

India-The Holy See Relations

Diplomatic relations between India and the Holy See were established soon after India's independence in 1948. In 2018, India and the Holy See celebrate the 70th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations. India's Ambassador to Switzerland, resident in Berne, has traditionally been concurrently accredited to the Holy See which maintains a Nunciature (Embassy) in New Delhi, presently headed by a Nuncio (Ambassador).

India has the second largest Catholic population in Asia including those from Kerala dating from Apostolic times. A large number of Indians have joined various Roman Catholic Orders and many occupy high positions within the Catholic Church including in Rome. India and Indians have a positive image in the world Catholic community.

Papal Visits to India

The Holy See has always acknowledged the importance of India, both in global and Asian terms. There have been three Papal visits to India so far. The first Pope to visit India was **Pope Paul VI**, who visited Mumbai in 1964 to attend the International Eucharistic Congress. **Pope John Paul II** visited India in February 1986 during which he visited different parts of India, including Missionaries of Charity in Kolkata and met with the Indian leadership. **Pope John Paul II** again visited India on a State Visit from 5-7 November, 1999. He met with the then President Shri K.R. Narayanan, Vice President Shri Krishan Kant and Prime Minister Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee. During the visit, he presided over the concluding celebrations of the special assembly of Synod of Bishops of Asia and he signed and released the post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation. New Delhi was specially chosen by the Pope to hold this Special Concluding celebrations [*The special assembly of Synod of Bishops of Asia was held at the Vatican from April 19 to May 14, 1998*].

High-level Visits from India

Several Indian dignitaries have, from time to time, called on the Pope in the Vatican. They include Prime Minister late Smt. Indira Gandhi in 1981 during her visit to Italy and EAM late Shri I.K. Gujral in September 1997. Prime Minister late Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee called on the Pope in June 2000 during an official visit to Italy. Vice President late Shri Bhairon Singh Shekhawat attended the ceremony on the demise of Pope John Paul II in April 2005. EAM Smt. Sushma Swaraj called on Pope Francis during her visit to Vatican for Canonization Ceremony of Mother Teresa on 5 September 2016, along with Smt. Harsimrat Kaur Badal, Minister for Food Processing Industries and Justice Kurian Joseph, Judge Supreme Court of India, and discussed various facets of bilateral ties and means to strengthen them.

Shri P.C. Thomas, Minister of State for Law & Justice, led a delegation to the Vatican on the occasion of the beatification of Mother Teresa on 19 October 2003. Shri Oscar Fernandes, Minister of State for Programme Implementation and Statistics attended the ceremony for installation of H.H. Pope Benedict XVI on 24 April 2005. Shri Oscar Fernandes, Minister of State (IC) for Labour and Employment, accompanied by an official delegation, visited the Vatican on 10-13 October, 2008 to participate in the Canonization ceremony of Sister Alphonsa on 12 October, 2008 (Sister Alphonsa (1910-1946) of Kerala had earlier been beatified in 1986 by the late Pope John Paul II on his visit to India). A delegation led by Prof. K.V. Thomas, Minister of State for Food and Public

Distribution visited Vatican from February 17-19, 2012 to participate in the Investiture Ceremony on the appointment of Archbishop George Alencherry of Syro-Malabar Church as the Cardinal at the Vatican. A delegation led by Prof. P.J. Kurien, Deputy Chairman of Rajya Sabha, visited the Vatican on 24 November 2012 to attend the Investiture Ceremony of Major Archbishop Mar Baselios Cleemis, Head of the Syro-Malankara Church as Cardinal at the Vatican.

India was represented by Prof. P.J. Kurien, Deputy Chairman of Rajya Sabha, at the installation of Pope Francis on 19th March 2013. On April 27, 2014, a high level delegation led by Shri Oscar Fernandes, Minister of Road Transport & Highways, represented India at the Canonisation Ceremony of Late Pope John Paul II and Good Pope John (Pope John XXIII) at the Vatican. The delegation also included Prof. K.V. Thomas, MoS for Food, and Justice Cyriac Joseph, Member of NHRC. They had an audience with HH Pope Francis at the end of the ceremonies.

Prof. P.J. Kurien led the Indian delegation, which included Ministers from the Kerala State Government, for the canonization of the two Indian Saints - Blessed Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara and Blessed Sister Euphrasia on 23 November 2014 in the Vatican.

Mother Teresa

Pope John Paul II held the late Mother Teresa in great esteem. He visited Mother Teresa at Nirmal Hridaya Ashram, the home for the dying and the first opened by Mother in Kalighat, Calcutta on February 3, 1986 during his visit to India. Speaking of his visit, Mother Teresa called it "the happiest day of my life." People of all faiths lined the 10 km route from Dum Dum to the Nirmal Hridaya to welcome the head of the Catholic Church, waiting for a blessing from him. For the people of Calcutta the visit showed that the Pope's first concern were the poor, the dying, the suffering. With this act of love, compassion and kindness, he won the hearts of the people. The Pope called it a sacred place where "the mystery of human suffering encounters the mystery of faith and love."

After passing away of Mother Teresa, the Pope fast-tracked the process of verification leading eventually to the beatification of Mother Teresa, one of the fastest in history as a gesture of goodwill and recognition of the work she did in India. The Pope beatified Mother Teresa on 19 October 2003 in the presence of an estimated gathering of over 325,000 people. Shri P.C. Thomas, MoS for Law & Justice, led a delegation to the Vatican on the occasion.

On March 15, 2016 Pope Francis decreed that Mother Teresa be canonized – conferred Sainthood. Pope Francis canonized Mother Teresa in a mass at the Vatican on Sunday, 4 September 2016. Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of India Smt. Sushma Swaraj led the 11-member official Indian delegation for the Canonization Ceremony. Three state level delegations from West Bengal & Delhi led by Hon'ble Chief Ministers Ms. Mamata Banerjee and Shri Arvind Kejriwal respectively and a Ministerial delegation from Kerala and a delegation from the Indian National Congress Party also attended the event. Pope Francis declared in front of several hundred thousands people that Mother Teresa be revered as a Saint. Hundreds of Missionaries of Charity sisters attended the event, along with 13 Heads of State and Government. Mother Teresa's canonization is an important milestone for the Church and for Indo-Vatican relations, as well as for the community in India. During the visit, EAM called on Pope Francis.

Christianity in India

Christianity is India's third-largest religion according to the census of 2011, with approximately 27.8 million followers, constituting 2.3% of India's population. There are over 19.9 million Catholics in India, which represents around 1.55% of the total population and the Catholic church is the largest Christian church within India. Christianity was introduced to India by Thomas the Apostle, who visited Muziris in Tamilakam in AD 52. Christians are in majority in four Indian states, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. Christians make significant percentages of population in Goa, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Puducherry, Sikkim, and Manipur.

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