

The *Mission* of a **Missionary**

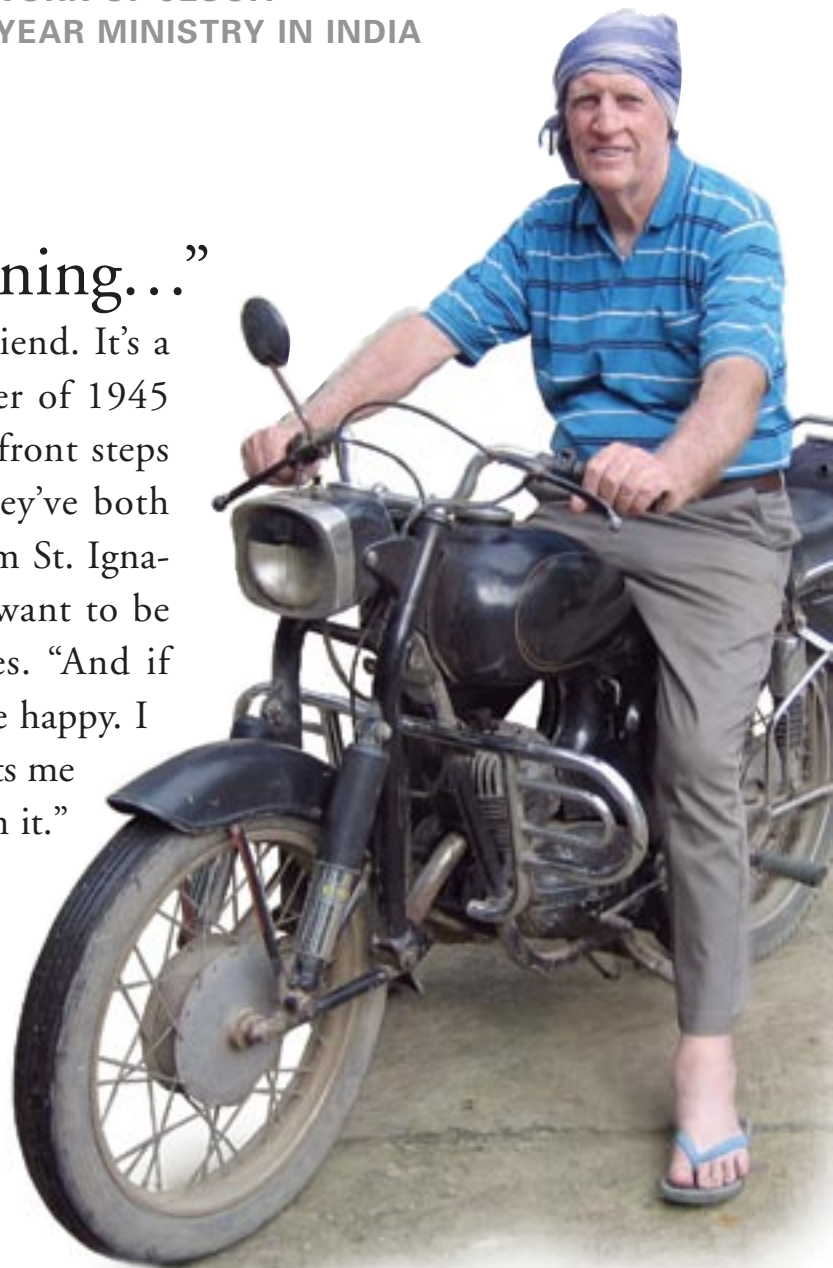
THE MOST IMPORTANT WORK OF JESUIT
FR. JACK KENEALY'S 56-YEAR MINISTRY IN INDIA

by George Kearney

“I don't really like joining...”

says Jack Kenealy to his friend. It's a warm night in the summer of 1945 and they're sitting on the front steps of the Kenealy house. They've both just recently graduated from St. Ignatius High School. “But I want to be happy,” Kenealy continues. “And if you do God's will, you'll be happy. I think this is what God wants me to do, so I'll take him up on it.”

Fr. Jack Kenealy, SJ, pictured here in July 2005 has taken his title of “Father” very seriously by serving as an adoptive father to over 20 orphaned girls in his 56-year ministry as a priest in India. He has celebrated their triumphs, encouraged them to be their best and cared for them in their greatest need.





The next day Kenealy boarded a train for Milford, OH, where he entered the Jesuit novitiate. Sitting on his porch, Kenealy never could have imagined where his life as a Jesuit would take him or that he would someday become a father figure—and in many ways a father—to 20 Indian orphans.

While still a Jesuit novice, Kenealy volunteered to go to India. “As a Jesuit, I figured I’d rather have the ball in their court. I didn’t want to sit around wondering about whether or not I should volunteer. So I did.” Less than four years later, before he’d finished the juniorate stage of his formation or his undergraduate degree, Kenealy was assigned to India. On September 20, 1949, he found himself on a ship steaming past the Statue of Liberty. He passed through the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean en route to his new assignment in the Patna Jesuit Mission in the northern Indian state of Bihar.

He spent his first year fighting his way through Hindi language studies. He never returned to college and never completed an undergraduate degree. During the regency stage of his formation, Fr. Kenealy taught at Khrist Raja, the Jesuit high school just outside the town of Patna. He completed years of philosophy and theology studies in order to be

ordained for priestly ministry, but again didn’t earn any degrees. Degrees didn’t really matter to him. He certainly didn’t need them for his own self-esteem and he was quite certain he wouldn’t need them in his work as mission priest.

He was right.

What he needed was an ability to perform sacraments, which came with his ordination in 1958. In 1961, after completing an additional year of theology studies—still without a degree—and tertianship (see pg. 20 for more about the tertianship stage of formation), Fr. Kenealy was finally assigned to do the work he came to India to do. He set out into the poverty-stricken rural villages in Bihar and started opening churches.

In 1961 he was in Jamalpur, where he began the mission at Basauni. In 1963, he was sent by his Provincial to the Shahpur Mission, a rural Church that ministered to some of the most desperately poor people in India. Then he returned to Jamalpur, where he bought land for the Bariarpur and Kharagpur Missions.

In 1967, Fr. Kenealy returned to Shahpur. It was the advent of what would become the most important work of his life. He administered sacraments,

Several of Fr. Kenealy’s “daughters” are pictured here (with other orphans) in 1980, including Vinita (far left, second row), Lata, (second from the left, second row), Asha (fourth from the left, second row) and Sarita (far left, front row). At the time the picture was taken they were being cared for by Sr. Consolata, IBVM.

Even though most of the girls are grown and have their own families,

Fr. Kenealy is still a presence in their lives.

Fr. Kenealy is pictured here in April 2005 with two of his "daughters,"

Sarita and Vinita. Fr. Kenealy accompanied them on a trip to Goa where Sarita will be moving shortly.



began a credit union to help people save and borrow without falling prey to money lenders, and began a scholarship fund to help the better Catholic students go on to college.

The most important work, though, began in, of all places, a maternity hospital. There was a young girl, *Nirmala*, who'd been left at a hospital run by the Blessed Virgin Mary Sisters. They called Fr. Kenealy and asked him to perform a baptism. He did. It was the first of twenty such baptisms.

"The Sisters received a number of orphans," Fr. Kenealy explains. "Some were born and abandoned at the hospital. Others were simply left there at the doorstep. All the orphans were girls. Girl children are often unwanted in India and are considered a financial liability. They are frequently aborted or done away with at birth. Boys are seldom abandoned. Someone will always turn up to adopt them."

As Fr. Kenealy held *Nirmala* and poured water over her tiny head, he was struck by the realization that she was almost totally alone in the world. Her parents did not want her. She had been given away.

So in a few weeks he came back to visit her in the orphanage. He kept coming every month or so. Before long there was another young orphan. And another. And another. And Fr. Kenealy kept visiting them. He didn't make any grand pronouncement

that he was becoming their father. He didn't ask that he be assigned to the orphanage. He simply made himself available to them when he wasn't busy with his parish work. It was, quite simply, a ministry of presence. Fr. Kenealy is also quick to point out, "The early Sisters were doing a terrific job with these girls. They loved them as their own children and gave them confidence and taught them to dance and sing."

In 1980, Fr. Kenealy was assigned to become treasurer of the Patna Diocese, a job he would hold for 24 years. Though he was no longer in Shahpur and had a very time-consuming job in Patna, Fr. Kenealy made every effort to remain present to his "daughters." He sent cards and gifts for birthdays and holidays. He visited when he could, just as a father would.

Unfortunately, in the mid-1990s conditions in the orphanage worsened and some of the older girls were eventually turned out. Again, like a faithful father, Fr. Kenealy was there. "At that point, I became their real father and they became my daughters. They had no one else to turn to. They also look upon themselves as sisters of one another. So it's a family and we share each other's joys and sorrows."

Fr. Kenealy's work got the attention of his fellow Jesuits. Though he continued to serve as treasurer, Fr. Kenealy's Provincial at the time told him that

his service to the orphans “was the most important work he was doing.” He had the Province’s blessing to continue to do whatever he could to help the girls. And, as they grew older, there was much that needed to be done.

Today, most of the girls are grown. Fr. Kenealy continues to care for them. Fifteen have been married and Fr. Kenealy presided at most of those weddings. Many of the former orphans are

Fr. Kenealy in Patna for decades, says “Jack is ready to climb the highest mountain and swim the deepest ocean for his orphans. He spares no effort to get them happily settled in life, and recently traveled as far as Goa—all the way on the other side of India—to attend the wedding of one of his girls. Since they have no other family, his fatherly concern is a great support to them.”

Some of the women struggle. When they do, Fr. Kenealy is there for them. One of his “daughters” was recently widowed at the age of 34 with three small children. Another has seven children and is married to a violent man Fr. Kenealy describes as “an alcoholic and a drifter.” The husband of another had a brain hemorrhage two years ago and is still partially paralyzed and unable to work. Many of the girls have lived or do live in what Fr. Kenealy describes as “pitiful conditions.” The youngest daughter of one of the orphans will undergo open heart surgery later this month for a congenital defect.

The problems come and go. But the father doesn’t. He is a constant in their lives. He is currently raising money to cover the cost of the heart surgery. With the help of generous friends and family who support Fr. Kenealy from the United States, including his classmates from St. Ignatius and his sister Mary Del Vecchio, Fr. Kenealy has been able to provide education, adequate housing, food, and medical care for many of the orphans and their families in times of need. He’s currently providing for the family of the woman whose husband was disabled.

In 2004, after 24 years of service, Fr. Kenealy finished his duties as treasurer of the Patna Province and was assigned to serve as the Province’s archivist. And, though he’s never been assigned to do it, he continues to serve as a father to the girls, especially those who are currently struggling. “I try to make them feel that, whatever the circumstances, my door will always be open to them, and they can reach me in any emergency.”

He does what he can to help. He prays for them daily. And he’ll continue to help as long as he can. It is, after all, the most important work of his life. ■



Fr. Kenealy celebrates with one of his “daughters” Sarita and her new husband, Anil, on their wedding day. Fr. Kenealy will continue to support Sarita and her new family when needed as they begin their new life together.

now working as teachers. One is currently pursuing an MA in teaching in a private college in India. One of the youngest girls recently joined the Holy Cross Congregation and will make her first vows at the end of the year. Fr. Kenealy hopes to be there. He writes to her regularly and sends her candy.

He continues to do what he can to help each of them. The work of a father in India, though, is somewhat different than that of a father here in the States. “I try to help with heavy medical and hospital expenses, and by providing decent housing and clean drinking water, and other needs which turn up.”

Fr. Jerry Drinane, SJ, who has served alongside

Contributions to Fr. Kenealy’s ministry of caring for orphans

—or for any of the important ministries in India, Nepal, Africa and Peru—can be sent to the Chicago Province Jesuit International Missions Office at 2059 N. Sedgwick St., Chicago IL, 60614. You can also call Kay Smolinski or Jeff Smart at (800) 922-5327, or make a gift online at our website, <http://www.jesuits-chi.org>.