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**ENCOUNTER**  
*Catholics on Mission – Everywhere*

***USCMA is a community  
of faith leaders engaged in  
networking, formation, and advocacy  
for God's mission.***

## Ministering to a World in Need of Reconciliation

If ever there were a time when we needed the charism of the Missionaries of Our Lady of La Salette — to spread the reconciling message of Christ to the poor — surely it's now, as the world grows ever more fractured and factionalized along cultural, economic, racial, and religious lines.

The congregation was founded after the 1846 visitation of Our Lady — weeping, her face in her hands — to two children near Grenoble, France. She spoke the message of reconciliation and the importance of prayer, penance, and zeal for the word of God.

"She asked the children to make this message known to all God's people," said Fr. Thomas Vellappallil, MS, director of the North American La Salette Mission Center in St. Louis, a ministry of the Province of Mary, Mother of the Americas. "Reconciliation is particularly relevant today in our mission countries."

The La Salettes are a congregation of 1,000 priests and brothers in 29 countries, with another approximately 450 women religious and the beginnings of a La Salette laity movement. The North American La Salette Province of the United States supports missions in Angola, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Haiti, India, Madagascar, Mozambique, Myanmar, Namibia, the Philippines, and Tanzania.

There are 85 La Salette priests and brothers in the United States, including seven in St. Louis, all retired but Fr. Thomas, who will turn 60 this June. A native of the state of Kerala, India, he grew up with a devotion to the Blessed Mother. He recalled that most families in his Catholic community in the 1960s and '70s were large — his with nine children — and had at least one priest or sister in them. It was an honor for them.

"That's the kind of culture I grew up with. I got all the support from my family, parish, community, and teachers," he said, noting that families are much smaller today and parents are more reluctant to support a child entering religious life. "I was an altar boy. There was so much inspiration where I grew up."

Fr. Thomas entered seminary in Kerala after high school graduation, then did philosophy studies in India and theology in the Philippines, ultimately receiving a master's in guidance and counseling and engaging in parish ministry. He was ordained in 1994 and came to the United States four years later. The La Salettes didn't reach India until 1988; now there are about 65 La Salette priests and at least 30 men in formation there.

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*Top: Fr. Thomas Vellappallil, MS, director of the North American La Salette Mission Center in St. Louis,*

*Middle Vocation talk to students in the diocese of Trenton, New Jersey*

*Bottom: With La Salette nuns in the Philippines*

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Once in the U.S., Fr. Thomas began working in parish ministry in Texas, Florida, Arizona, Massachusetts and in Sulphur, Louisiana, where the La Salettes have a parish, one of 16 across the South and in New England — many in places that could use some reconciliation, he noted with a laugh. A member of the Indian region serving in the Philippines, he became a member of the North American Province in 2005 and a U.S. citizen in 2010. He has been in St. Louis for 13 years.

Fr. Thomas appreciates the opportunity to visit parishes and share the work and mission of the La Salettes while preaching, which he can do in English, Spanish, Tagalog and in his first language.

“Although you’re only there for one weekend, you’re not just going to preach, you are creating a relationship,” he said. “I enjoy preaching for the missions, and it’s not easy to ask for money. But I have seen such tremendous generosity of support from people in America.”

Fr. Thomas loves to talk about vocations in the parishes and dioceses when it is permitted during his mission preaching, and vocations is one of their priorities after the congregation’s most recent gathering in Florida, where they meet every October.

They’ve hired a new national vocation director, a lay woman, who works from their center in Attleboro, Massachusetts. The community has embraced her, he

said, which makes sense considering that another focus area is engaging more lay people, which itself segues into another focus area: determining which ministries they can continue to manage, given their diminishing numbers.

“We are rightsizing/downsizing ministries as much as possible and selling some properties,” he said. “Our goal is that the laity will be able to take charge in many of the areas we serve.”

While they support missions internationally, Fr. Thomas is, ultimately, reluctant to distinguish between here and abroad.

“The need is felt everywhere. Right here in our own home country, we see issues to address, like homelessness,” he said. “There are many situations we as Catholic missionaries can reach out to help. Reconciliation comes to the scene and we are given inspiration to face these problems.”

Fr. Thomas was called back to India by his family at the end of March to preside at the funeral of his beloved older brother, Jose Vellappallil, and to comfort his mother, seven siblings and his brother’s wife and children. We hold them in our prayers at this time.

For more information about the Missionaries of Our Lady of La Salette, visit [www.lsmc.org](http://www.lsmc.org).

*Article by Julie Bourbon, ENCOUNTER Editor*

## Happenings

**Amplify YOUR Mission with Go Forth...**

**Thursday, April 20 (see p. 3)**

**Register for 2:00 pm ET or 8:00pm ET**

**Healing a Polarized World**

**Thursday, April 27**

**1:00-2:30 pm ET**

Focolare Media and Glenmary Home Missioners invite you to join Charlies Camosy, Kim Daniels, David Lapp, Br. John Mark Falkenhain, OSB, Fr. Patrick Gilger, SJ, Angelica Kerr, Amy Uelmne, and Fr. Aaron Wessman (our host) for a discussion to help us see more clearly the age in which we live and respond with the grace necessary to be a person of reconciliation and hope. **Register via Zoom.**

## USCMA Town Hall Meeting

**Thursday, May 4**

**2:00-4:00 pm ET**

This is an important update on the work of the board, its committees, and the national office since the 2022 convention. Two initiatives will be highlighted – Go Forth ... (a service to amplify the Call to Mission) and Mission Church (a multi-year initiative to identify, engage, form, and network all mission leaders serving the universal Church in or from the United States). We need your input on member engagement, program and services, governance, and finance and development. **Please register via Zoom.**

## SUBMIT YOUR EVENT

Send the details to Don McCrabb at [dmccrabb@uscatholicmission.org](mailto:dmccrabb@uscatholicmission.org) or submit online at <https://uscatholicmission.org/mission-events-submission-form>. We'll post on our website and as space allows in ENCOUNTER.