

## **India – The Holy See Relations**

Diplomatic relations between India and The Holy See were established in 1948. In 2023, India and the Holy See celebrated the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. The Holy See has a Nunciature (Embassy) in New Delhi, headed by a Nuncio (Ambassador). India's Ambassador to Austria, resident in Vienna, is concurrently accredited to the Holy See.

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.

To commemorate 150<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, a major event was organized on 1st October 2019 on Fraternal Love and non-violence for global harmony and Peace at Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican City.

### **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. Pope Paul VI visited Mumbai in 1964 to attend the International Eucharistic Congress. Pope John Paul II came to India in February 1986 and visited different parts of India, including Missionaries of Charity in Kolkata and met the Indian leadership. Pope John Paul II paid a State Visit to India from 5-7 November 1999. He met President Vice President and Prime Minister. During the visit, he presided over the concluding celebrations of the Special Assembly of Synod of Bishops of Asia. He also 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 19 April to 14 May 1998].

### **High-level Visits from India**

Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, along with External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S. Jaishankar, on the sidelines of G-20 Summit in Rome, visited Vatican City on 30 October 2021. PM was received by His Holiness Pope Francis and had a private audience with him. The two leaders discussed the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences for people across the world. They also discussed the challenges posed by climate change. Prime Minister extended an invitation to His Holiness Pope Francis to visit India at an early date.

PM met Pope Francis on the sidelines of the G-7 Summit held in Apulia, Italy in June 2024 and invited Pope to visit India. PM interacted with Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of the State of the Holy See in New York during the United Nations General Assembly High-level Week in September 2024. Cardinal Pietro Parolin also greeted PM Modi in Rio de Janeiro on the sidelines of the G-20 in November 2024.

Several Indian dignitaries have, from time to time, called on the Pope in the Vatican. PM Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru during his visit to Italy in July 1955; PM Smt. Indira Gandhi in 1981 during her visit to Italy and PM Shri I.K. Gujral in September 1997. PM Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee called on the Pope in June 2000 during an official visit to Italy. Vice President Shri Bhairon Singh Shekhawat attended the ceremony on the demise of Pope John Paul II in April 2005.

### **Ministerial Level Visits from India**

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 of Supreme Court of India, and discussed various facets of bilateral ties and means to strengthen them.

Shri P.C. Thomas, Minister of State (MoS) 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, MoS for Programme Implementation and Statistics attended the ceremony for installation of H.H. Pope Benedict XVI on 24 April 2005. Shri Oscar Fernandes, MoS (IC) for Labour and Employment, accompanied by an official delegation, visited the Vatican from 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 Pope John Paul II on his visit to India]. A delegation led by Prof. K.V. Thomas, MoS for Food and Public Distribution visited Vatican from 17-19 February 2012 to participate in the Ceremony on the creation of Archbishop George Alencherry of Syro-Malabar Church as 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 27 April 2014, a high level delegation led by Shri Oscar Fernandes, Minister of Road Transport & Highways, represented India at the Canonisation Ceremony of 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 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.

Indian delegation led by Shri V. Muraleedharan, MoS for External Affairs visited the Vatican City from 12-13 October 2019 to attend the Canonization Ceremony of Blessed Sister Mariam Thresia Chiramel Mankidiyan of India. The delegation also included Shri Shyam Kumar, Minister of Forest and Environment, Horticulture and Soil Conservations and Mahud and Town Planning, Government of Manipur.

A delegation led by Shri George Kurian, Hon'ble Union Minister of State for Minority Affairs and Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying, visited Vatican to participate in the Ceremony for creation of Monsignor George Jacob Koovakad from Kerala as Cardinal, held on 07 December 2024.

### **Mother Teresa**

Pope John Paul II held the Mother Teresa in great esteem. He visited Mother Teresa at Nirmal Hridaya Ashram, the home for the dying destitutes and the first opened by Mother in Kalighat, Kolkata on 3 February 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 Kolkata, 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 15 March 2016 Pope Francis decreed that Mother Teresa be canonized – conferred Sainthood. Pope Francis canonized Mother Teresa in a mass at the

Vatican on 4 September 2016. EAM Smt. Sushma Swaraj led the 11-member official Indian delegation for the Canonization Ceremony. Three state level delegations including delegations from West Bengal & Delhi led by the Chief Ministers 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 thousand 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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