

The Priest of Multitasking

Pierre Gillet (1939 – 2015)

Pierre Gillet was the rare sort of clergyman who escaped classification—but fishers around the world will remember him as a godsend

Priest, boat-builder, instructor, appropriate technology proponent, mechanic, carpenter, handyman, event organizer, blood donor, accountant, economist, counsellor, rights activist, humanist, negotiator, joker par excellence and ... much more! There is no single trade one could not associate with this maverick of a human being. The complete human, he was all over the place—the true multi-tasker in the days when multitasking had not even been conceptualized.

We first met in Marianad, near Trivandrum, the capital of the south Indian state of Kerala, a week after he arrived in India in 1973. He made fibre-glass fish boxes for my fish marketing experiments in 1975.

We led sessions together at the Indian Social Institute in 1979. He attended my wedding in 1981. He visited me in Hong Kong in 1983 to plan the historic Rome Fishworkers Conference. Together we took on a major role to organize it 1984. We worked on the first funding proposal for ICSF in 1987. He consecrated my new home in 1989. We exchanged ideas when he did a course in economics at Namur in 2000. We met up every time he

visited India thereafter. He blessed the wedding of my son at Calicut in 2013 and the last email he sent me in July 2015, a month before he physically left us, was to welcome my first grand-daughter. That I and my whole family knew Pierre for 42 years was the greatest joy and blessing of a lifetime!

With Pierre around, there was never a dull moment. Serious and concerned discussions were always laced with jokes and humour. He never spared an occasion to joke about his own gaffes.

When he arrived in India he quickly learned Tamil, the local language, and even celebrated mass in it, much to the surprise of the fishing communities who were his congregation. Those of us in India have heard him recall his

attempt to make conversation with a toothless old woman parishioner by asking, “Patti un pal enge?” (Granny, where are your teeth?). However, the slight error in intonation of the word ‘pal’ led to the question becoming “Granny, where is your milk?” (paal)! The resultant finger-pointing admonishment of the old



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woman—“*Kettaswamy, kettaswamy*” (Naughty priest, naughty priest!)—and the embarrassment for ‘Fr. Pierre’ have been recounted many a time by him leading to hilarious side-splitting laughter from his ardent listeners!

Pierre the handyman taught me a useful daily habit which has become second nature to me since I practice it many times a day. I always turn on a light switch with the back of my index finger.

Given the often poor quality of wiring and electrical parts (in our area of the world), using the front of your finger—particularly if it is wet—to switch on a light can be dangerous. If you use the back, even if there was a leakage of current, your hand will be thrust towards your chest and to safety!

In everything Pierre did for others—trivial and serious—there was always an aura of the special. Whether it was making the large

chariot-like frame which would roll his famous plywood ‘Gilletkats’ down from the hill-top boatyard to the sea, or just sand-papering the little cross which hangs in my living room, he paid great attention to detail.

I will certainly miss his special physical presence. But now he is always around. Pierre, forever! 🍷

For more



practicalaction.org/docs/region_south_asia/small-is-difficult-boats.pdf

Small is Difficult - The Pangs and Success of Small Boat Technology Transfer in South India

www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/madras-miscellany-the-belgians-on-the-coromandel/article7043394.ece

The Belgians on the Coromandel

www.icsf.net/en/samudra/detail/EN/245.html?detpag=mapart

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