

# Return to Pakistan: Part 2

Stephen Swann

## Khushpur

On Monday afternoon, I was on the road again, very kindly accompanied by Br Christie, going back to the village of Khushpur where I once spent eleven eventful years. Wintertime in the Punjab can be a bit dismal. A shining sun always brightens things up but on a cloudy day the poverty, the greyness, the dust and the cold can be quite depressing. To make matters worse it rained for much of the four hour journey but thanks to the skill of the driver we eventually reached Khushpur late in the evening. The rain had caused a power cut, until late the following morning, and the generator had packed up in sympathy so we were welcomed by candlelight. It was great to get to the community and, I must say, I felt as if I had come home. The cook was the same as 15 years ago and he showed me the cooker I had bought for the kitchen, still in use and with the oven still unused – it had been broken the day after installation. Fortunately, Pakistani food rarely if ever requires an oven like that and they laid on another varied and enjoyable meal.

My old community companion Br Osmund, who had great influence in the village, and also in the country through the Catechists' Training Centre, died several years ago in Sri Lanka. The Centre is now run by Br Dennis Marasinghe, Auxiliary Visitor for many years, Br Damian supervises the work of the Literacy Centre and the third Sri Lankan in the community, Br Yohan, is in charge of the Boys Hostel which is now also run as a school.

The Hostel where I worked was pulled down about seven years ago and in its place there now stands a solid two-storey building, much more attractive and more suitable than the high former stable buildings we had. I was pleased to meet some of the boys but they found it difficult to understand my now uncertain Urdu. I have to say that as the week went on the language came back and by the end I was making proper sentences. A plaque on the Hostel wall shows that the new building was built with help from the Basque government. This has come as a surprise to

my students in the south of Spain who don't usually associate the Basque country with anything like that.

Khushpur village has changed since I knew it. Proper roads and drains have been laid and the houses which were once made of sun dried brick are now made of baked brick. But it had rained and the lack of maintenance of roads and drains was evident, there was slippy mud all over the place, so we had to be careful when Br Damian took me to visit the parish priests and then the Literacy Centre. The latter was in full swing with classes of sewing for women, cooking for illiterate boys, and theology for the catechists' wives. It was good to see Osmund's work and ideas still thriving and, of course, being adapted to new challenges.

The new building of the Catechists' Training Centre itself, which was opened in 1994, the year I left the country, is well-designed, bright and airy. Full-time catechists play an important role in the local church. Each parish priest is helped by five or six catechists who are each responsible for about fifteen villages in their area where there are usually small groups of Christian families living among Muslims. They perform baptisms and weddings, pray with the people, encourage and teach. Their work is a great comfort to the Christians who often have to put up with the insecurities, petty discrimination and injustices which are the lot of minorities and illiterate people everywhere.

In the village, I met two of my old helpers, the hostel cook, and the night watchman. The cook's career came to an end while I was at Sangre when he was found to have been taking home some of the lentils which were meant for the boys' breakfast. His wife came pleading and promised to give back not only the lentils, which they knew about, but also the potatoes and onions, which they didn't! Despite this setback, he was always very correct and friendly and he was delighted to see me again and I was equally delighted to see him. He led me across the mud down the road to see his family and his house on the plot he reminded me I had paid for. When two of his children were very young and his wife not very well,

they were always at death's door, so he asked me to get him two goats so they could have some milk. It was moving to meet his daughter, now a trained nurse and a mother herself – the goats' milk had worked wonders. It is amazing the progress that can be made within a generation if people get a chance.

One Christmas night fifteen years ago, the night watchman came to me just before Midnight Mass and told me his wife had given birth to their sixth child, a girl. Both were pretty weak at the time and some timely help enabled them to survive. It was wonderful to see that girl now grown up and looking as healthy as her mother now does. By the way, if I say 'I bought' this or that, I mean I usually used money which had been donated by the GB Brothers or schools or friends or family; in those days I didn't have any personal money. So, a big thank you to everybody who helped then, the money wasn't wasted.

### **Faisalabad**

The Faisalabad community, an hour's drive to the north, was next on the list. The city has doubled in size and now has a population of over two and a half million. The place is thriving and so are the English Medium School, under the wise guidance of Br Loorthusamy, and the Urdu School, under Br Jameel, the Director of the community. Br Shehzad, who runs the formation programme with help from Br Gregory Ferguson from Ireland, will be the new delegation superior, if that is the correct term, from the month of February. He is from Khushpur village and I remember him well from that time. It is the first time the Brothers in Pakistan have been headed by a local man and, after nearly fifty years, such a development is very promising. After overseeing this and other changes, Br Colin Griffin will return to Australia in February.

Before the excellent evening meal in the community, accompanied by five postulants, I was surprised by the visit of two former Hostel boys, Shamshad and Besharat, both of whom work in the laboratories of the hospital of the FMM Sisters in Faisalabad. We had a long chat and they told me that in their work although the incidence of HIV is low, many people test positive for hepatitis C. I can't remember the percentage they gave but it was amazingly high. Old times were fondly and humorously remembered.

There are two other Brothers' communities in Pakistan, an orphanage in Karachi, run by Br Peter Abraham, whom I met briefly in Khushpur, and a new school in Rawalpindi, run by Br Javed Bhatti, another former Hosteller, who kindly rang me as I was leaving Faisalabad.

### **Back to Lahore**

The long bus ride from Faisalabad to Lahore in the company of Tariq gave me plenty of time to think about the experiences of the previous four days. Despite the difficulties, the Brothers have freedom to work well and fruitfully in Pakistan. They work both with Christians and Muslims. Many of the Brothers from Sri Lanka have been in the country for twenty or thirty years. They bring their own traditions of spirituality and sound educational practice as well as a great friendliness and sense of fun. Their dedication has enabled them to put up with the extreme heat, the difficulties of understanding another culture and the inevitable setbacks. Given the current political situation I think it takes considerable courage for the dozen Sri Lankan Brothers to remain in the country and work side by side with the local Brothers for the good of the people. The Pakistani Brothers, about six of them now, bring all the richness of their own ancient culture, an inside knowledge of what makes things work, and because they are fairly young, a certain freshness and creative unpredictability. I am now an outsider, from the religious life and from the country, but I was impressed by them all and I would like to thank them for their welcome, for making me feel once again like one of the family, for sharing so much of their lives and ideas and for listening to my comments and stories.

After a quiet night and a pleasant breakfast at the convent in Lahore, I went out with Pervez and another driver to have a walk in the Botanical Gardens near the centre of the city, opposite the Governor's House. Created in 1860 and originally known as Lawrence Gardens, after the first viceroy of India, Sir John Lawrence, they survive now as the Jinnah Gardens, after the man who wrested Pakistan from India at the time of independence in 1947. Away from the noise, fumes, dust and incessant bustle of the traffic in the city, the gardens were an oasis of calm and greenery, a balm for the soul and a relaxation for the body. At least, that's what I thought; my two com-

panions were not so easily impressed by trees and flowers and things.

That evening, I was invited to dinner at the house of Maxwell Shanti who was once the excellent principal of the school in Faisalabad. Max was so good at his job that he was invited by the Bishop to set up a school in Lahore and also to direct the education of the diocese. Over generous food and drink with his wife and son, to which he also invited the drivers, he told me that his school had been visited that week by six principals of schools in England who were looking for some kind of twinning arrangement with schools in Pakistan. At the end of the visit they all wanted to be twinned with Max's school. As an anecdote, he mentioned that at break time he had gone out to the school yard with one or two of those headmasters who were amazed at how the pupils came up, smiling, and politely greeted them with the usual "God bless you, sir" and spoke to them nicely in English. They said that was a bit different from England.

Friday was the last day of my stay in Pakistan. Tariq and I had been invited for lunch at the house of Fr Nadeem John, a former Hostel boy. The previous Sunday, over breakfast at the convent, the Sisters had asked him if he knew me. "I am a priest because of him", he declared, to the surprise of some. For the last ten years he has been running the communications and media centre of Lahore diocese, producing discs of music and visual and printed material for the Christian community. He has also published a book of his Urdu poetry of which he gave me a copy. It

turned out that he and Tariq had been good friends in the Hostel and they had many anecdotes from that time. Another Khushpur village man, Fr Haroon, a contemporary of Tariq and Nadeem and now head of the seminary in Lahore, also arrived for lunch, and he told of various tensions which had existed between the hostellers and the village boys, most of which I was quite unaware of at the time, which was probably fortunate.

Pervez, Tariq and Mushtaq, who had made the sixteen-hour train journey from Karachi to see me, accompanied me to the airport on the evening of Friday 14<sup>th</sup> December. They were as sad to see me go as I was to leave them and asked me to return sometime, which I would be very happy to do. Once again, with them, I was reminded that what makes life worth living is not material possessions but the quality of human relationships and in Pakistan they are very rich in those. Let's hope the people of the country do not exchange the solid values they have for the 'mess of potage' of materialism and individualism.

Some people say you should never go back to a place once you have left it, you will be disappointed, but I am so glad to have gone back to Pakistan to meet old friends and to discover new ones, to see the life and work of the local church and feel again the warmth of the hospitality of both Christians and Muslims.

The next part of the journey took me via Bangkok and Hong Kong to Auckland, New Zealand, but that's quite a different story.