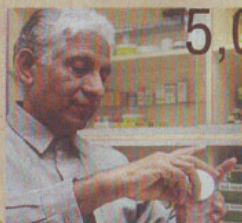


Priest helps the sick using a 5,000-year-old healing system



EVEREND Fr. Jacob Gnalian has treated about 400 snake bite victims in his native India. "All got well except one, which I did not want to accept because it was already too late."

Fr. Gnalian is no ordinary doctor, but a practitioner of the ancient healing system known as Ayurveda.

The Catholic priest and Ayurvedic doctor has been practicing in the Philippines for the past four years. Through the use of Ayurvedic medicines, diet, exercise, and lifestyle changes, he says that difficult illnesses like diabetes, asthma, arthritis and hypertension can be cured.

Fr. Gnalian was born in Kerala, India in the 1940s. According to him, both his mother and her father had a special talent in medicine. "They have secret herbal medicines, and it's part of Ayurveda but not the classic Ayurveda," Fr. Gnalian explains. "My mother can cure hepatitis in three days, and my grandfather can heal different ailments like wounds and poisoning." They got their healing knowledge from their ancestors, who passed it on to them, just as it was conveyed to them by their ascendents.

Needed expertise

"I was interested from the very beginning because I saw all that," he explains. He saw, for instance, how his grandfather healed bad cases of burning. Today, Fr. Gnalian's relatives are his patients, too. "My mother is taking my prescribed medicines, and my brother-in-law, who is highly diabetic, has been taking my prescription for four years, and now he is okay."

When Fr. Gnalian goes on one of his yearly trips to India, he makes his diagnoses and prescriptions for family members who need his expertise. His siblings, three boys and three girls, two of whom are now religious sisters, are all based in India.

Gnalian's birthplace of Kerala is a southern state in India considered to be the center of Ayurveda, a 5,000-year-old Vedic healing system.

"Kerala is the strongest Christian community in the world," he says.

"One of Christ's apostles, St. Thomas, went to India in 52 A.D. and started preaching the Christian message in South India, particularly in Kerala." St. Thomas supposedly established seven churches and communities there, which allowed the Christian faith to flourish.

Since his elementary days, Fr. Gnalian had felt the desire to "serve the people." "That is my mission," he says. Priesthood naturally came next, since for him it was the best way to fulfill his mission.

In the seminary, Fr. Gnalian thoroughly studied the scripture and the mission of Christ. "While studying the scripture, I learned that the mission of Christ is healing—he didn't spend much time in the temple, he was always with the people, preaching to them and performing holistic healing." Christ healed the people of their physical, mental and spiritual afflictions. Likewise, the Ayurvedic approach is not limited to looking at the symptom of the patient, "but looking at the patient as a whole, to see the cause of the problem."

Priest and doctor

Fr. Gnalian's *acharya* (guru) was a Carmelite brother and doctor of Ayurveda. When Fr. Gnalian was assigned to the brother's hospital for his pastoral experience, he got interested in the study, and began to learn from him. "I was under an *acharya* when I was in the seminary, and I learned Ayurveda as I studied for the priesthood," Fr. Gnalian recounts.



Fr. Jacob Gnalian has successfully combined his Catholic faith and Ayurvedic medicine to help people overcome illnesses the natural way

Faith and medicine: Fr. Gnalian examines patient Menggie Cobarrubias



When he finished his studies, he began practicing Ayurveda. He was ordained a Catholic priest in 1971 by His Eminence Joseph Cardinal Parecatal, Archbishop of Ernakulam, Kerala. As a priest and doctor, he would say Mass at the church, then see his patients afterwards. He did this for about 14 years, until he moved to the Philippines in 1984 for pastoral work and for higher studies in philosophy and theology.

He was requested to come on a mission by the bishop of San Pablo. While in San Pablo, he pursued and completed an MA degree in Oriental religions and cultures at the University of Santo Tomas. He remembers, "I came to San Pablo to do parish work in the diocese of Laguna; but when the mission was over, I felt that it was not complete, so now I do this," he says with a smile. He completed his doctorate thesis in Vedic Philosophy, the root of Ayurveda, also at UST, while serving as the chaplain of various poor communities in Metro Manila.

Driven by his sincere desire to help people, Fr. Gnalian started the Missionaries of the East in the Philippines. He was a member of Missionaries of the East in India. It is a religious organization that aims "to continue Christ's mission in fullness, that is, to heal the people through a holistic healing process." The local organization currently has priests and laymen members.

Unusual clinic hours

In 2001, he established the Sandhi Ayurveda Clinic in Mandaluyong City, with the help of his good friend, the late Rudy dela Rama. Sandhi is a research center and health care facility that "offers cure for diseases for which conventional medicine has no effective remedy." Sandhi aims "to provide a healthcare program for those who cannot afford other forms of medical treatment due to their high cost." Fr. Gnalian spends most of his time in the clinic, seeing patients for "as long as they are here," he says, referring to the absence of usual clinic hours followed by other doctors.

The Sandhi Ayurveda Clinic brochure states that from the time the clinic opened in 2001, "many patients have been treated for numerous diseases—arthritis, asthma, diabetes, psoriasis, eczema and other skin problems, stone in the kidney, dysmenorrhea, eye problems, sinusitis, migraine, hypertension, gastric ulcer and liver disorders; there has been no report of any side effect or complaints."

The Ayurvedic medicines he dispenses are produced by reputed companies in India, patented and registered with the Government of India. Fr. Gnalian's Missionaries of the East obtains them directly from the producers. Patients can't get the medicines anywhere else in the country, they are only available at the Sandhi Ayurveda Clinic. "In India, I just prescribe the medicines and the patients can buy them outside because they are available," he says. "But here, I have to get the medicines myself because they are not available anywhere else."

Getting the required clearances from

Department of Health (DOH) and Bureau of Food and Drugs (BFAD) was not an easy process for Fr. Gnalian. "But they have approved my proposal and I was eventually asked by DOH to start Ayurveda here," he says. "I now have a clearance from BFAD to import more than 100 kinds of medicines in bulk, and I have clearance to dispense the medicines." These medicines have been available in the Philippines since 2001.

In 2002, Fr. Gnalian was invited as one of the lecturers in the World Ayurveda Congress in Cochin, India. He was the delegate from the Philippines in the same congress.

Finding harmony

Ayurveda has not become that popular among Filipinos, Fr. Gnalian says, because of the mindset that healing is dependent only upon the medicine and the doctor, with the patient doing very little work.

With Ayurveda, the patient is active in the healing process, and is responsible for his own healing. "When you are sick, it is because of a disorder in the harmony of the body, mind and spirit. The patient needs to cooperate before the healing power will work. You can't be passive because you are important here—you must be active in eating, proper exercise, and in taking your medicine."

This way, the immune system becomes stronger and the person can be healed properly. "The difference between Western medicine and Ayurveda is that Western medicine treats symptoms, while Ayurveda treats the cause."

Healing the body also means healing the spiritual or mental aspect of the person, as well. As with Christianity, faith is an important factor in Ayurveda. "You need faith in God, faith in yourself, and faith in your medicine."

Financial support

Fr. Gnalian has been doing his missionary work practically on his own. "In the beginning, I was told that there will be financial support from the government," he says. But nothing came his way. It's a good thing that the Indian community, and the Indian ambassador in particular, recognizes his endeavors. Individuals whom he had helped in the past have also extended some form of support to the cause, providing, for instance, a venue for the Ayurveda Wellness Weekends he conducts.

Aside from serving as his clinic, the center in Mandaluyong is also a venue for yoga sessions and rejuvenating therapies, and a place of counseling for wellness and healthy food management, and even Ayurvedic treatment for the HIV virus.

The secret, according to this priest-doctor, is to "go back to nature—that is the meaning of Ayurveda." Fr. Gnalian advises the sick to follow the law of nature. "When you change your way of life, then you will be healthy." ☐

Sandhi Ayurveda Clinic and Research Center is located at 414 Calbayog Street, Mandaluyong City, tel. no. 531-0559