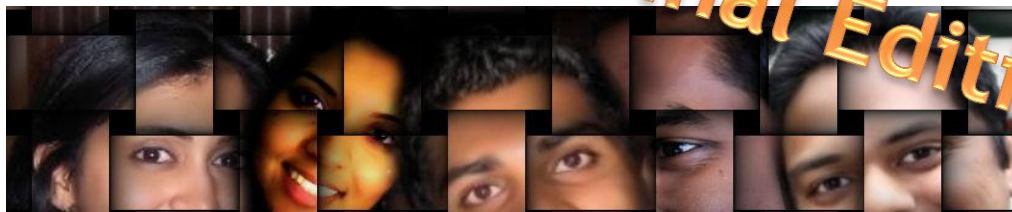


Final Edition!!



THE FAITH JOURNEY  
**MGSOSA**  
MISSIONS

IT'S TIME TO LOVE, SERVE, GO.

**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**  
07.03-07.09  
2011

He brought us from there to here.  
Now let us go from here to there for Him.

"Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others. Faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" -1 Peter 4:10

MALANKARA ARCHDIOCESE OF THE SYRIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA

# Dominican Outreach Mission Trip 2011

PUERTA PLATA, SOSUA, & SANTO DOMINGO, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC | JULY 8-12, 2011

## Majesty of the Moment

by Lispin Kuruvilla

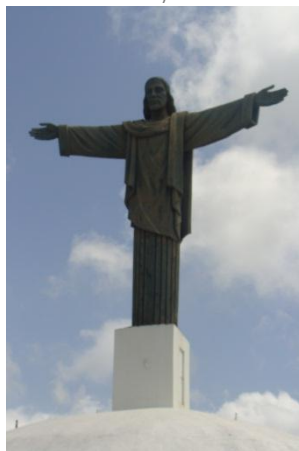
On nearly every trip I have been on, there has always been a moment that is too beautiful to be captured in a picture or spoken of with words. Those moments that are so rare and precious that all you can do is stand in it and experience the beauty of it. With this trip, this occurred atop a mountain at the Isabel de Torres National Park. After riding to the top and experiencing some lovely time of reflection and meditation as well as an inspiring moment of fellowship with our team, we returned to wait for the cable car to take us back down the mountain.

As we waited, a sharp gust of wind started pushing clouds up the side of the mountain; it surrounded us and the mountain as well as the statue of Jesus that overlooked the city. As I looked out at the sight, I couldn't help but be moved by the splendor of it all. I tried to capture it in my camera, but it simply couldn't be done. So I set down my camera and just reveled at the majesty of the moment.

In a similar way, I have found that this trip is like that moment atop the mountain. Though we have pictures to document our experiences, and stories to share of our moments of celebration and camaraderie and ministry, neither words nor pictures

will ever fully describe how our hearts were touched by the people and the sights of this great country.

Isabel de Torres, Puerta Plata



Every single one of us is returning with a changed heart, a renewed sense of purpose and desire to reach out to more people with the love that Christ has filled our hearts with. And though we are preparing to return, ready to share our adventures, we know that we will never be able to convey all that we have experienced in this short amount of time. However, we bring back what we can with faith that, by the spirit and grace of God, our stories will not be forgotten and our impact will be felt in the hearts of all those that we share it with.

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Sometimes the best plans don't work out, even though they have merit. Fr. Dale shows us an orphanage that was shut down because it was unsustainable.



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Fr. Dale shows us one of his greatest achievements - a village built in partnership that has lifted hundreds of families out of poverty.



**Wrapping up, Fruits, & More!**

## People, Meeting, & Possibilities

As mentioned elsewhere in our newsletters, the Syrian Orthodox community in the Dominican Republic is quite remarkable. As a result of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early 1900's, many Syriac Christians from the Middle East faced persecution, along with other Christians like the Armenians. Like millions before them, these oppressed peoples sought refuge in the New World. Groups of settlers of Lebanese Christian origin found solace in the Dominican Republic. Famous for industriousness, these settlers became highly productive and wealthy members of society. A large number of them belong to the Syriac Orthodox Church. Though now largely assimilated into the Roman Catholic culture, many remain tied to faith of their fathers.



One such remarkable individual is the honorable mayor of Puerto Plata, Mr. Walter Musa. Mr. Musa's family controls broadcasting in the area, and his uncle, Dr. Wadi Musa, is the regional director of health services.



Fr. Dale knows these two and a host of other notables personally. We tried to arrange meetings with a few dignitaries but scheduling dictated otherwise. One epidemiologist was kind enough to meet with us at the regional directorate. We offered to explore whether other public health students and missionaries may volunteer at public health stations across the region. The official was receptive and directed us to the appropriate channels.

We also took a tour of a hostel where volunteer missionaries usually stay. The place is under new management. Now called "Kevin's," it remains a spartan but safe place to lodge.

We have discussed the possibility of providing scholarships to public health students in return for practical experiences and tangible public health goods delivered to the Puerta Plata area. Many ideas are in the pipeline – we'll watch for those that bear fruit.

## Translators are Key

Two of our party – Shana and Lispin – know Spanish well enough to get around in the Dominican Republic. Fr. Dale's Spanish is pretty good, but still needs polish. Having local translators catapulted our level of communication from merely transactional to that of flavor and color.

Many of these translators are street people. They all have colorful backgrounds. Fr. Dale employs them, so they certainly receive a worldly reward for their services. But by contributing to the work of the Gospel, they also participate in a very heavenly blessing. Shown below are Marlon, an ex con who used to reside in New Jersey, and Jaime, one of a line of maliciously treated hermaphrodites famous in the Dominican Republic. Both use their language skills to bring help and hope to their neighbors.



## It's not a Piece of Cake

We all marveled at how much a single person with resourcefulness and tenacity

could accomplish so much. But Fr. Dale is quick to mention that some endeavors have not panned out well.



We toured a location next to an important Haitian bately. Called "integracion juvenil," the site was envisioned as an orphanage with adjacent

facilities. The orphanage program was handed off to the government upon commencement. For one round of children it went beautifully. Unfortunately, the government failed to appropriate funds to continue operating the quarters. Now a locked up building awaits the fulfillment of its purpose. Plans are in the works to resurrect the program, but this particular ministry has remained dormant now for several years.



Fortunately the adjacent facilities are better utilized. We saw how Fr. Dale has partnered with agricultural experts from Canada to farm the surrounding land. It's hoped that one day the produce will contribute to the orphanages' self-sufficiency.



A public health clinic exists onsite that underwent remodeling supported by the Bill Clinton Foundation. We engaged the

medical director and staff and received quality information about the areas' needs. We were able to contribute token supplies as well.



Though the core part of this ministry languishes at the moment, other pieces work well. The pitfalls of providing support to the local population are many, but thanks be to God that good still ensues.



**FAST FACT**

There is no significant public train system in the country. Buses abound. Two main nationwide carriers, Metro and Caribe Tours, offer clean, reliable service. The 4 hour ride to the capital costs less than USD 10 one way. .

**A Market to Remember**

After several days of struggling to get Fr. Dale to understand the value of systematic sampling we finally hit pay dirt – an open air farmers' market all of San Felipe neighborhood frequented. Here we could deploy the HIV/AIDS survey instrument in a manner consistent with generating valid results.



It's perfect – open, but with cooperative shopkeepers (with electricity) that are willing to create private areas. All walks of life come to purchase sundries. Too bad we only had one session here! As we have converted our initial project into a pilot study, a more substantive future survey certainly can be envisioned.

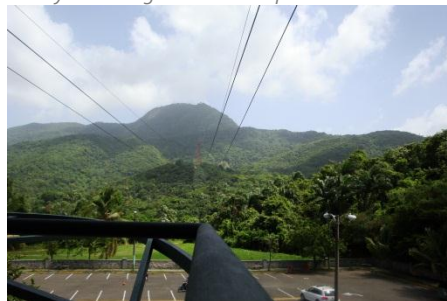
Additionally, as some of us were surveying, others took the opportunity to peruse some interesting souvenirs. A gift was also purchased for Fr. Dale, cleverly hidden in plain sight!



**Misty Mountain**

The Ten Commandments were given from a mountain top. Moses and Elijah met our Lord, transfigured, on Mount Tabor. Indeed, a hill called Calvary in Jerusalem supported our Lord as He saved His creation. Mountain tops figure prominently in many religious expressions. We too had a capstone experience on Puerta Plata's local mountain top, Isabel de Torres.

*Slowly ascending toward the top via cable car*



Fr. Dale dropped us off to take care of some pressing business, so we braved the cable car up the mountain alone. Once afoot we were impressed by the imposing figure of Christ with outstretched arms, welcoming us to explore this national park.



The scenery was breathtaking. We took several photos, some quite playful, and hiked around for a bit. Suddenly we found ourselves in a clearing where Dn. Zach conducted a Bible study focusing upon faith's foundations and incorporating the wonder of our natural surroundings.



Afterward we dispersed and took about 20 minutes to reflect upon the totality of our experiences. We rejoiced in God for the small things we had accomplished. We also gave thanks that our Lord was reshaping our perspective as consumers and givers.



As we prepared to return to ground level the cable car operators initiated a weather delay procedure. God was not through with us yet! As Lispin and Shana write about, a powerful wind, clouds, and mist came over the mountain, granting us a taste of the majesty with which our planet is endowed.

*The engulfing mist & cloud*



### Gift That Cuts to the Bone

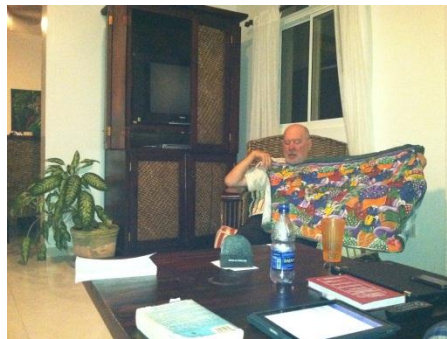
Thursday came too quickly. We were saddened that our evening fellowships would conclude after Thursday prayers. These times truly fed us with heavenly bread. Our esteem for each other as fellow sojourners grew tremendously during song and sharing.

As we were preparing for prayers, Fr. Dale shocked us with an extraordinary presentation. He displayed a pouch with the seal of Mor Athanasius Samuel, who ordained Fr. Dale into the priesthood, that contained a precious relic. Inside was a section of leg bone from a monk who died under Mor Gabriel Monastery in southern Turkey. The monk was seeking refuge from Tamerlane (c.1401), who mercilessly killed those that stood between him and

Europe. This monk, along with 400 or so others, suffocated in the caves under Mor Gabriel while under siege from fire and smoke.

Fr. Dale was granted permission to remove this piece from the unnamed monk's remains as a precious holy relic. Fr. Dale believes this relic directly underscores his motivation to give his life for the community he is called to serve.

To commemorate the visit of a Syriac Orthodox group (only the second to do so in the 8 year/ 2000+ volunteer history of Dominican Outreach), Fr. Dale shaved off a piece of this bone for each of us. He is so grateful for Orthodox company. It is hoped that this gift will be a constant reminder that we should remember our stay with prayers and continued involvement.



Later in the evening we were able to present to Fr. Dale our marketplace gift. Fr. Dale seems fascinated by Haitian art, especially the notion that the Haitians see themselves as faceless and void. We presented a colorful sample which seemed to evoke deep satisfaction.

### The Crown Jewels

A few miles away from the area's airport is a miraculous little village. On Friday, our last scheduled mission day, we were granted the chance to tour this remarkable place.

*The entrance to the village*



Dubbed "Ascension Village," the community is a result of a close partnership between several faith based ministries. Inhabitants once used to live in the nearby shanty town. These used to live without ever hoping to break the grip of extreme poverty. After passing through a selection process, each family was given charge of a small house.



A health clinic, a church, retail space, and agricultural sections were all built. Running water and electricity is plentiful. Most homes have indoor plumbing. Children play in the streets instead of unsanitary waste. Local business contributes to a growing economy. To be sure, these people are by no means well off, but they have new space to deploy their skills and build a better future.



Fr. Dale's specific contribution was to build a school for the neighborhood. Operations are now run by a separate mission team, but Dominican Outreach constructed the multi-classroom, fully finished and furnished structure. What a joy to know that thousands of kids will get a fertile chance to transform their circumstances through education!



The United Nations backs the "Samaritan Project" that designed this village. There are over a dozen such villages around the world. Another well-known involved group is Mercy Ships, which performs medically related service.

*A completely separate volunteer at the village clinic on her last day*



Sadly, tragedy did befall the village several months ago when the "immigration police" rounded up around fifty Haitian families and unceremoniously deported them. Some returned only to find their houses squatted upon by Dominicans.



These people have no recourse and were forced to abandon participation. The unforeseen good that's resulted from this trauma is two-fold: the population of the village has become more diverse and tolerant, and the Dominican government has begun to construct public housing of its own nearby.



We were able to buy souvenirs at a local shop from a woman who spoke great English. In this way Fr. Dale found a new translator, the local economy received some cash, and some came away with

haggling experience and beautifully handmade keepsakes.

## Field Notes

I didn't see anything at first. The gray heavy clouds rolled across the sky, as I finally found peace, inside and out. As the cool breeze gently whirled through my hair, the clouds slowly drowned me in foggy watermarked scenery. After a few moments, the moving clouds revealed a remarkable sight. It was Him. The One I saw down from the roads as a t-shaped speck in the trees. It was the statue of the Son. The Holy Son. The sight was uplifting. Seeing Him this close has changed me. Being there alone in silence, hidden in the skyscraper-like trees, gave me more sense of why I was there in the first place. From that moment on, I felt like a changed person. I was more motivated to stand up and make a difference other's lives. From this, God-willing, I am considering to continue visiting the Dominican Republic in the near future to continue the journey of finding myself, strengthening my faith, and serving as God's tool.

➤ *Shana Kadaril*

## The End of This Beginning

With the tour of Ascension Village complete, we headed to the resort town of Sosua for a quick check in at the foreign tourist beach. This area is very close to the airport, and given that our departure itineraries varied, Fr. Dale arranged a base for us at a local restaurant and a final lunch before shuttling off with Monai.



So, our tightly woven fellowship began to disband. We relaxed at La Roca for a while and then some chose a bit of afternoon sightseeing. After a truly amazing barbeque buffet dinner to which Fr. Dale

treated us, we slowly moved to retire at our nearby hotel to await Dn. Sheryl and Shana's outbound flight.



*A poor person we earlier met happened to find us in Sosua and received counseling.*

As our company regrouped we regrettably began to see the seedy side of a third world resort area at sunset. The conversations, gestures, and clothing witnessed are far too disturbing to repeat here. Fortunately, our safety was never in question and the ladies on our team were comfortably far away from any untoward circumstance. We did have time to discuss and pray about these fleeting moments, asking God that He may intervene where human desperation reigns.



On a brighter note we unexpectedly had a few more hours with Dn. Sheryl and Shana as their flight was delayed. Determining exactly when their flight was leaving became an adventure in itself as our hotel didn't have internet and locked up in the wee hours.



We were able to make a timely drop off, catch a few zs's and then drop off Lispin on Saturday morning. Fr. Dale and Dn. Zach headed off by bus to Santo Domingo, the capital, for a bishops' meeting, to pioneer a parish, & debriefing.

Time for good-byes was surprisingly short. Our feelings, however, anticipate meeting again in our Lord's service.

## Fruits of the Day & Flavors



*Tapioca (Cassava, Kappa) grows at "integracion juvenil." The plant is a staple.*



*Pomegranate*



*Beef is king @ La Roca!*



*A stinky fruit that nonetheless tastes good!*



*Avocados. We did not find the California "haas" variety. These were great.*

## ADDENDA by Dn. Zach Varghese

Taking a final snap and turning away from the last departing missionary, I walked alone for a few minutes toward where Fr. Dale was hailing a taxi. I hadn't been alone and free for a while. The preceding weeks were full of concern – would the group get along? Would our experiences shape our faith? Could we really make a difference in a relatively short time? Would all the planning and support by a variety of friends be worth all the trouble?

As I got closer a smile welled up in my mind. We had accomplished what we had set out to do. This outpost of Orthodoxy had sprung new legs with athletes invested not only in helping others, but in Christ's mission. We pray that lamps now lit anew with passion will guide change both in the Dominican Republic and in our own backyards.

Categorically I can report that through the testimony and body language of my peers, and from a deeply personal perspective, the answers to my worries were all affirmative. As Shana put it via a Facebook post, "mejor momento en mi vida!" (A major moment in my life!)

But my work was not yet over. Fr. Dale and I had much to do. I had booked a few extra days in case our research project needed further refinement. Since we had transformed our original survey into a neatly presentable pilot study, I took the opportunity to hit the mission road once again with Fr. Dale.

There was a Roman Catholic bishops' conference in Santo Domingo. Fr. Dale was looking forward to introducing me to his friend the bishop of Puerto Plata. Even more importantly, we were going to try to seek out fellow Syriac Orthodox, many of whom were members of the Syrian – Palestinian – Lebanese Club, a prominent social society. Fr. Dale mentioned it was high time to reignite efforts to organize these people into a functioning Syriac Orthodox parish.

We found our way to the Caribe Tours' bus terminal and purchased one-way tickets on this comfortable conveyance. My luggage was with me as I was flying out of far less expensive Santo Domingo early Tuesday morning.



Fr. Dale and I had a chance to debrief, evaluating all our activities and planning for the future. We also enjoyed some the lush scenery of the interior. The trip to Santo Domingo took 4 hours.



Upon arrival we checked into a hotel in the city's historic zone. We took a brief tour of important sites, some of which you can enjoy in these pictures.

As mentioned elsewhere, Santo Domingo is the first European city in the Western Hemisphere. Columbus founded the city and his brother was its first governor. We had the chance to visit the house they occupied.



An ancient monastery



Praying in Santo Domingo's Cathedral

We had two major disappointments as we made our way through the city – we learned that the bishops had left town shortly before we arrived and that the

Syrian-Palestinian-Lebanese Club was closed for the weekend.



The inability to speak with any Suroye was truly a letdown. We now have a Spanish speaking bishop sitting in Argentina. We were hoping to make a preliminary stab at envisioning collaboration with His Eminence, but it was not meant to be on this trip.



The most extraordinary thing occurred in the evening, however, and it involved paella, rain, and a cappuccino.

While visiting a Suryoyo friend in Valencia, Spain several years ago I had the great pleasure of enjoying paella (pie-a-ya), a "fruits of the sea" dish using saffron rice when most authentic. Imagine a hearty stew of lobster, shrimp, mussels, etc. boiled down on a plate of spiced yellow-gold rice and you get the picture.

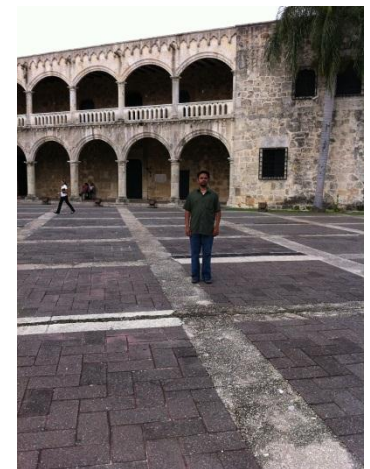
Finding a place serving such a dish inexpensively - and that too in the square where Columbus and his brother built the Western Hemisphere - I insisted that Fr. Dale join me at my expense for this tasty dinner treat. The air was appropriate for

outdoor dining, so we leisurely began to discuss further plans as our meal was being prepared.



Museo de Jamon, across from Columbus' house, where we enjoyed the dish at bottom. Mr. Joseph Thomas & Family may be seen seated.

Out of the corner of my eye – guess what I saw – a family of South Indian tourists! Of course, we are everywhere. The restaurant was otherwise sparse. I left them alone as I was here to enjoy my paella. Our ears heard something soon after this sighting – the sound of thunder. Quickly it began to rain, but Fr. Dale and I were in a protected area so we ate away while the storm drenched our surroundings.



Alcazar de Colon, Diego Columbus' permanent residence and where Christopher Columbus stayed

The rain remained heavy, so I ordered an after dinner cappuccino to pass the time. Shortly thereafter the rain stopped long enough for us to find a taxi, but we were stuck since I was waiting for coffee. I kicked myself as the rain vigorously down poured again! However, God had a plan...



Fr. Dale was praying earnestly for help in digging a well for his Haitian school. Being out in the middle of nowhere, and having the sea a few thousand feet away makes well drilling a challenge. Equipment has to be brought in and engineers have to be careful not to find fresh water contaminated sea water seepage.

Since we moved inside the restaurant to drink coffee we found ourselves seated immediately next to the Indian family we had seen earlier. It turns out the father works in Haiti for a charitable organization that *drills wells*. (Albert Schweitzer Foundation) Sri. Joseph Thomas is settled in Singapore, but is originally from Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu and serves as the director of finance for his group working in Haiti.

I had the chance to introduce Joseph to Fr. Dale. The man is a fervent Christian and promised to help Fr. Dale in whatever proposals Dominican Outreach brought forth. Fr. Dale was the happiest I saw him during the entire trip! Our excursion started out as a whim for a particular dish, but ended up a fitting capstone for our team's entire journey.

I relate this story because it sums up Fr. Dale's ministry. It's not fundamentally based upon preaching. He doesn't even have a church of his own. He counseled us to simply be available. We, as Orthodox Christians, are supposed to carry the love of Christ within us wherever we are. That love must be readily expressed. When we see trouble, injustice, or a chance to help we should step forward. Almost always our effort will be met with gratitude and a glimmer of inquiry – why do you care to help me? That's when God's power and Christ's message can be delivered in fullness – after it has already made an intangible impression on another's heart. Patience is needed, but as we exercise our spiritual understanding it grows and bears ever sweeter fruit for our Savior.

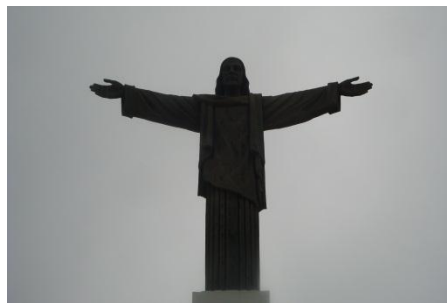
Fr. Dale has developed connections and created all the various ministries you have read about from scratch through the same philosophy. There actually are many other programs gone undocumented in these pages, and perhaps even further possibilities as our missionaries return with Dominican Outreach on their minds. The amount of charitable good done over 8

years and thousands of lives is almost unbelievable.

We saved three fellow human beings from life threatening harm during our trip, again simply by being available. The monetary and time commitments were minimal to nonexistent. We learned to be present and willing to help. We hope to share these ideas with our people world over so we might help spark missionaries within our own parishes. We didn't build a specific building. We didn't make a large monetary contribution. We didn't stay put long enough to organically benefit a specific program. We did however experience a way of life that seeks Christ, holiness, and justice – an attitude we hope continues to be infectious outside the Dominican Republic. Let our Archbishop and priests lead the charge, and may our people heed their calling.

### Thanks to All!

The multitude of well-wishers we have run across, from conference attendees, Facebook friends, and clergy endorsements has been truly refreshing. This expedition was in many ways a reconnaissance operation. We were trying to answer whether or not the considerable talents of our church members could be channeled toward a spiritual ministry of integrity and caliber. We found such a ministry. The opportunities to display Christ's love and develop one's spiritual vision are almost endless. We pray that through prayer and future action we may continue to support Dominican Outreach.



Because of the generosity of our church members, we raised significant funds which were used to defray each missionary's out-of-pocket expense. These expenses included airfare and a set donation to Dominican Outreach which covered our room and board, insurance, transportation, and incidentals. Roughly expenses came to \$1200 per missionary.

We are pleased to report that collectively one third of this amount was covered by donations. Our Archdiocese sponsored \$250 of expense for each person. St. Ignatious parish and St. Mary's parish, both in Dallas, raised a total of \$980. Together St. George's parish in Charlotte and St. Mary's parish in Augusta raised over \$330. Two individuals, Jacob Palamattam and Vibi Varughese, also made significant financial contributions

Individual missionaries were further supported by personal benefactors whom we collectively thank for their vision and generosity.

St. Thomas Malankara Syriac Orthodox Church, Austin, offered to handle donations, disbursements, and receipts. The treasurer, Mr. Regi Pattammady, deserves special thanks for his time.

Our missionaries left behind supplies, clothes, and personal cash contributions simply out of gratitude for a beautiful spiritual experience. Fr. Dale promised to address the needs of the poor with these donations.

Of course, we must thank our entire Archdiocese for their prayerful support. Especially mentionable is H.E. Mor Theethose Yeldho, our Archbishop and President of MGSOSA. Rev. Fr. Bijo Mathew, MGSOSA Vice-President, also deserves praise for his guidance. The Archdiocesan Council, the leadership of MGSOSA, and several priests advised and supported us in numerous ways. Fr. Dale Johnson, his wife Martha, and everyone supporting Dominican Outreach now occupy a special place in our hearts. Certainly there are many others who deserve mention but are unnamed inadvertently. Thanks to God for each one.

Finally, thanks to you, our respected readers, for taking the time to inquire about us. May we meet one day on the mission field together!







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Monai Karuthalackal, LPN, Chicago, Illinois



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