

Post 2000, Loyola entered a transition phase. Change became the only thing permanent in the school. The architect behind all these changes is a person looked upon with respect mixed with a small amount of fear, by his colleagues and students. Reading his thoughts could probably be the toughest task that a person could ever imagine. Two students, Master Aravind Sreekumar of 7 A and Master Arun Sudarsan of 11 A, got the rare privilege to interact with the vibrant character on one fine October evening, when he had just slid into his office after a usual busy day which was rounded off with a PTA meeting with parents and teachers of the 12th standard. In this exclusive interview with *The Loyolite* 2008, Fr. Varghese Anikuzhy spells out information about his personal life, critical views on various issues, and his future plans.

Born into a very religious and orthodox agrarian family at Nedumkunnam in Kottayam district, he was just like every other middle-class child of that era. Though the youngest in the family, he was never pampered, neither by his parents Mr. Cheriyan Scaria and Mrs. Eliyamma Scaria, nor by his 2 brothers and 4 sisters. His father passed away when he was at the tender age of five. From then on, the responsibility of running the huge household fell upon the shoulders of his eldest brother. During this phase, his mother proved to be his biggest support and inspiration.

Starting his formal education at a CMS school close to his own house, he finished his matriculation at a Parish school run by the Nedumkunnam church. Remembering his school days, he points out that he liked his Headmaster, Mr. Chacko for his pleasant behaviour towards his students.

Excerpts from the interview

Q. What are the changes that you observe in the relationship between a teacher and a student?

A. During my school days, teachers were considered to be somebody great. The students loved and respected their teachers. Over the years, there has been a constant decline in the purity of guru – shishya relations. The commitment of teachers was certainly much better in those days. They lived for their students.

Q. The education sector has become a battleground. Parents often complain about the work load of their children. What have you got to say on this issue?

A. The work load was certainly lesser when I was a student. But we had some work load at home. We had to take part in the regular affair of running the family.

Q. In which year and at what age did you become a priest?

A. I became a priest at the age of 37. It was after 13 years of higher studies in Belgaum.

Q. What motivated you to become a priest?

A. During my stay in Belgaum, I was in close touch with Jesuits who ran a school called St. Paul's. I used to meet them and talk to them. Moreover, I was staying in a Parish church and there was a Goan priest there, with whom I was very close. I was really close to this religious

group. That led to me becoming a priest.

Q. So, being a priest was your desire?

A. After my studies in Belgaum I came back to Kerala and taught in a school for three years. That was a time for me to reflect. I was never attracted to the salary that they offered. I felt that there was something more in life than getting money. I felt it was a better life than to become a family man. There was no need to have much of wealth.

Q. Did you have any other ambition? If you were not going to be a priest, then what would you have become?

A. I didn't think about anything else. At that time I just wanted to get a job. After getting the job, I found a better life, a better thing.

Proceeding onto Father Varghese's first stint in Loyola, we understand that he joined the institution not as a Principal, but as the class teacher of 9 A in the year 1981. Next year, he was their class teacher once again, in the tenth. And then in the year 1983, he became a Principal for the first time. It was indeed a challenging task for him. The continuous failures of the Basket Ball team was causing him headache. But he fought hard against all odds and the following year, the school regained the trophy. On questioned whether he enjoyed being a teacher, his was quick to answer that he is now enjoying being a Principal. After he left Loyola in 1987, he came back in 2000 to replace Fr. Kuruvila S. J. as the Principal of the institution.

Q. You came back to Loyola in 2000. What were the changes you observed?

A. I was happy to come back and see how things have changed. There was a drastic change in the discipline, life-style and attitude of the students. The school campus sported a new look with a new basket ball court, a new building, a new pavilion etc.

Q. Do you think that there is a decline in the overall environment of the school? Almost all the students from 9th and above are going for tuitions. It is said that they listen more to their tuition teachers. What has caused all this?

A. The present situation existing in the world is to be blamed. In Trivandrum there is pressure on the students to do well. Here, it is a need of the parents. They build their hopes on their children. If you look at the situation in villages, many own farms. So the parents may not insist on studies. Their children may go for some business, or they may continue their tradition, or buy more property and go on that way. Also there is a culture of comparison in Trivandrum, which is too much.

Q. Can we blame the teachers who take tuitions for students in their own class?

A. Yes. I would blame them. That is not the right thing to do. When they begin to take tuition for the students

they teach at school, they tend to adopt two types of teaching methods, where the one at the tuition class is better than the one at school. These are things that cannot be tolerated. I cannot understand this and I cannot digest it.

Q. The fact that the teachers are not committed to the students at schools, may be because of their realisation that all their students have tuitions. They may have a feeling 'why should I exert myself in class for them, when they give emphasis to their tuitions'. What do you think?

A. The teachers may feel that the students are not caring for them. But because of that they cannot neglect their duty. As long as they are employed in some work, they have to put in their maximum effort. Otherwise they should resign and leave. Teaching should not be treated as just a matter of livelihood. It should be thought of as the training of the younger generation. It is a service to the society rather than a job that fetches you income. I feel that the standard of teachers will deteriorate further in the years to come.

Q. What is your take on the necessity to change the school uniform?

A. During the 70's, tie was a part of the uniform. At that time, I was teaching at St. Joseph's School. But we soon got rid of the tie. I do not know the exact reason. But I think it was because the management felt that students get a superiority complex when they wear ties. They did not want them to have such behavioural malfunctions. I remember an incident that helps me to substantiate this point. In '83 I took one of the batches to an exhibition. Students from many other schools also participated in it. The Loyola boys were talking and mingling with the others. But those who wore shoes and ties were tight-lipped. They remained isolated from others. I would say that this type of behaviour was probably there in the Loyola boys of 1970s. Our message to the boys is 'become ordinary people, mingle with the general public, rather than with the rich class.' Catering to the rich is not our policy.

Q. Do you feel that our uniform is disordered? There are reports that other schools feel that Loyola uniform doesn't command the dignity that the other school uniforms get.

A. You see, that depends on the definition of dignity. One person's definition of dignity can be different from another's definition. I wouldn't say that our uniform lacks dignity. It is a simple uniform which can be bought by ordinary people. Certain schools have different uniforms for different days of a week. These are all meant for rich people. I don't agree with such schools on the matter of their uniform.

Q. Father, a decades old question - Why no girls in Loyola? Father Pulikal once told that admitting girls would mean that the school would have to build new toilets, which was the main problem?

A. (Laughs). My reason is different. After I came here I thought about it. Before coming here, I was in a co-ed school. That has got its own advantages. But in Trivandrum, the situation is different. There are a number of girls' schools in the city. Boys' schools are limited. Supposing we take a few girls here, that many boys will have to be thrown out. That is not the right thing to do. Some boys are thrown out, and they may not be able to find good schools to study in. I don't want that to happen.

Q. It is heard that the teachers of outside schools make bad comments about Loyola even while they teach. What is your reaction to this?

A. These types of derogatory comments arise out of their jealousy. Some can love their own, only by hating others.

Q. How did LaFest help in changing the standard of Loyola?

A. LaFest is very much helpful for the students to bring out their talents, mainly in communication without fear. They get enough courage to address people, face the interviews, take questions without much of hesitation and answer them.

Aravind Sreekumar now intervenes in the middle of this serious discussion to ask the Principal some questions that would interest the younger Loyolites. He asks a few questions that most of the younger students have always wanted to ask Father.

Q. Do you use your cane regularly?

A. (Laughs) Not really. I use it very rarely. I use it so that they understand that they have done something wrong and punishable.

Q. Why don't you give us more games periods?

A. A school is supposed to have a fixed number of study periods. To play more, I give the students the freedom to stay back after regular school hours. Buses have been arranged to take back such students wishing to stay back for the second trip.

Q. Father, the buses are very crowded. Will you buy one more bus?

A. No. The strength of Loyola was about 950 during the 1980s. We had only 4 buses then. Now the strength is 1600 and we now have 10 buses and at least two vans and two taxis are plying from Loyola.

Q. Father, a question out of context. Do you feel that the political parties are trying to divide the country on the basis of religion and reservation?

A. All political parties without exception are trying to divide India in all possible ways so that they remain in power. Talking about reservations, I believe that the reservations should be based on economic status. There are practical difficulties in implementing it. Always the salaried people bear the negative impact of it. But it should be based on conscience.