

# Renowned Asian social apostle dies

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Panaji: Hundreds of people on May 17 attended the funeral of Father Desmond de Souza, a liberal priest who gave a justice-driven face to the Asian Church.

The Redemptorist priest died suddenly three days earlier on an operating table while undergoing an emergency angioplasty. He had suffered a massive heart attack a few hours earlier. He was 76.

On May 17, Fr de Souza's body was brought to the Redemptorist House in Goa's Alto Porvorim around noon for public view. It was then taken to Our Lady of Mae de Deus Church Saligao for the requiem Mass and funeral rites.

Fr de Souza, who was popularly known as Demi, was born on July 27, 1939. He joined the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, more popularly known as Redemptorist, in 1958 and was ordained a priest in 1966.

He held a Master's degree in Social Work, and taught Church History, Social Analysis and Catholic Social Teaching. Many of his former students later became his superiors and bishops, including Archbishop Filipe Neri Ferrão of Goa and Daman, with whom he claimed to have enjoyed "a very cordial relationship."

He worked as the executive secretary of the Office of Human Development of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) for more than 10 years during the 1980s and coordinated the Asia-Pacific national offices of Caritas Internationalis.

He then took over as secretary of the Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism (ECTWT), now called Ecumenical Coalition on Tourism (ECOT), a coalition of continental Catholic and Protestant churches. He was part of the team that set up ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes), formerly known as the global network that campaigns against child prostitution in Asian tourism.

Although the priest came from an affluent background, he spoke boldly and directly against injustice in the Church and society. The pro-poor activist was among a few Catholic priests who championed the Ramponkar (traditional fishermen) agitation in the 1970s in Goa.

Mario Mascarenhas, activist associate of Demi for decades, expressed shock and surprise at the sudden death of the theologian-turned social activist. "Those of us who knew him well and met him often are in shock at how suddenly and unexpectedly it all happened," he wrote while condoling the death.

He described the priest as "a friendly, concerned, helpful and outspoken man. When he had something to say even about the Church, he said it without mincing words; you would scarcely guess that the criticism came from a man of the cloth."

The priest worked at the grassroots and in 1980, motivated half-a-dozen nurses, trained at St Martha's of Bangalore, to take their skills to the rural area of Pernem in northernmost Goa. Health care facilities then were unequally spread out over Goa, where transport posed a huge hurdle.

Presentation Sister Dorothy Fernandes of Patna recalls that Fr de Souza was lately disturbed with influx of young women to Goa as domestic help from Gajapati, a remote district of Odisha.

He visited the eastern Indian district and was shocked at the utter poverty in those villages that forced the parents to send their daughters to work in other parts of the country. He also found agents encouraging trafficking of women and girls to cities.

With the help of a religious sister he began to organize the women who were brought to Goa and look into the

menace of trafficking. “He also began to rescue young women and put in place a system at both the entry and destination points to check trafficking,” Sister Fernandes wrote.