



PERSONAL ENCOUNTER WITH FR. MARIAN ZELAZEK TRANSFORMED MY LIFE

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ENCOUNTER

When I came to Puri for the first time in late 1986, I never expected that it could have changed my life so drastically. I was introduced to Father Marian by an Italian nun, sister Amelia. I was very surprised to hear that Father was speaking fluently Italian, German, Spanish and so many other languages that I couldn't recognize. He was so enthusiastic showing me the lepers' colony. Frankly speaking, for me, coming from the West, everything was very shocking. All the same, after some time, I could realize how happy all the people of the colony were, when Father was visiting them. You would expect a very heavy atmosphere in a place of suffering, but instead I felt a very profound love. He was bringing so much hope and joy to them, that you could see his love and their love coming together, joining with smiles and sparkling eyes. They all felt secure and cared for, like babies in the arms of their mother, protected and looked after, like children in the presence of their father. Unforgettable.

At that time, I didn't know much about Father Marian's life. However, everything became clearer when I learned of the concentration camp of Dachau, where he spent 5 long years, of the horror of the WW2 and the cruelty of the Nazis, that he lived and had to go through. Anyhow, all these terrible events had the power to awaken in him a very deep sense of mercy, forgiveness and a profound empathy for all those who are suffering. I felt that in this way, Father Marian was prepared for his higher mission: to start, where there was nothing, a colony for hundreds of Indian lepers' families. To me, it seemed that all the persons that he saw disappearing inside the Dachau camp, were reappearing again in a leper's body, that he could take care of.

Living this experience, I realized for the first time, what it means to be a real Christian. Yes, I was baptized, and I was grown up in a Christian society, but only after being in contact with Father, I understood the teachings of Jesus, not

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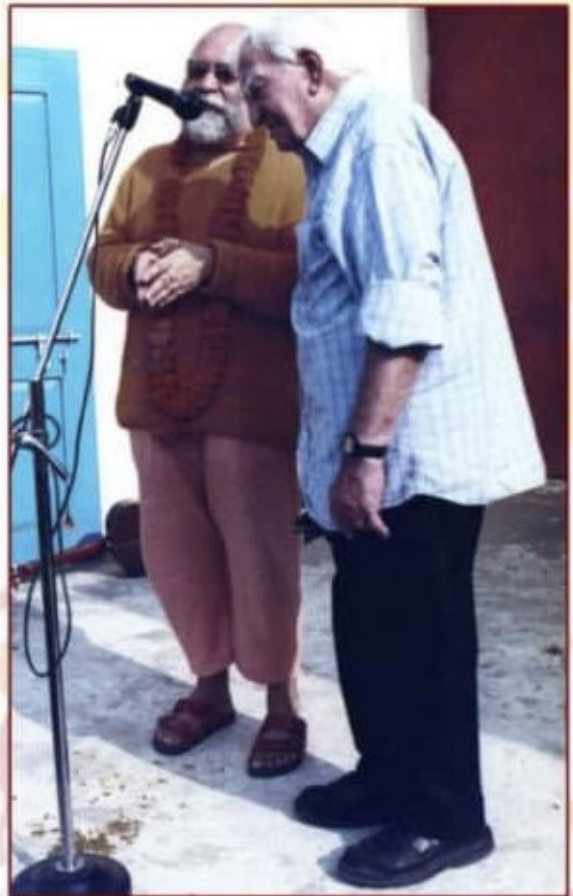
in their theological meanings, but in their direct life impact. Yes, again, I must say that I became a Catholic in India. And since then, I felt that India was my birthplace. Like when Jesus said to Nicodemus: "None can see the Kingdom of God, unless they are born again". Father never spoke with me of the Gospel, but all his life was a clear example of a living Gospel.

Through faith and surrender to the will of God, I realized that all fears of death and suffering could disappear. In fact, Faith and Surrender were for me his first teachings. And then, love, more love, endless Love and Care for all the suffering souls. Father was like a bridge, helping all those forgotten souls to cross the river of abandonment, despair, solitude and desolation. He was like an invisible guardian angel leading them across the desert of misery, aridity and sadness. There was nothing he could do to save the lives of his fellow prisoners in the concentration camp, but that desire to help was now totally fulfilled, spending his life for his Indian brothers. As Jesus said: "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends".

Every time I was watching him cleaning their open wounds, the image of Saint Francis came to my mind, thinking of how the saint was hugging and kissing the leper in Assisi, and how in reality he was hugging and kissing not a leper, but Jesus himself.

After some weeks of visiting his mission, before leaving, he gave me 7 pictures of children of the Beatrix School, asking if I could have found some sponsors to help the children to go to school. At that time, I didn't know I was holding in my hand 7 seeds, that grew into many more projects for the future of the colony: hundreds more of children could go to a new school and so many wonderful things happened later. All was blessed by the silent presence of Father.

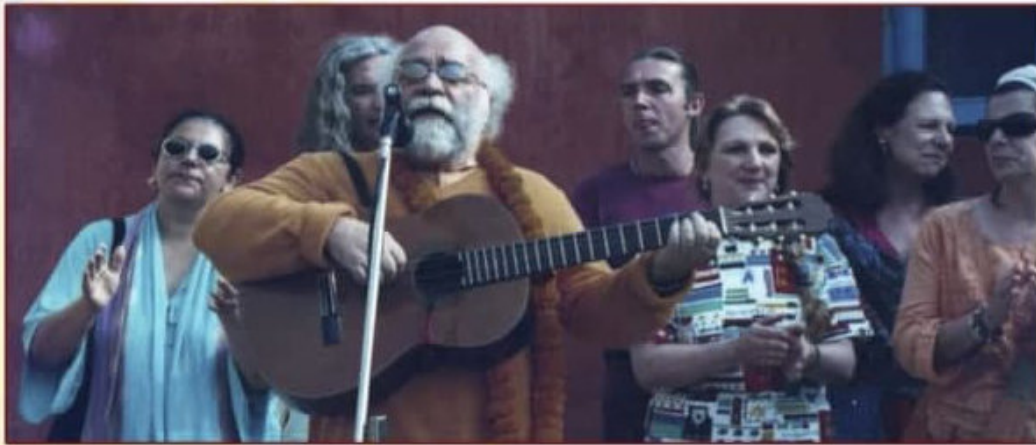
Every year I went back to Puri to visit Father Marian and see his work spreading, and finding always more inspiration, from his life and attitude, from his friendship and fellowship. Since I was always travelling with my guitar, he always invited me to sing for him Salve Regina (Holy Queen) in Latin, that reminded him of his beloved Mother of Czestochowa. Many times, I was visiting him with other friends from Italy, Germany and US, and he invited us to cook a special Italian meal with spaghetti, that we were carrying from home. So many unforgettable moments. Sometimes he used to call my mother in Italy asking "Yolanda, come stai?" (how are you?) He knew that I was travelling a lot and therefore my mother was feeling lonely.





The last time I met Father, was a few months before his passing. He was always telling me about the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, so I expressed the desire to visit the Shrine. He immediately called some Fathers in Poland, asking to organize a visit for me there. Shortly after I could visit his beloved Shrine.

When I reached Czestochowa by train, I had an appointment with Father's brother and Brother Peter, who drove him. Since it was already dark, we decided to meet the next morning: April 30th. We visited the Shrine of Czestochowa and attended Mass for the Sunday service. I was feeling very well, and the atmosphere was very serene and devotional.



When we came out of the church, Brother Peter received a phone call. He was talking in Polish, but I realized from his voice, that he was quite nervous. When he finished his conversation, there was a period of silence. I was looking at them, trying to understand. Finally, with a broken voice, he told us that Father had passed away.

We were really shocked, incapable to show a reaction. Silently Father's brother was weeping. I felt dry, like a desert without any breeze or motion. Silently Brother Peter gave us the details of the event, on how Father very peacefully had left the body among the lepers, after having lunch with them. That was his last desire: to be among the lepers to the end. I realized that we were inside the holy Shrine of Mother Mary, where he loved to be, exactly at the same time when he left the body. Perfect timing.

We decided to enter into the church again to pray for him. As we were entering the gate, trumpets and drums started to play to mark the closing of the Shrine. That moment was so solemn, that we felt, with goose bumps, that Father's Soul was entering into Heaven's Gate. No doubt, that was a real sign from Heaven. *SHANTI.*

