

# Singing for the Pope, 1964

02 Nov 2013

By [naresh fernandes](#)



At 5.15 pm on December 2, 1964, Bombay poured into the streets to greet a famous visitor: Pope Paul VI. “Pilgrim of peace gets tumultuous welcome: 15-deep cheering crowds pack streets,” said the *Times of India*’s headline. Both Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and Vice President Zakir Hussain were on the tarmac at Santa Cruz airport as the Pope stepped out of the plane, joining his hands to say “Namaste”. As his open Ford convertible made its way south, passing through streets decorated with archways and bunting, more than a million people lined his route.

“Every vantage point – tops of buses, scaffolding, incomplete cement structures, trees, terraces, galleries, improvised platforms – was packed with people,” reported the *Times*. “The surging crowds threw the elaborately-planned police arrangements into confusion.” The crowds were so thick, it was already dusk by the time the motorcade had got to Prabhadevi. It took more than two hours for the Pope to reach the Oval, his destination.



Paul VI was in the city to attend the Eucharistic Congress, a Roman Catholic conference held periodically in various parts of the world. The Bombay congress, the 38<sup>th</sup> edition, was attended by several hundred thousand people, including 20,000 overseas delegates. The meeting aimed to project the idea of a “servant Church”, which, a Jesuit weekly explained, emphasised the image of “a Christ born poor – more at home in the slums of Bombay than in the magnificence of a papal court”. It also attempted to foster the idea of ecumenism, reaching for dialogue with people of all India’s religions.

Preparations for the Eucharistic Congress had proceeded for almost two years before the event. Special attention had been paid to the musical accompaniment to the various services that would proceed at the Oval Maidan, which had been converted into an open-air cathedral. Eighteen months before the event, a special Congress hymnal was issued to school and parish choirs, so that they could learn the tunes and help the congregation at the Oval participate more completely. In addition, a 1,000-voice Polyphonic and Gregorian choir was assembled under the baton of Father JB Fernandes. It held several practice sessions at a stadium in Parel.



A few months ago, I found a recording of some of the pieces performed at the Congress. It features the *Congress Hymn*, composed for the occasion by the Bombay musicologist Antsher Lobo. In keeping with the Church’s efforts to demonstrate its deep Indian roots, there are also songs in Hindi, Marathi, Konkani and Gujarati. (The EP was retrieved from a shop in Chor Bazaar, so it’s scratchy and when my friend Ajay Noronha digitised it, it decided to skip a little.)





On the sidelines of the conference, a three-act ballet about the life of Christ titled *Anutam Prem* (No Greater Love) was staged for several nights at the Brabourne Stadium. It featured 300 dancers, 250 musicians and 1,000 singers. It had been composed and choreographed by a Sanskrit scholar named Father George Proksch, who had assumed the name Guru Gyan Prakash. In addition, sitar maestro Ravi Shankar created a musical show called *In the Beginning Was Sound*.

The Pope seemed to have been rather impressed by his trip. As he departed three days later, he told the crowds, "We return to Rome bearing with us an unforgettable memory of our pilgrimage...here we leave our heart." (Click [here](#) for footage of the visit.)

Jazz tangent: Louis Armstrong performed in Bombay exactly when the Eucharistic Congress was being held. This caused no end of consternation for people who worshipped both jazz and the Lord. But since Armstrong made two appearances, at Shanmukhananda Hall and at Rang Bhavan, fervent Catholic fans had the option of attending the Papal mass one day and seeing Satchmo the other.

