American 'Parents' Meet Indian 'Son'

By BONITA BALDWIN

"He's definitely our son, and we are just as proud of him as we can be." George Leo and his wife Rita have waited ten years to meet their son, their only child. He's Father Chako Kooramattam, a 32-year-old Roman Catholic priest from India.

The Leos heard of Father Chako while he was a seminarian through the Catholic Near East Relief Association. They were his foster parent sponsors. Since then the Leos have collected 85 of Father Chako's letters, paid for his education and ordination, learned to spell some Indian words, and dreamed of meeting their son.

Father Chako and the Leos began working to make their dream happen May 23. Father Chako arrived Aug. 7. Difficulties over his visa caused the delay. Finally the Leos, who were already paying for the trip, posted a $1,000 bond with the American counsul and the visa was granted.

The red tape entanglement was also expensive for Father Chako who made three very long trips from his mountain parish to the American consul. Each trip cost the priest $25, an immense sum equivalent to many an Indian's yearly income. Father Chako left India with $7; he still has $5.

Father Chako was due to arrive in Rochester on an 8:25 p.m. flight. "You can imagine how we felt when everyone got off the plane and there was no Chako," Mrs. Leo related. Father Chako had missed his flight from New York and did not arrive here until midnight. He didn't call his parents because he thought that, as in India, it would take five or six hours.

But the happy meeting did finally come. "This is a once in a lifetime experience for him and for us too," Leo said. "I'm 71, I'll never see him again." Between now and the time Father Chako must return home in late October, the Leos are parents indeed.

Mrs. Leo reported that a family reunion is planned to introduce him. The reunion will be held at Maplewood Inn with Fathers Frederick Eisemann and Phillip Billotte, pastor and associate pastor of Holy Family, the Leo's parish, attending. Msgr. George Cocuzzi and Father Richard Brickler will also be present.

In his parents' home Father Chako talked about the Catholic Church in India and his life there. Only two percent of the Indian population is Catholic, he said. Many of these are descendants of the original Christians converted under the teaching of St. Thomas the Apostle of the first century. Although there is no caste system among Indian Christians Father Chako reported that St. Thomas worked principally among the Brahmins, the priestly caste. Chako traces his heritage to this group. Today in India harijans, of the untouchable caste, are easily converted, Father Chako said, especially if they are given alms. The practice of almsgiving, however, is diminishing for fear the conversions are not genuine.

Little direct attempt is made to convert the Hindus. The Gospel is not preached evangelistically. Father explained that Catholics strive instead to show their countrymen Christ through their service in hospitals and schools. They also encourage each person to practice his own religion first and try to show him Christ in his own faith. Father Chako quoted the Vatican II decision that in religion "variety is beauty." India is closed to foreign missioners.

Comparing the Indian Church with the Catholic Church in America, Father Chako said, "There is no richness there." He serves as assistant pastor in Peermedu, a village in the Idukki district in Kerala state. The area is 4,000 feet above sea level and so cold at night that Father wears the caps Mrs. Leo knits him to bed. It's a five mile walk on a foot path to the main road. Sundays the young priest walks 20 miles, visiting four chapels in his parish of 350 members. They have no heat, electricity, or running water. Father Chako draws his wate. from a well and washes his clothes by hand. His food, which he prepares himself, is rice and tapioca. Bread is uncommon.

Nevertheless Father Chako finds American Catholics far less devoted than their Indian counterparts. "They're very faithful," he said of his parishioners.

Father Chako is enjoying his home in the United States. He has watched his first television and his first washing machine. His mother reported that he is eating everything, despite his customarily limited diet. He explained that he ate his first strange food on the plane "with the help of Coca Cola."

Contest Winners Cited

Court Our Lady of the Cenacle, CDA, saluted poetry contest winners at a recent meeting. The three in front are Janine Donnellan, Edward Breiner and Sheila Calnan. Second row (l-r): Mrs. Anthony Mineo, contest chairman; Oleh Zazulak, Martha Emmel, Mary Quinn, Mary Elizabeth Hagen. Behind them stand Kathryn Robach, Bruce Benson and Mrs. Henry Taillie, regent.

Bowling League

The Holy Name Society Bowling League of St. John the Evangelist Church on Humboldt Street is looking for a few more bowlers for the coming season. The league bowls at the Moose Club on Tuesdays at 7:30 p.m. Starting date is Sept. 16. Persons interested are asked to call E. Heinsler at 288-0378.

Business In The Diocese

Roger James Schifferli has been named vice president for development at Loyola College, Baltimore, Md.

Schifferli is a Rochester native. His mother, Mrs. Leo Schifferli resides in Rochester. His brother, Father Jerome Schifferli is pastor of St. Joseph's Church in Livonia. His four sisters also live in the area.

Schifferli, his wife and six children live in Silver Spring, Md.

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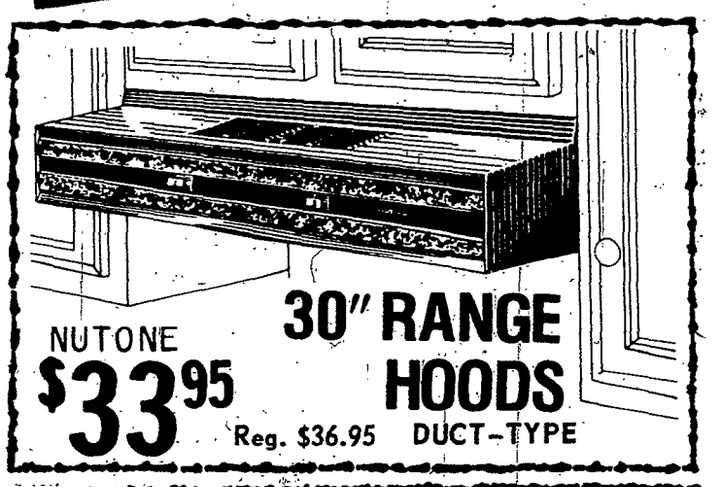

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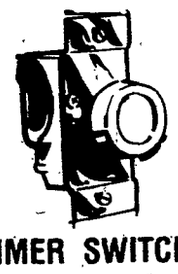

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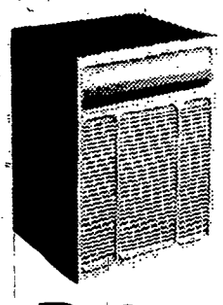

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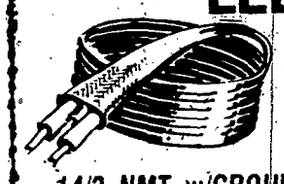

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