

Tributes

Remembering Fr. George Proksch

The professors and students of the Gyan Ashram, Bombay celebrated the 92nd anniversary of the birth of Fr. George Proksch on 10 February. Fr. Proksch, founder of the ashram, died in St. Gabriel in 1986.

Fr. Stephen Fuchs (88), who has since retired to St. Gabriel opened the celebration by unveiling a bust of the lately deceased Guru Gyan Prakash Sharman, as Fr. Proksch was called in Hindi. This was followed by a performance of the Aradhana ceremony by seven students of Fr. Francis Barboza, who has followed the footsteps of Fr. Proksch and studied Indian dance. Fr. John Paul Hermann, who is writing his doctoral thesis on Fr. Proksch, summed up his life and work, while Fr. Norbert Hermann sang two of the Indian bhajans (songs) composed by Fr. Proksch. The tenth anniversary of Fr. Proksch's death was on 30th May.

Fr. Proksch (1904-1986) came to India shortly after his ordination (1932). He began his work among the Bhils in what is now the diocese of Indore, using the then normal methods of evangelization which took very little account of the thought and the culture of India. But the uselessness and lack of results of this form of evangelization soon became clear to Fr. Proksch.

He then began to observe more closely the methods used by the Hindu preachers. They spread their religious teaching primarily through dramas performed in dance and song. People, who had worked all day long under the burning sun, could watch and listen to these sermons late into the night, without falling asleep! Would it not be possible to preach the truths of the Christian faith in a similar way? Fr. Proksch found little response to such questions among his confreres. But he did not give up. He began to prepare himself systematically for this form of apostolate. He undertook the necessary studies in Hindi, Sanskrit, etc., studied the forms and rules of the native dances and songs, and learnt how to play traditional Indian instruments.



In the foot steps! Fr. Proksch (Left) and Fr. Carlo

Interned by the British, during World War II, the German-born Fr. Proksch made good use of the time by improving his knowledge of Indian languages. In the following years he wrote a life of Jesus in Hindi, gathered Indian melodies and

set them to Christian texts. He also composed melodies himself, inspired by Indian music. Some of them were received so well that they later become popular songs.

An Indian secular priest, who got to know his work, became his particular friend and supporter. Valerian Gracias, later Archbishop of Bombay and Cardinal. He called Fr. Proksch to Bombay. There he was able to open Gyan Ashram in the vicinity of Andheri in 1949. He gathered around him a group of like-minded Indian teachers who promoted his work. With their help he became the first European ever to study Sanskrit and Hindi at the University, Mysore. He completed his music studies in Bombay, and at the Music Academy in Lucknow. He thus built his work on a solid foundation.

His first attempt to express religious themes in dance, dates way back to 1935. But it was not until twenty years later that this attempt won recognition on a countrywide scale. This was when he staged a religious play in honour of the Mother of God at the National Marian Congress, in Bombay in 1954. The attention of the whole Christian world was drawn to his work when he performed a religious play called *The Fruit of Death and the Bread of Life* at the Eucharistic World Congress in Munich in 1960.

He wrote another religious play for the Eucharistic World Congress in Bombay in 1964: 1500 people attended its first performance. Christian faith was given an Indian garb. The ashram he founded was intended not only as a place of creative work, but also as an opportunity to give the necessary spiritual depth to his action.

When he personally experienced Mahatma Gandhi in Indore in 1935, he sensed that Gandhi's influence did not rest just on the use of certain cultural elements of Indian culture, but on his ascetic personality. Fr. Proksch never forgot this lesson.

A number of his closest followers practised a serious religious life in the ashram he had founded, but he never succeeded in finding an appropriate structure in which to express it. His attempts to connect the ashram-idea with that of a secular institute proved fruitless. The result was that after his death this group quickly dissolved. Nor did Fr. Proksch succeed in founding a school which would develop the work he had initiated.

The confreres who work in the Ashram Gyan Prakash today are inspired by Fr. Proksch, but go their own separate ways:

- Fr. Dr. Francis Barboza studied classical Indian dance and tries to express Christian doctrines and beliefs through it.
- Fr. Charles Vas is more specialized in the ethnic elements of Indian song-culture. His compositions have been widely diffused among the people through many cassettes.
- Fr. Gilbert Carlo tries to make Christian spirituality accessible to Indians with the help of yoga and Indian methods of meditation.

(Arnoldus Nota)