dancing with an umbrella – and of all people, a bishop. Amazed at seeing the swaying bishop, the crowds forgot the rains and joined in. In no time, the music was in flow and we had a full crowd dancing as the rain ended. For us in the Rexband, it was another moment of unbridled joy, brought to us by Archbishop Abraham Virushkulaingara – our dearest ‘Pithavu’ [a fond address for a bishop, which means ‘Father’].

Now over to Nagpur, the heart of central India – a cultural melting pot. The Archbishop had organised one of the largest Rexband concerts we have performed in India. He had made the concert an opportunity to mobilise the youth, to connect to the heads of different communities and make it a cultural celebration for the entire Nagpur. In his own way, His Grace had used the Rexband concert to reach out to a larger community – to build bridges and to catalyse the people of his region. Almost throughout the concert, the bishop was dancing, swaying and enjoying with the crowds. At the end, when he asked for an encore, we were happy to do so – and a few moments later, there he was on stage, dancing, as our drummer played his Dhol. All of us joined in, forgetting ourselves, lost in the beauty of the moment.

Cut to the city of Kochi. Over 20,000 youth and families had gathered together in a massive jubilee celebration of the Jesus
THE ARCHBISHOP WAS SO HAPPY & FULL OF ENERGY EVERY TIME I MET HIM. THE FACT THAT HE WAS A DIE-HARD FAN OF OUR SONG ‘IN THE SPIRIT’ SPEAKS A LOT ABOUT HIM. IT IS AN ENERGETIC SONG – ENJOYED BY YOUNG PEOPLE. I BELIEVE HE LOVED THIS SONG BECAUSE HE WAS REALLY YOUNG AT HEART. IT SHOWED HIS HUMILITY AND COURAGE TO STEP OUT AND BE WITH THE YOUTH AND ENCOURAGE THEM. IT WAS SUCH A JOY FOR ME AND EACH ONE OF US IN THE BAND TO HAVE A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH A PERSON LIKE HIM. I AM SO BLESSED THAT I WAS ABLE TO MEET HIM. I ADMIRE AND FOLLOW SEVERAL GREAT SPIRITUAL PEOPLE INCLUDING THE POPE - AND THE ARCHBISHOP WAS ONE SUCH PERSON WHO HAS INSPIRED ME.

STEPHEN DEVASSY, REXBAND


ALPHONS JOSEPH, REXBAND

ARCHBISHOP ABRAHAM WAS THE EPITOME OF HUMILITY FOR ME. HE HAD ALWAYS SUPPORTED OUR BAND ‘ACTS OF THE APOSTLES’. I CLEARLY REMEMBER OUR CONCERT IN NAGPUR WHERE WE HAD A SEA OF PEOPLE ALL GLUED TO THEIR SEATS. DURING ONE OF OUR PRAISE SONGS, I REQUESTED THEM TO RISE AND JOIN US IN DOING THE ACTIONS AND, TO MY SURPRISE, THE FIRST PERSON TO STAND UP AND JOIN US RIGHT IN FRONT OF THE STAGE WAS OUR DEAR ARCHBISHOP. THE ENTIRE AUDIENCE JOINED IN WHEN THEY SAW HIM.

LAST AUGUST MY WIFE AND I WERE IN INDONESIA FOR THE ASIAN YOUTH DAY. DURING THE INAUGURAL CEREMONY, OUR DEAR ARCHBISHOP ENTERED THE VENUE WITH CARDINALS AND BISHOPS FROM MANY OTHER COUNTRIES. THE MOMENT HE SAW US HE LEFT THEIR COMPANY AND RUSHED TO JOIN US IN A CORNER. THAT DAY WE’D JUST FOUND OUT THAT IOSINI WAS PREGNANT AND HE WAS THE FIRST ONE TO KNOW ABOUT IT EVEN BEFORE WE COULD TELL OUR PARENTS. HE WAS EXTREMELY HAPPY TO SHARE IN OUR JOY AND PRAYED OVER THE BABY AND US AND WE COULD TRULY FEEL THE POWER OF HIS PRAYERS THROUGHOUT THE PREGNANCY.

I WILL ALWAYS TREASURE THE WAY HE USED TO HOLD MY HAND AND TALK TO ME AT LENGTH EVERY TIME I MET HIM. ABOUT HIS DREAM FOR GOD’S KINGDOM AND HOW, AS A JESUS YOUTH, COULD PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN FULFILLING IT. I’M SURE HE IS INTERCEding FOR US ALONG WITH ALL THE SAINTS IN HEAVEN.

TIMSON THOMAS, ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Youth movement. During the festive sessions, the Jesus Youth jubilee song would always lead to celebrations and dancing. Usually the section in the front of the audience was reserved for dignitaries and bishops. And even during the festive sessions, the dignitaries were usually formal in their responses – clapping along. Then suddenly one could, out of the corner of one’s eye, see a Bishop standing up as the youth began to celebrate – slowly he would sway along and invariably join in with the youth. Often by the end of the song, we could see many other bishops standing up and joining the youth.

Finally zoom into one of the several backstage, pre-concert encounters with the Archbishop during hectic Rexband tours at the World Youth Days. Often, we would be tired – with hoarse voices and drooping eyes due to our tight schedule; our minds riddled with thoughts of home and concerns about our families. That’s when we have always experienced the presence of the Archbishop like a refreshing stream, praying for us, consoling us and changing us for another session of music and proclamation.

Often, we have wondered about his love and encouragement of our ministry. Of course, he loved music, and even before he was in touch with the movement, we have heard that he used to enjoy music greatly. But we feel that his vibrant response to the music ministry of the Jesus Youth came from his understanding of what moved the youth of today. And he was in the midst of whatever moved the youth. He wanted to use those platforms as spaces for the Gospel, to connect with them, interact with them and love them. Secondly, we felt his love for our ministry came from his love for mission. He could see the possibilities of reaching out beyond borders through music. He could see music as a unifier, a connector and a bridge to reach out to diverse people – to begin conversations that would lead to proclamation. He clearly saw, sensed and understood the scope and growth of music in our movement.

Finally, while most people saw us as a band, he saw us as people. He could see through the dazzling lights and powerful sounds right into our everyday lives and struggles. He knew about our work, our family, our kids and our concerns. He would always keep us in prayer, constantly enquiring about us and follow our journeys. He had very clear opinions about our songs, not to mention the dances. He noticed the changes we made on stage and invariably responded to it and encouraged us. Though no musician, he enjoyed good music, though no dancer, his feet knew no restraint and though not a performer or an orator, he would steal the hearts of all who saw him in action or heard him speak.

Even though we know that we have a great intercessor for our ministry, the next time we go on stage and sing one of his favourite songs, our eyes would be searching the front rows for a dancing bishop with joyful, twinkling eyes.

Dr. Beena Manoj
Lead vocalist of the Rexband. She heads the Department of English at St. Teresa’s College, and lives in Cochin with her husband Manoj Sunny and two sons.
The Jesus Youth Journey

From the moment Jesus Youth encountered the Archbishop, the movement was energised with his missionary zeal, simplicity, love and overarching vision. He, in turn, drew inspiration from the joy, power and trust of young people who loved him. Here are a few highlights from the beautiful journey of the Archbishop with the movement.
Right from my childhood, Archbishop Abraham was a very familiar figure because we both hail from the same parish. My personal relationship with him began in 1994 when I went to Khandwa for a mission experience as part of a group of young missionaries of the Kairos Community. We reached late in the night, and to our surprise, found the Bishop himself waiting up for us. He surprised us further by preparing a simple meal of bread and eggs. That was my first close encounter with “Bishop Swami” as I used to lovingly call him.

My vocation was influenced by the missionary life of Bishop Swami. Unlike others, he encouraged me to join the Pallottines rather than a diocese because he realized my calling. During the years of formation, he visited me often and I had the privilege of being ordained by his holy hands. How can I ever forget the emotional moments of my ordination, when he embraced me, shedding tears of joy?

Following his massive heart attack in 2004, I had gone to Nagpur to meet Bishop Swami. It was late and he’d gone to bed, but hearing my voice he opened a window and called me upstairs for a chat in the middle of the night.

Then, to my surprise, he knelt down before me - a priest of 4 months - and asked me to pray over him. I was awed by such a dramatic and humbling event! Years later I learned that it was habitual for him to ask youngsters to pray over him. And so I wasn’t surprised, when Pope Francis bowed down before the people asking them to pray over him.

Archbishop Abraham was a father figure with a simple heart and soothing smile, who always motivated me. Once, during a training programme, there were no dustbins at the venue, only a big cardboard box. Suddenly, I saw the Archbishop carrying the box to discard the garbage. I was astounded at his humility. I heard later that after this incident the contractor had placed dustbins on each floor for the convenience of the participants. That’s the sort of change His Grace worked through his simple, spontaneous actions. I feel privileged to have been able to meet him on his last day (18 April) at the CBCI Centre, New Delhi. Little did I know when he blessed me and said we would meet somewhere, that somewhere would be heaven.

Abhilesh Thomas, Canada

Bishop Swami earned the respect of all who met him just by being simple. I remember one of my last encounters with him in Rome just 10 days before his death. It had rained unexpectedly, and we were both drenched. On entering my room, he went straight to the wardrobe and began searching for something. On enquiring he asked, “Tomy, my socks are all soiled and wet; can you give me an old pair of socks, which will not serve you much longer?” His request left me humbled, speechless.

Holiness of life is shaped by small gestures (Cf. Gaudete et Exsultate n. 18). It consists in doing small things with great love (Mother Teresa of Calcutta). I wonder if the Holy Father had in mind the great person of Archbishop Abraham, when he wrote his latest Apostolic Exhortation. I sometimes wonder if Mother Teresa coined the above expression, looking at the life of her friend Abraham or if he put into practice the words of Mother Teresa. Bishop Swami had the extra ordinary charism of making a great impact with small, yet significant gestures. In order to honour a person, he employed simple, spontaneous gestures of love. All he needed was a flower from the altar, a piece of cake or chocolate, a hug, a broad smile, a selfie...
with youngsters, sitting on the floor with young people, remembering people’s names, holding hands and dancing with youth – the list is long. If the Holy Father measures holiness of life in the modern world on the basis of small gestures of love, is not our Archbishop Abraham a saint?

His passionate love for Jesus gave him no rest. He was always on the move, as if he had not too much time left. His zeal for the Gospel was such that he ran to carry the message of the Gospel, and employed all his energies for the formation of young and adult missionaries. He used to say that our mission is to love others; is lived among others; is to encourage others to do the same. Even during the last couple of days of his life on this earth, he gave me memories to cherish for a lifetime. His spiritual fervour was an inspiration to commit our lives for the service of others.

His love for the Church was intense and he taught others to pray for the church. I have noticed that Bishop Abraham and Pope Francis shared similar pastoral attitudes. The primacy of being over having or doing, desired and lived by two bishops – of Rome and of Nagpur – converging in the Apostolic Exhortation Gaudete et Exsultate: “It is not healthy to love silence while fleeing interaction with others, to want peace and quiet while avoiding activity, to seek prayer while disdaining service. Everything can be accepted and integrated into our life in this world, and become a part of our path to holiness. We are called to be contemplatives even in the midst of action, and to grow in holiness by responsibly and generously carrying out our proper mission.” (GE n.26). If so, is not the life of Archbishop Abraham a sign of healthy holiness of life? He never avoided a single opportunity to interact with others; rather he always created opportunities to interact with them. Though he stole brief moments from his hectic activities to be in silence and prayer, he was never found idle or secluded. He was one of the few bishops always available for his people round the clock. His charm of building personal relationships penetrated the hearts of multitudes irrespective of age, sex, religion and culture. His magnanimous heart made him share the stage even with fundamentalist religious groups, for he always conducted himself on the ground of love for all humanity. Through his life he preached without preaching, the beauty of a simple life, reaching out to everyone. An antithesis to the prevalent culture of keeping away from others, he chose to stay close to everyone on a personal level, overthrowing the consumeristic culture of utilizing others. Only a generous heart can appreciate others, and I believe there’s no one who had an interaction with Archbishop Abraham who came away without receiving a word of appreciation from him.

The list of qualities that underlie a life of holiness as envisaged by Gaudete et Exsultate finds its resting place in that of Archbishop Abraham: perseverance, patience, meekness, joy, a sense of humour, boldness, passion, life in the community both ad intra and ad extra, a life of constant prayer, etc. (GE nn. 112-157).

Archbishop Abraham was a holy person adaptive to the demands of the modern world; and this joyful privilege of knowing him was given, in St. Peter’s words, “to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him…”

In 2007, I was super excited when I was told that I’d be placed in Nagpur for my one-year commitment as a JY fulltimer. Little did I know that this would also mark the beginning of a very special relationship with Bishop Swami’ (that’s how I addressed Archbishop Abraham). Although I was originally from a city with one Cardinal and three Auxiliary Bishops, I’d never had an opportunity to meet them personally. However, I never feared while approaching or speaking to Bishop Swami. He was a channel of ever radiating joy and hope. Once, I was asked to travel to Ambikapur for a retreat in the dead of winter. Coming from a tropical place, I didn’t have enough warm clothes. On the night I was to leave, I was surprised to receive a message asking me to meet Bishop Swami. When I met him, he first enquired about my trip and the retreat. Suddenly, he disappeared into his personal room and came out holding something. He said, “This is a coat that my sister gave me while visiting her in Germany. I want to give it you”. Needless to say, I was awed struck. First, because of the unconditional love of my Heavenly Father who had come to my aid – providing for me, when I thought I would freeze in Ambikapur. Second, because this providence came through the hands of Bishop Swami - a ‘man of God’ who had kept his ears open so that God could whisper this need of mine to him. Not only had he heard God, but he had also obeyed Him – giving me something that must have been very dear to him but not as dear as God himself.

Rachele Dsilva, Mumbai, India

Meeting Archbishop Abraham was always an overwhelming and a learning experience for me. In him I saw the embodiment of Jesus in the Gospel who said that He “did not come to be served but to serve”. Once, despite his busy schedule, His Grace offered to spend some time with my brother and me at the Cochin airport. While having tea, in his usual way he insisted on sharing even his portion of snacks with us. After a while, he got up to take some paper napkins from the counter. Embarrassed for not having thought of doing so, I said to him, “Your Grace you could have asked me to get it,” to which he lovingly replied, “Had I asked you, how then would I have got a chance to serve you?” Such a great personality but still so simple at heart! This incident left a lasting impression on my brother and me.

Soumya Simon, Bangalore, India
It was the spring of 2016 in the city of Rome. The skies were cobalt blue and the ancient arches shone bright in the golden sun. It was a springtime for the movement too, as a small group of us representing different countries had gathered together for the ceremony of our canonical recognition. At the centre of it, I could see, was our beloved Archbishop, connecting everyone to everyone else. He would introduce me to many different people across the next few days, telling me about their families, their professions and their lives. I could see their eyes light up as he spoke, and invariably, seeing me with a camera, he would ask me to get a picture of them together. That spring, I went home with the largest album of photographs I had ever shot while on a trip.

I wondered how he could, in a matter of seconds, get people to open up to him. I noticed him at work as we followed him across the street. He'd say something to a surly looking security officer and in a few moments they'd be chatting away. He'd walk up to the formidable, expressionless Swiss guards, and soon, they'd be all smiles. I watched the same story unfold over and over again - a group of African nuns, some stern looking Carabinieri, a youth brass band from Spain who gathered around him for selfies - he would connect to all of them, just like that.

Over the years, I’ve come to realise his secret - he always spoke from his heart and the connection was unmistakably real. He was genuinely interested in what people did, how they worked and the way their family lived. You could see the love in his twinkling eyes. His concern about my work, family or travel, I know, wasn’t a mere social greeting. It came out of a father’s heart large enough to encompass the needs of everyone he met.

It was beautiful how he sustained relationships over the years. While in Nagpur for the Rexband concerts, I met several families, some of them non-Christian, with whom his friendship went back decades into the past. At a time when we constantly whine about lack of time, I wonder how he could be there at most of their baptisms, weddings and other gatherings.

He is one of the most travelled bishops in India, and most of his trips stemmed from his deep friendships and relationships. In fact, he was all set to make a trip to Kerala to bless the marriage of a Jesus Youth leader and spend time with friends and families in the movement, when he passed away in Delhi.

The secret of his enduring relationships with people was also his readiness to step down from his position of authority and meet everyone in their spaces. I never imagined that I could have such a loving friendship with a bishop - to me, bishops were somewhat distant figures until I met him. And suddenly, here was an Archbishop who would run to us, and envelop us in a warm hug - such a joy!

A young priest had once heard him say, “I know my friendships are my weakness, I cannot but oblige or respond to people and their needs”. Perhaps even knowing that some people might take advantage of this, he was ready to respond, 24x7, 365 days a year, literally.

His friendships and relationships, naturally joyful, were always laced with deep concern and love. Twice, I remember him telling me about young people who needed help and guidance, putting me in touch with them and calling back to follow it up. He must have been doing this with so many people all his life - connecting, liaising and helping - silently, invisibly. He definitely had a slice of the heavenly Father’s heart to remember, pray for and address the concerns and needs of every person he met.

Now, when I try to remember him, the only images that come to mind are the ones where he is among people. Images of him dancing with the youth, breaking out into peals of laughter, embracing friends, laying hands, praying for people and celebrating Holy Mass with outstretched arms. Even in the midst of a serious meeting, his twinkling eyes and infectious smile would fill us with the pure happiness of the Father. And that is why, our dear Archbishop, we miss you so, so much.

Sonia M. Francis, Nagpur, India

In May 2000 Archbishop Abraham asked me to do a 2 year Theological course on Marriage & Family Apostolate at ‘CANA’, Pope John Paul II Pontifical Institute, Kerala, on behalf of the Archdiocese of Nagpur. During my time there, he would visit me, encourage and guide me whenever he came there, and even took me out to meet his family members. On completing my studies, I was given the opportunity of serving the Archdiocese as secretary for the SCC, Family Apostolate and Marriage Tribunal. In these 18 years I’ve have been richly blessed in every area of my life and I’m grateful to God for opening the doors of the Church to me and intervening in my life through the person of Archbishop Abraham.

Shellon Pinheiro
A Jesus Youth leader and the present Co-ordinator of the Rexband, he works as the creative head of an advertising agency in India.
As a child, I was always fascinated by Bishop Swami. His name was the most difficult to learn in my catechism class – ‘Most. Rev. Abraham Viruthakulangara’ – and I would be among the very few to gain an extra mark for getting the spelling right. But hard as his name was for us, his life was the easiest and best catechism ever. As Jesus Youth, we would often interact with him and he had a special place for all of us. From my 16th birthday onwards, I would meet him on my birthday every year to get his special blessings. He would often ask me to get him mulberries from my garden and my first harvest would always be reserved for him. Though he ate only a few and shared the rest with whoever was around, he would never fail to ask me to get them for him. One of my birthdays happened to be a busy day at the Bishop’s house and I did not have an appointment to meet Bishop Swami. The Secretary was unavailable, and when I told the brother at the reception that the purpose of my visit was to give Bishop Swami mulberries, he bluntly told me not to disturb him then and that perhaps I should come later when he was not so busy. I was very disappointed and almost in tears. Out of obedience to the brother, I left. Bishop Swami must have heard the entire conversation, for while I was still in the parking lot, another brother came running and told me that he was asking for me. My joy knew no bounds; I was smiling and crying at the same time. When I reached him, Bishop Swami was waiting, with chocolates in his hand for me as always. When he saw my tears, he softly patted me on my back and said, “Moleh (daughter), you don’t need an appointment to meet me. I am always here for you. Whenever you are here, come directly to my office; even if I am busy I’ll always be there to taste your mulberries and meet your daughter.” So beautiful was his love, which I got to experience. His simple gesture encouraged me to be more approachable, to know my people, to love them even when I’m busy. Above all, he taught me to imitate Christ through his life and mission.

Doris Santiago, Nagpur, India

My regency period was spent at the Archbishop’s House in Nagpur. As a routine I had my meals with the SFS community. However, on those evenings when Archbishop Abraham was there, he would reserve some treat for me - a piece of cake, a slice of mango... When I reached the Bishop’s house after supper he would call me and give me whatever he had kept aside, such was his paternal love and care. Once, during my theological studies at St. Charles Seminary, Nagpur, we were rehearsing a play when His Grace came there for a meeting. As he was passing by, he stepped into the auditorium. The director, Fr Bineesh told him, “Your son is acting in this play,” to which he replied, “Yes, I heard his voice, that’s why I came.” I was stunned. Here was an Archbishop who had numerous commitments, yet was attentive enough to recognise the voice of his son. Such experiences have made a deep impression in my heart and His Grace will forever remain an icon of simplicity and love in my priestly life.

Fr Ditto Devassy, one of the first two priests ordained by Archbishop Abraham for the Jesus Youth movement

My first close encounter with Archbishop Abraham was during the Jubilee Conference. I still remember our happiness as we heard His Grace speaking to us at the opening address with great simplicity, of his joy and pride in being a part of Jesus Youth – we relished this sharing of a Jesus Youth Bishop. The image of His Grace greeting and chatting with each of the priests and religious present there is etched forever in my mind. How can I ever forget this Archbishop who, after Holy Mass at my first National Evaluation Meeting, led me by the hand into a group of young people to have lunch with them? While he stood in line to be served, he spoke to a number of young people, enveloping them with his love. He also lovingly taught me what a Jesus Youth priest ought to be. Walking along with the Archbishop, celebrating Mass with him, dancing together, sharing meals and taking selfies are memories I’ll always cherish, as are all the times I got to spend with him. Our Archbishop, our ‘Pithavu’ will never leave us!

Fr Shibu Xavier OCD, Kerala, India
A Shepherd with the smell of the sheep

In May 2016, Archbishop Abraham Viruthakulangara came to Rome on the occasion of the Pontifical Approval of the Jesus Youth Statutes. The city was heating up, ushering in the summer. It was late evening when I got to meet him, by which time I was sweating profusely. When he saw me, His Grace, with a beautiful smile, stretched his arms out wide to give me an affectionate fatherly hug. Having noticed that I had just freshened up and was wearing a nicely ironed kurta, I warned him that I was sweating and hesitated to receive his hug. But His Grace smiled and hugged me even tighter saying, “Let me smell you then”.

The words of Pope Francis about being “shepherds, with the smell of the sheep” could well have been said of our dear Late Archbishop Abraham Viruthakulangara. People who have worked and interacted with him, for however small a while, will surely agree that Archbishop Abraham was a shepherd with the smell of the sheep.

It was my great privilege to have worked directly under His Grace as his P.A. (Personal Office Assistant) for almost a year in the Archbishop's House at Nagpur. Sometimes he'd take me along on his pastoral visits in the Archdiocese. I recall one of my recent mission journeys with him in March 2018, during his pastoral visit to the farthest mission stations of Nagpur, which was 8 to 9 hours drive away. In spite of the tiring journey, he spent every minute meeting, talking and listening to the people, clergy and religious and their concerns. His Grace always tried to find a solution and responded promptly and positively. Often he would crack timely jokes and set a livelier and lighter tone to the atmosphere. During such journeys he would narrate stories about his first 9 years as a priest and how he worked under a senior German Priest in one of the mission stations in Indore diocese before he was ordained Bishop of Khandwa. His Grace always shared such personal experiences as a priest and a bishop in order to motivate young missionaries who were working in the missions in the Archdiocese.

Archbishop Abraham was always available to the people. On many occasions, people have come to meet him in the Archbishop's house at odd hours, without prior appointment. His Grace never once turned them back. He always had a patient ear, a loving heart and a caring spirit for his flock. His relationships had a striking resemblance to that of the shepherd in the parable of the good shepherd, ever ready to go to any extent to take care of his flock, to “lay down his life for his sheep” (John 10:15). Jesus said “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16). In the same way, late Archbishop Abraham was not only a Pastor and Shepherd for the Archdiocese of Nagpur and the Jesus Youth movement, but also a loving father, comforting friend and guiding master for everyone irrespective of religion, region, rite or race.

On 16th April 2018, exactly three days before he left for his heavenly abode, His Grace hosted a luncheon for the priests and sisters of the archdiocesan curia on the occasion of the Easter blessing of the Archbishop’s house. I took this opportunity to read a farewell note as I was being transferred from Nagpur Archdiocese to the Jesus Youth International formation office in Cochin, Kerala. As I read out my farewell note, His Grace was deeply moved and started weeping, and on returning to the office room after lunch, he held me tight and gave me his final hug, which left both of us in tears. I never knew that would be his last hug and final farewell.

This is how I concluded my speech that day: “Your Grace, it is difficult for me to bid you farewell. It’s hard to believe that I won’t get as many chances to meet you! I want to thank you very sincerely my dear ‘Your Grace’, for all the love you shared with me and the rest of us, especially the Jesus Youth Movement. I can never repay you adequately for all that you have been and are to me. As long as I live, Your Grace will have a special place in my heart and I shall continue to pray for you every day. May God bless you abundantly and keep you ever close to His Heart!” Amen.

Fr. G.V. Das
One of the first two priests ordained by Archbishop Abraham for the Jesus Youth movement
Archbishop Swamiji was a father to me - my father in the faith and my father in the spirit. His love was unconditional and constant. He always believed in me, inspiring me to move ahead. He used to visit me wherever I was, making sure that all my spiritual and physical needs were taken care of. He baptised me, he gave me my first communion and confirmed me in the Holy Spirit. He ordained me as a Deacon and then as a Priest. Those were some of the many instances where his actions expressed his unconditional love for me. There were no extraordinary moments, but each moment with him was special. Being a first generation convert from a Buddhist family, it was not easy accepting my call to be a Catholic priest, but he always supported me and his loving presence strengthened me. He was my formator all my life, from my baptism to the present, and even as he has entered eternal rest, he continues teaching me, loving me, holding me...

Fr Sameer, Nagpur, India

Once, I accompanied the Archbishop to my own parish to administer the Sacrament of Confirmation. My understanding then was that we should always abide by the rules. Just before Mass, a girl from another parish approached the parish priest for permission to be confirmed as her marriage was fixed for the following month and the Confirmation in her own parish would be only 4 months later. She did not have a letter from her parish priest, and while we priests were worrying about the rules, Bishop Swami spoke to her and asked her a few questions about the Sacrament, to which she gave all the right answers. Then the Archbishop told her to stand first in the line to receive Confirmation as she knew the importance of the Sacrament and had come from far to be confirmed. He then explained to me, that at times we need to look beyond rules and regulations and become pastors, teaching me a very important lesson about pastoral ministry, which changed my attitude towards my people completely. Bishop Swami was always attuned to the needs of others and their desires.

When I first joined the Seminary, everyone called me ‘Samuel’, as that was my official name. But in reality I wished to be called ‘Prashanth’, which was how my family addressed me. One day Bishop Swami visited my home and heard my father call me Prashanth. Immediately he said that since I had such a beautiful name already, I should be called by that name everywhere, even in the Seminary. So it is as if Bishop Swami re-christened me that day, giving me back the name I love.

Fr Prashanth, Nagpur, India

Archbishop Abraham was a bundle of surprises. The first time I met him in Nagpur for the JY Hindi Fulltime Volunteers’ Training, he surprised me by his warm welcome and wide smile even though we were strangers. Later on I sent him an email request saying I wanted to join the Archdiocese of Nagpur. He was in a meeting but surprised me with a brief response that he would get back to me later. After a week I sent him a reminder and his response surprised me again, for he began saying, “Sorry Linto! I never expected such an apology from an Archbishop. Later, while I was at Nagpur, he used to care for me like a father. Whenever I was tired or dispirited, I would meet him and share my thoughts. With a pat on my back he would say, “Don’t worry, Linto, I’m with you.” At our last meeting just before his departure from Nagpur on Sunday, he shared his dreams regarding seminary formation, Jesus Youth, and his plans for the years ahead. I really believe his presence is with us and that he’ll continue to surprise us from Heaven!

Fr Linto Peter, Nagpur, India

Archbishop Abraham was a shepherd who always cared for the basic needs of his sheep. Once, when I went to meet the Archbishop before embarking on a long mission trip, he had just received a kurta and pyjama as a gift, which he seemed to like a lot. It was still in the box on his table. Feeling the material, he said it was of the best quality. Then seeing the small shoulder bag that I had packed for my journey, he told me that I might need more clothes for my long trip and gave me his beautiful new clothes without another thought! Each time I visited Nagpur, there were 3 things I would receive without fail from Archbishop Abraham - a warm hug, a few chocolates and loads of motivation to continue the mission work.

Another time, I recall we were conducting a training for the JY leaders of Nagpur at the Archbishop’s House. During games, the participants were making quite a lot of noise in the small play area situated right behind the Archbishop’s room. I instructed the participants not to make so much noise since we were in the Archbishop’s House. Promptly one participant spoke up and pointed out that we could actually make more noise because we were in Archbishop Abraham’s house! So great was the freedom he gave all of us!

Shoy Thomas, Kerala, India
FOREVER YOUNG

My first encounter with Archbishop Abraham Viruthakulangara was in 2008 for the Campus Meet held in Mumbai. I had the responsibility of dropping him off at the station. Since we were meeting for the first time, we introduced ourselves in detail. The Archbishop spoke at length about his life and mission and I was immediately carried away by his lifestyle. I had encountered many Bishops and Archbishops and had always observed that their smiles were limited, conversations brief and demeanours serious. But here was an Archbishop just like me - youthful, mischievous, talkative, energetic and ever-smiling. For me it was love at first sight.

Though it was a short distance, Mumbai's traffic lengthened our commute. During our conversation, I asked His Grace, “Are you getting tired, talking?” He responded with his trademark smile, “I am as young as you” and continued talking about his open-heart surgery, how his heart was stronger than before and how Jesus had saved him. I was wonderstruck at the enthusiasm and joy with which he shared every detail of his life with a person he had just met. Minutes later at the station, I was again taken aback on discovering that he, an Archbishop, had booked his ticket in the Sleeper Class! As he bid farewell and kissed me, it melted my heart for two reasons - it felt like we were parting after having known each other for ages and also, there was this paternal love I could immediately sense. It was only 2 years since I'd lost my own father and this loving gesture moved me.

After that first meeting, I met him several times for various Jesus Youth programmes. His smile always mesmerising and his energy levels matching those of the youth. He would make it a point to meet every young person who came for a gathering, sing and dance with them, click pictures, play cricket, eat food, pray and be one among them. He made no distinction; giving fatherly love to everyone he met, living out the scripture: “Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind” (1 Pet. 3:8).

My wife Divya recounts her first meeting with His Grace during the Jesus Youth South East Asian Conference, where he came up on stage to dance to the song ‘O Yesu Raja, tune mujhe chun liya hai, apna bana liya hai’. He truly believed and rejoiced in the song and it was contagious, because very soon the entire crowd was dancing with him. He inspired and touched the hearts of many youth that day. Later when Divya became sick and was undergoing treatment, he called regularly to check on her. His words and prayers were an assurance of God's hand in our lives as well as for so many others who needed encouragement in their situations.

When I heard about his sudden death, I told Divya that it felt as though I had lost my father again. I soon learnt that I wasn't the only one who felt that way, for everyone who knew him felt the same. On 23rd April 2018, we went to Nagpur to pay our final tribute to our dear Archbishop whose presence will be sorely missed but whose smile has taught us to live joyfully and faithfully in Jesus Christ.

Archbishop Abraham was a brave and courageous man. A shepherd who knew and loved every sheep of his flock like the good shepherd, who left the 99 to search for that one sheep that went astray. He was a living saint who lived the Jesus Life and set a benchmark for everyone, especially all the Jesus Youth, to be like Jesus.

Rest in Peace, beloved Archbishop Abraham. We will miss you a lot.

Immanuel Joseph & Divya Immanuel

Husband-wife duo from Mumbai, Immanuel was the former Assistant Co-ordinator of Jesus Youth India and Divya is a member of the International Council.
During the World Youth Day in Poland, there was an event in which Pope Francis was to address the crowd. The bishops were to be escorted in a special bus and seated in the front rows very near the Pope. However, Archbishop Abraham did not join them. He chose instead, to walk with us. On the way he kept greeting and talking to everyone he met, especially the youth. It was indeed inspiring to see a 73 year old Archbishop taking such a step. A few youngsters there were so surprised to see a bishop amongst them, that they shouted,” There is a bishop here; there is a bishop here; make way!”

There were times when we got stuck in the crowd, but His Grace kept going. And because he was with us, he couldn’t get close to Pope Francis. However, he did win the hearts of many people from different nations who, like me, look up to their shepherds and to the Church. He was very much a shepherd who knew the smell of his sheep.

Br Anthony Xaviour, Italy

I met Archbishop Abraham for the first time in October 2012 at a Jesus Youth Leaders’ Gathering in Rome. His simplicity, humility and passion to work with the youth and zealously serve the young inspired me a lot. I noted how he was very active during the gathering, always ready to help the organising team and to meet the leaders. I still remember him holding my hand, introducing me to the JY leaders from other countries and the resource persons who were to address the gathering. When I met him again in July 2014 in Bangkok, he spoke to me and encouraged me to continue my mission in Pakistan. His love and passion for Jesus Youth was truly extraordinary. We have lost a great Shepherd of the movement, a Shepherd who was also fully a Jesus Youth.

Ayyaz Gulzar, Pakistan

Once I got an urgent call from the JY Int’l office asking me to get a few papers from the Archbishop for the visa processing of Rexband members for a WYD tour. His Grace had just reached Nagpur late that evening and was traveling again the next morning. It was close to midnight when he called me to his room. I was challenged by the way he set aside his health and rest, and touched by his concern for the band members whose visas were pending. So great was his love for and trust in the JY movement. On 23rd April, as I was bearing his coffin to the altar, I held up not the weight of his body, rather the enormous weight of the care, trust, time and energy he had invested in me and our movement. And I thanked him and asked his intercession for myself and for the whole movement. That short walk to the altar was the toughest and longest walk of my life.

Jibin John, Nagpur, India

We remember Archbishop Abraham as a member of our family, because of the many occasions he lovingly chose to spend his valuable time with us, even amidst hectic schedules. He was always ready to listen and respond lovingly, understanding God’s will till his last breath and this determination motivates me to do the same throughout my life. The Archbishop’s simple lifestyle used to constantly challenge me. I am reminded of one of his train journeys back from Ernakulam to Kottayam after spending the entire day at a JY programme; he deliberately chose to go by a slow passenger train so that he could spend more time with young people!

Sony Noble, Mumbai, India

I still remember the day Archbishop Abraham booked my tickets for the Jesus Youth Jubilee Conference, even when I didn’t want to go. He told me to leave everything and just go. Truly that Conference changed my life forever. His Grace’s personal interest in an ordinary youth like me and his undying trust in me changed my life. I did fail a few times, but like a loving father he was there and ensured that I got back up. While organising the Rexband concert in 2016, he gave me the biggest of all responsibilities with an assurance that it would make me a stronger and better Jesus Youth. I will remain ever grateful for his undying love and unending energy, which changed my life and made me what I am today.

Mike Edwards, Nagpur, India
Archbishop Abraham, a true missionary who literally went out to "the ends of the earth" has inspired me so much that upon hearing the news of his demise, I decided to fly down from UAE to attend the funeral come what may. My personal encounters with His Grace have mostly been in the context of our missionary journeys within Africa. As one involved in the mission of Jesus Youth, I have often pondered on who a true missionary is. My answer to this question has mostly come from observing the Archbishop and his life. He had a clear gift of wisdom - a wisdom that always expressed itself in a fresh, joyful and authentic way. His wisdom remained fresh because it emanated from his lifestyle of constant prayer, whether he was at home or away, travelling in some remote corner of the world - and that is something that I have personally observed.

The first thing that struck me about the Archbishop was his readiness to travel, to keep moving, whatever the situation may be. Later, after I got to know him better, I found out that many years back, he was advised against travelling at all, following a major heart surgery. Knowing him, that would only have strengthened his resolve to travel because all his travels were not for himself but for the mission that God had put in his heart. He travelled across all continents, countries and the smallest villages in the remotest parts of India. His missionary zeal was so intense that he never let any discomfort or inconvenience cause him to miss any Jesus Youth programme. He was always there. In fact, I have heard so many stories about him spending hours in airports waiting for connecting flights - perhaps we should call him the airport evangelist. Sometimes after my long journeys, when I am fatigued and tired, it is the example of the Archbishop that challenges me to persevere, to carry on.

During our trip in Uganda, he had just flown in and we were a bit concerned about the 800 kilometre long journey to meet the Archbishop of Gulu. Quickly, consulting among ourselves, we decided that perhaps we should arrange a small flight for him to travel to Gulu. The moment the Archbishop heard of it, he flatly refused to travel by flight. "I am here to experience this land and its people, so I will travel by road", he said firmly.

Not surprisingly, his motto was 'Be Radiant' and his life was just that. Throughout our entire journey in Africa, he was inspiring each one of us to radiate God's peace and preach the gospel through his smiles and words. Like Mother Mary who set off to visit Elizabeth, or like St. Paul and St. Peter who travelled extensively, the Archbishop was a missionary on the go. The entire movement, I am sure was inspired by the missionary zeal of the Archbishop.

Like his favourite saint Mother Teresa, he was able to see Jesus in everyone. No wonder, over 50 bishops and several thousands travelled to bid farewell to him at his funeral in Nagpur, and thousands around the world gathered together to remember him and pray for him, each one of them a testimony to his faith and radiance, a clear sign of the many lives he has touched in his lifetime.

Santhosh Mathew
A senior Jesus Youth leader from UAE and the Animator of the GCC team.

It was 2007. I had recently become station manager of Lufthansa in Mumbai and was doing a night shift at the airport, when I got a call from Archbishop Abraham. He had missed his connecting flight to Nagpur and had called to see if I was around. I was overjoyed and invited him over. We spoke about old times together over some tea and snacks and I remember we laughed a lot. He still had hours until his morning flight, and I had only the small sofa in my office to offer to him to rest, while I attended to work. When I had finished he was still sleeping soundly and I thought that it didn’t feel like I had an Archbishop curled up on my sofa, but rather a father filled with love for his many children. He would take an opportunity to be with his sheep, rather than be pampered as an Archbishop in a comfortable setting. In the morning before I dropped him off to his flight he blessed the entire office. It was just another of the many experiences where Archbishop Abraham suddenly appeared to shower his love on you.

George Ettiyil, Germany
A MAN WHO REJOICED IN SIMPLE THINGS

I remember the Archbishop as a man who rejoiced in the small, simple things of life. Once, in 2010, at his request, I spent a day with him in Munnar. After chatting over tea for a while, he began to walk around, meeting and greeting every single person on the premises. Then he strolled down to the small congested town of Munnar and went into practically every shop talking to people and shaking hands with the vendors and tourists. Later, we went to the Eravikulam National Park, where he wished to see the Nilgiri Tahr. On reaching there, he jumped out of the jeep and began running after the baby Tahr, his eyes glowing like those of a little child. He was curious about every animal, bird, plant and flower he saw. As we bade farewell, my eyes filled up at the way he hugged me tight saying, “Thank you Thomachai!” That was the day I learnt to appreciate and find joy in the small and simple things of life and nature.

Of late my interaction with the Archbishop was mostly regarding the selection and formation of candidates to the priesthood for Jesus Youth. “Priests for Jesus Youth” was a difficult concept, particularly in the ecclesiastical circles of India. Had it not been for the strong but gentle intervention of Abp. Abraham, this dream would never have been realised. There were times when taking a decision was difficult, but the Archbishop, with his usual sense of wit and wisdom, would show us a smooth way out. From the very first moment of discernment of vocation by a Jesus Youth in any part of the world, Archbishop Abraham would follow him up like a loving father, wise guide, patient listener and strong defender. He rejoiced at every step taken by each of the candidates. O blessed and happy day when the Archbishop ordained the first two priests for Jesus Youth!

The Lord gave us Archbishop Abraham as our father and guide at a time we needed him most. Now that his toil is over He has taken him back. We mourn, but with hope. The music has stopped but the melody continues to ring in our ears; the light has gone but the glow shines on us still; the body has departed but the spirit remains and leads us on.

Fr Thomas Tharayil
Former Chaplain of the Jesus Youth International Council, presently the Priest-in-charge of Seminarians and Priests in Jesus Youth

I first met His Grace Archbishop Abraham in person in 2011. A year later, I met him again. I did not expect His Grace to remember me and was about to introduce myself when he said aloud, “My Ravi, how is Sri Lanka?” I have heard these words so many times from him since then. He cared for us as if each one of us was “his own”. Another time I was touched by His Grace’s simple ways was when he visited Sri Lanka recently. We had arranged a gathering for the leaders and when His Grace entered the hall, we were ready to surprise him with a welcome song and a garland of flowers. But as soon as His Grace saw my little daughter running about at the back of the hall, despite his age he ran past all of us to meet her [and the girl with the garland ended up running behind him to garland him!]. He then took out a special gift he had brought specifically for our little one - a beautiful little statue of the Holy Family. Then carrying her he came to greet all of us with sweets he had brought from India, surprising us with his loving thoughtfulness.

Ravindha Silva, Sri Lanka

Archbishop Abraham was open to the smallest suggestion anyone made and always honoured even the smallest of commitments. I remember a couple of us returning with him to Nagpur after the World Youth Day at Krakow. While talking about the pontifical recognition and the celebrations held at Delhi and in Kerala, we casually asked him if a celebration could be arranged in Nagpur for the Central Region. A few days later we were told that a celebration was indeed being organised in Nagpur. I was surprised and overjoyed that His Grace had considered our small idea and had organised it in such a grand way.

During the celebration, I met Archbishop Abraham again along with a few friends and requested him to visit Ambikapur. He said he would and asked us to plan something. A year later, we organised a programme for campus students and invited His Grace, even though we doubted he would come due to his hectic travels. Not only did he enthusiastically accept our invitation, he also stayed back the following day to meet the youth, and everyone was amazed at his energy and stewardship. For Swamiji, every commitment was a commitment to be fulfilled.

Arunav Khalkho, Chhattisgarh, India
With the sudden demise of Archbishop Abraham, we can truly say that the Indian Church has lost one of her most vibrant missionaries. As a missionary movement, Jesus Youth has benefited a lot from his guidance and visionary leadership. From 2007 to 2010, as the National Co-ordinators of Jesus Youth India, we had the privilege of working closely with him and being inspired by his many missionary qualities.

A missionary with a vision: Whenever we visited him after a journey, he always wanted to hear the story of each place in detail. He constantly challenged us to move to new mission areas and also build on existing ones. His suggestion, for example, that we host conferences, campus meets, training programmes, etc., in the Chota Nagpur region, was a clear indication of his vision for that region. At times, he would call up Bishops in other regions and request them to support and encourage the Jesus Youth mission in their respective places. As the Ecclesiastical Advisor, he gave us the freedom to walk into his room anytime to share our problems or challenges and he always provided solutions. His experience and frequent visits to the mission areas helped us to build strong foundations for the movement in states like Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and many other parts of North India.

Action-oriented, always on the move: He did not just speak, but put everything into action by following his heart and instincts. A courageous missionary, he expressed his views freely and did what he believed in. He used to tirelessly sit through meetings and get actively involved in the discussions. He was always on the move - people, building relationships, nurturing missions - even the remotest places that had not even been visited before. He made several trips to states as he did for the programme for priests at Dimapur, Assam.

Commitment and availability: Throughout his missionary life he was passionately busy loving the younger generation. He laid a strong foundation for Jesus in their hearts through his simple yet outgoing nature. Once after a tiring journey from Nagpur to Indore, he was about to go to sleep when a youth requested him for a confession. Forgetting his tiredness, he readily agreed. Somehow we could never figure out how he managed his time and remained available for youth ministry while being the shepherd of an Archdiocese spread across seven districts in two states. His missionary commitment was also an inspiration for many youth to discern their priestly vocation.

Inculturation: From the moment he responded to his call, Archbishop Abraham had the missionary quality to identify himself with the people he served. He was very much in sync with their language, culture and traditions - a priest who played cricket with his parishioners; a Bishop who walked through the city of Nagpur like an ordinary man. For many, his presence was Christ-like and he always spoke from the heart. We have fond memories of His Grace from the “Deeper and Higher Conferences”. Whether it was on stage singing and dancing with the participants, conversing with youngsters or being in the kitchen, many were touched by his approachability and love for the young people.

Perhaps, what attracted him most to the Jesus Youth movement was the same missionary zeal with which his heart was deeply rooted. For instance, despite his several responsibilities, he always made time for the participants of the Fulltimers’ training. His presence challenged the participants in their mission planning and his eagerness to build lasting relationships with each of them left an indelible imprint on their minds.
Archbishop Abraham never missed a chance to share the Gospel with the people he met. During a mission trip to Uganda, he visited the river Nile accompanied by a tour guide named Sara. He asked her if she knew the character Sarah in the Bible or the Biblical significance of the river Nile. She did not have answers to both even though she was Catholic. So he proceeded to teach her about them and his simple conversation moved her heart. Another time on an aeroplane, he informed the air hostess that he was a Bishop and asked her if she would like a blessing from him. When she agreed, he presented her with a medal, blessed her and also invited her to visit him whenever she passed through Nagpur.

Whenever he met a person who had an encounter with Jesus, he was eager to listen to their faith story. After listening carefully, he would go on to challenge them to go deeper in their faith journey.

Archbishop Abraham had the heart of a missionary and accepted the call to mission to which he fully committed his life and remained faithful. He was an inspiration for many and will remain a great role model for countless missionaries today and in the future.

Silja Thomas &
Julin Jacob

Worked closely with the Archbishop as Co-ordinator and Asst. Co-ordinator of JY India. Presently Silja, is the JY Europe Co-ordinator based in Ireland and Subin, based in Kochi is the International Director for Mission.

When Archbishop Abraham visited Uganda in 2016, he reflected a grace and simplicity that I had not seen in any person before. The way he talked and embraced many of the youth filled them with joy. Even though he was meeting many of us for the first time, it felt as if we had been together for a lifetime. One day, he’d just returned from a trip to Gulu 800 kms away and he looked tired, but as I was going down to his room carrying a flask and a pillow, he humbly asked me to let him help carry the flask. He said he wanted to spend some time with me and that I looked tired! He shared so much with me that day and I wondered how he could be so strong. During his time here, I never once heard him complain, though I can only imagine how tiring the entire trip must have been. Every moment that he spent with us was full of love, joy and Christ. He communicated to us with such simplicity especially during homily that we all prayed that his Mass would not end. He showed us how a true shepherd lives and serves. May his soul rest in peace.

ROBERT KATO, UGANDA

The first time Archbishop Abraham visited our home in Chicago, I was in Haiti on a youth mission. I was very disappointed I wasn’t there and facelifted him. He consoled me saying that one day both of us would go to Haiti and spend some time together. But that time never came! When I heard of his sudden demise, I was grief stricken thinking of all our meetings and conversations and especially his promise to go on a mission trip with me to Haiti. In my heart I asked him, “What will happen to your promise now?” As always, pat came his reply! I could hear his signature laughter with his eyes closed and face turned up and then still smiling he put his hands on my shoulders, looked into my eyes and said, “My dear daughter, now I can accompany you on all your missions!” That was enough to lift my soul, for I know that our dear Archbishop, being a good father, will fulfill his promise! Now I keep singing, “Father Abraham had many sons; many sons had Father Abraham. I am one of them and so are you, so let’s just praise the Lord.” And I’m sure Archbishop Abraham, in his new white robe, will gladly join in this action sung with all us all!

SINDHU SUBHADRA, USA

I was fortunate to have witnessed many of the Archbishop’s meetings with Jesus Youth groups. No matter how tired or busy he was, whenever he entered a hall where a JY group was waiting, he would have a smile on his face and a spring in his step that caught the attention of all the youth present. And by the end of the interaction with the Archbishop, the group would be rushing towards him to introduce themselves and take selfies with him. One memory I’ll always cherish is the time His Grace came for the Central India Campus Meet in Ambikapur, Chhattisgarh. He had been motivating the Jesus Youth leaders of Central India to take up some initiatives like this and he spent almost two days there meeting the leaders and participants, trying to reach out to the maximum number of people till the last minute before leaving to catch his train. I will never forget his friendliness, his personal care and the impact he had on young people.

CHARLES BASTIAN, KERALA, INDIA
“I grew up in a village where we have people of all the major religions of South India. And in our group, we had children from all these religions. We never felt any difference between us. We were certainly aware that we were from different religions. Yet, we felt that we were one family. This ‘dialogue of life’ is my humble foundation on the approach to other religions.” – This quote from a paper Archbishop Abraham Viruthakulangara presented, epitomises two facets of his personality: a man of simple convictions and a safe-keeper of relationships. This ‘dialogue of life’, which the Archbishop had learned from childhood was further moulded by his mother who was his first spiritual guide and introduced him to the Holy Bible. His faith, his personality and all that made him what we know and have experienced of him was truly inspired by the utter love for Jesus and passion for the gospel truths. Archbishop Abraham believed that Christ’s love reached out to all who sought Him.

Archbishop Abraham Viruthakulangara’s existence was the saga of a life well lived. A life that was true to God’s mission. “It is high time we faced the reality that there is no one religion for the whole of humanity. On the contrary, there is only One Humanity for all the religions,” he said. The violence and unrest in the name of religion pained him greatly. He believed that when one does not have enough knowledge of the holy scriptures of one’s own religion, it breeds utter disregard for other religions based on false presumptions. He went on to say, “Knowing each other, exploring the goodness in others and mutual understanding will only help us to perceive our own religion in a better way. It will only equip us to know how important it is to be compassionate and non-judgmental.” Archbishop Abraham always sought this commonality in religions and encouraged people of all faiths to explore common platforms and mutuality. It was in his search for commonality that Archbishop Abraham befriended spiritual leaders of all religions, with all of whom he had unique spiritual relationships. It was very evident that the Archbishop dedicated his life to share the essence of Christ’s message with his fellow brethren of other faiths. Through his thoughts, his writings, his loving personality and his characteristic simplicity, he witnessed the truth of Jesus to those of other faiths.

The Archbishop’s deep spiritual connect with the monks of the Nagpur Rama Krishna Mutt was palpable when they came to the Bishop’s House on Christmas and other feast days. The inmates of the Mutt never refused an invite from the bishop as they were attracted by his simplicity, which they perceived as genuine holiness. The Archbishop greatly valued these relationships and took much effort to foster them. And Christmas became a very important day in the life of the monks of the Mutt.

The Archbishop had close associations with the sisters of the Brahma Kumari Ashram of Nagpur. He discerned in their philosophies certain truths of the Gospel, which resulted in mutual respect. He spent a lot of time in open dialogue because he could see in their spirituality the Christian virtues of love, peace, purity and understanding.

The Archbishop forged friendships with people irrespective of their religious beliefs and political affiliations. All of them were attracted by his ability to look beyond differences and be himself with them. This honesty fostered some remarkable bonds; one of these was his 19 year old relationship with the former Governor of Nagpur, Shri Ranwarial Purohit, who used to travel long distances to meet the Archbishop every year on the morning of Christmas day. This was a regular feature even after he completed his term as Governor of Nagpur and was posted in Meghalaya and later in Tamil Nadu. Nagpur being an important R.S.S. headquarters with tense social
situations at times, they sought refuge in each other’s company and thus evolved a unique team-work, which was very important for the church in Nasapur. Their relationship wasn’t a politically or socially motivated one. On the contrary they both shared a spiritual bond and the Governor took the liberty of insisting that the Archbishop should set apart 11:30 am on every Christmas Day for him. During the funeral service, the Governor referred to him as ‘a pious man,’ for it was the Archbishop’s deep spirituality that attracted him.

Another close friendship that went beyond political, social and religious differences was the one with Nitin Gadkari, Union Minister and former BJP president. They were close to one another and as in all true friendships, each would go the extra mile for the other. The Honourable Union Minister rightly referred to Archbishop Abraham during his funeral service as “one of the finest human beings and a truly just man.”

“I am deeply grieved at the demise of Rev. Abraham Viruthakulangara... a holy soul... a missionary dedicated to the cause of religion and the upliftment of the common man. When he started his religious, social and cultural work at a tender age, he tried his best to create harmony between various religions and ensure that the deprived get justice. With his zeal, dedication, innocence and simplicity, he won my appreciation from St. Mother Teresa during her visit to his diocese. He played a versatile role of religious personality, effective leader, inspirer, educationalist, visionary and a true disciple of God. There was not a single field that he left untouched... which helped him to come in contact with huge masses to spread the message of love and humanity. His life will surely inspire the youth of the nation to tread a pious and holy path in the service of society.”

The late Archbishop was a pious soul and a great religious leader. He was a firm believer in the process of dialogue. He believed that violence could never solve problems, and that there was no problem that could not be resolved through dialogue. He left us at a time when his guidance and friendship was most needed. He is no more with us... but his life and Mission will always remain to guide and inspire us always.

The sad and sudden demise of Rev. Abraham Viruthakulangara... takes away a pious soul, a great religious leader and a personal friend of long years. His face that oozed love for all will no longer be seen by countless thousands of men, women and children, not just of Christian faith but of all religions... Even as he worked as a religious leader of Christians in Nasapur diocese, he offered a leadership of pious thought to the larger community in Central India. He was at the forefront of the efforts to create an inclusive religious culture that will bring people of all faiths under one umbrella of good thought and action... He headed not just the church but countless other activities of public good... In moments of stress, he offered calming words that sounded like prayers. That was the reason why he attracted countless hundreds of people from all faiths to greet him on Christmas. I also maintained this practice... His soft words, his accommodative personality, his simple approach to life, and his preaching of the Christian message beyond bias made him a darling of all people... May his life guide everybody in good and bad times.”
TRIBUTES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Jesus Youth around the world commemorated the days immediately following the demise of their beloved Archbishop as days of fond rememberance. Jesus Youth communities in different countries came together to share memories about the Archbishop and to celebrate the Eucharist in gratitude for the gift of our beloved ‘Pithavu’. This coming together of young people, families, teens and kids to pay tribute to a loving father, was a sign of togetherness and love beyond the boundaries of life and death. These are a few snapshots from some of these gatherings.