

OBLATES AND FORMATION OF LOCAL CLERGY IN SRI LANKA

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The missionaries who labored in Sri Lanka during the Portuguese period (1505 -1658) did not try to create a native clergy. They were involved more in the instruction and maintenance of the small group of Catholics.

The Dutch period (1640-1796) was one of persecution of the Catholics in Sri Lanka and hence the missionaries did not have the opportunity and the facilities to concentrate on the formation and training of a native clergy.

Though the Oratorians of Goa could not form a native clergy during the Dutch period in Sri Lanka, they did not manifest interest for such a purpose even after the British Governor Thomas Maitland gave the Roman Catholics religious freedom on 27 May 1806, abolishing the disabilities suffered by the Roman Catholics in Sri Lanka. It was during the British period (1796-1948) efforts were made to establish Seminaries and encourage candidates to study for priesthood. There were two main reasons for such an undertaking. **First**, the suppression of the Oratory of Goa in 1833 by the King of Portugal. Hence Sri Lanka could not expect missionaries any more from the Oratory of Goa in India. The royal decree from Portugal was extended to the colonies in 1834 and implemented in Goa in 1835. The Oratorians who were in Sri Lanka, however continued their services as before. Sri Lanka's link with the Indian missionaries which began with Fr. Vaz' arrival in 1687, ended when the last Indian Oratorian in Sri Lanka, Fr. Mathaes Caetano died in 1874. **The second reason** is the creation of a separate ecclesiastical territory (The Vicariate Apostolic of Sri

Lanka) by Pope Gregory XVI by the Brief *Ex munere pastoralis ministerii* of December 3, 1834 detaching Sri Lanka from the diocese of Cochin, India after it had been part of it for 275 years (since 1558). Hence the cessation of the Oratory of Goa and the urging of the Holy See paved the way for the establishment of Seminaries and the encouragement of young men to study for priesthood.

The Congregation of Propaganda Fide (Rome) soon began to invite European priests, both religious and diocesan to go to Sri Lanka as missionaries, expecting also that European Oratorians would be well received into the company of the Indian Oratorians who continued their services in Sri Lanka, but was not very successful. However, the first European missionary Propaganda sent to Sri Lanka was an Oratorian, the Italian priest Orazio Bettacchini who arrived in 1842.

In 1845 came an Italian Sylvestrine (Sylvestro-Benedictine), Joseph Bravi and 2 Spaniards who had become Cistercians in Italy, Freilano Oruna and Firenzo Garcia. At the request of Bishop Orazio Bettacchini, the Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna, made to Bishop Eugene de Mazenod, the Founder of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), four Oblates, led by Fr. Stephen Semeria, came to Sri Lanka on 27 November 1847 and began their apostolates in 1848.

Initiative of the Oblates to create local clergy

According to a letter written on 22 May 1848 to Bishop Eugene de Mazenod, Fr. S. Semeria, in consultation with Bishop O. Bettacchini, had indicated his intention to begin a Seminary in Jaffna to train indigenous priests (presbyters) for the wellbeing of the Vicariate of Jaffna. He had requested Bishop De Mazenod to send two Oblates to undertake the important task.

In May 1848 he went to Nagapatam and Pondicherry to study how the Jesuits and other Religious Congregations in India were forming their native clergy. But due to some urgent missionary engagements, he could not carry out the project even after he succeeded Bishop Bettacchini as the Bishop of the Vicariate of Jaffna.

In 1869, Oblate Bishop Christopher Bonjean who succeeded Bishop Semeria as the Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna, took the initiative to establish a Seminary. In 1874, that Seminary was dedicated to St. Martin of Tours. On 16 March, 1889, there was a significant ordination ceremony in the Cathedral, Jaffna when four Sri Lankan seminarians, all alumni of **St. Martin's Seminary**, were raised to the priesthood. John Pahamunay, a Sinhalese, a convert who had been in training to be a Buddhist monk and a brother of the Buddhist monk, Sri Saranankara Sumangala, who became the chief monk of the Siamese sect attached to the Malwatte Chapter in Kandy, was one, while the others were A.L. Poologasingham, Martin Joseph and J. Chrysostom. A.L. Poologasingham remained a diocesan priest while the others became Oblates. This first seminary established in Sri Lanka became in the years to come a source of supply of a large number of native priests, Oblates and diocesan clergy, for service in Sri Lanka.

After fifteen years in Jaffna as Vicar Apostolic, Bishop Bonjean when he was transferred to Colombo in 1883, he brought with him some Oblate Scholastics and diocesan major seminarians and immediately took measures to provide for their training by opening a major seminary (**St Bernard's Seminary**), staffed by the Oblates, which, in the course of the next three quarters of a century, until its amalgamation with the present National Major Seminary in Kandy in 1955, produced

a large number of Lankan priests, both Oblate and diocesan. Bishop Bonjean was one who obtained financial assistance from Europe for the construction of the Seminary buildings in Jaffna and in Colombo.

In 1934, the first-ever Oblate Scholasticate under the name of “**Scholasticate of Mary immaculate**” opened at Kyney Road, Borella with Fr. Alfonse Margez OMI as Moderator. He was succeeded by Fr. “Thomas Benjamin Cooray OMI on 06 August 1937, when Fr. Theodore Laboure OMI installed him as its first Superior. He was succeeded by Fr. A. Margez OMI when Fr. Benjamin Cooray OMI was nominated Coadjutor of the Archdiocese of Colombo in January 1946. On 01 May 1950, it was shifted to a bungalow and property bought from Sir Chittampalam Gardener at Green Path, Kohuwela, Nugegoda.

The idea of a Minor Seminary to foster vocations to the presbyterial life (as diocesan or religious) in the Archdiocese of Colombo was conceived by Archbishop Christopher Bonjean OMI but was carried out by his successor Archbishop Andrew Melizen OMI in 1893 at Kotahena. In 1921, Archbishop Anthony Coudert OMI erected suitable buildings of **St. Aloysius’ Minor Seminary** in the premises of the Archbishop’s House, Borella, facing Kynsey Road.

In 1947, Fr. F.M. Bizien OMI, who became the Vicar of Missions of the Oblates in Sri Lanka, in consultation with his council, felt the need for an Oblate Juniorate where the candidates could be initiated gradually to experience the Oblate way of life. Hence **St. Joseph’s Juniorate** began with one aspirant on 10 January 1952 with Fr. Albert Pleiber OMI as an accompanier / formator. Today it’s a private school directed by a team of Oblates, preparing candidates up to G.C.E A/L.

Oblate formators / accompaniers at the National Seminary of Lanka

When the Papal Seminary which was established in Kandy in 1893 was shifted to India, the Holy See invited the Oblates to accept the formation and training of the Major Seminarians belonging to all the dioceses of Sri Lanka and also the administration of the **National Seminary of Our Lady of Lanka** (former Papal Seminary), Fr. Leo Deschatelets, OMI, the Superior General of the Oblates in Rome accepted that invitation on 02 August 1955. Hence the Oblate Scholasticate too shifted to the National Seminary building at Ampitiya, Kandy on 09 September 1955. The Scholasticate community lived there under Fr. Frederick Sackett OMI, the Rector of the National Seminary as Superior and Fr. Anthony Gurusamy OMI as the Moderator until June 22 1959 when the **Oblate Scholasticate** moved to the new building constructed in a property adjacent to the National Seminary, blessed and declared open by Fr. Leo Deschatelets, OMI, the Superior General on 17 February 1959.

The academic year of the National Seminary of Lanka was inaugurated on 10 Sept 1955 with a special group of Oblates, headed by the American Oblate Fr. Frederick Sackett, the Rector, drawn from different countries to be teachers, formators and spiritual directors at the National Seminary. There were 66 diocesan Seminarians drawn from the dioceses and 40 Oblates and 4 Sylvestro-Benedictines attending the classes from their religious houses. The Oblate staff at the Scholasticate also were involved in teaching at the National Seminary.

In October 1972, the transference of the administration of the National Seminary from the Oblates to the Catholic Bishops'

Conference took place with Fr. James Cooke OMI as Rector. Though the teaching and the formation in the National Seminary went under the direction of the Bishops' Conference, the Oblate staff at the Scholasticate continued to assist in the teaching at the National Seminary. The Oblates offer their services in St. St. Francis Xavier's Major Seminary in Jaffna and continue to assist also other Religious Congregations in Sri Lanka in the formation of their candidates for ministerial priesthood in their Houses of formation.

Today' Oblate Formation is decentralized and does not depend totally or not focussed totally on the National Seminary Formation. Since the handing over of the National Seminary to the Bishops, Oblate Formation has drawn from numerous sources, for example Tulana Research Centre, Suba Seth Gedara, Subodhi, fisherfolk in Negombo etc.

The Oblates in Sri Lanka have 02 Scholasticates (in Kandy and in Jaffna), 01 Novitiate (at Bandarawela), 01 Pre-Novitiate (at Mannar), and 02 Juniorates (minor Seminaries, at Kohuwela and in Jaffna) for education, formation / accompaniment and training of the candidates. At the Scholasticate in Kandy, there is one-year immersion programme for the Oblate Scholastics before their presbyteral ordination.

Renewal Programmes for Clergy

Special formation / accompaniment programmes and renewal programmes are conducted for candidates preparing for ministerial priesthood and for the clergy (The Religious and the diocesan) at Sangamam, Kopay, under the leadership of Fr. S. M. Selvaratnam OMI.

Oblate formator / accompanier at a diocesan Seminary

The Oblates continue to assist the dioceses and Religious Congregations in fostering candidates for presbyteral life in the Church in Sri Lanka. At the request of Bishop Norbert Andradi OMI, the bishop of Anuradhapura, and with the consent of the Oblate Provincial Fr. Irwin Morais OMI, Fr. Sarath Perera OMI became the director of St. Peter's minor Seminary in Anuradhapura on 05 February 2018.

New historic situation demands new Oblate response

The Oblates are Consecrated men sent by the Church through the Oblate Congregation to serve selflessly the poor and the abandoned masses in today's world.

The present historic situation in Sri Lanka demands that the Oblates prayerfully discern a new model of formation of Oblates in order to be creatively faithful to this mission, spiritually motivated and energized by the Holy Scriptures and the Charism (the Spirit) of the Oblate Congregation. The Gospels remind us that the people who want to become Christian missionaries need to be people who experience the intimacy (love, compassion, mercy) of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ (Mk 3:15) in their prayer life. It is such a spiritual experience that will energise to serve the poor and the abandoned and thereby give glory to God by promoting God's Reign.

Who will be today's beneficiaries of the services of the Oblates?

Reflecting on the experience I had as a formator at different stages of Oblate formation in our Oblate Province of Colombo,

I can say there was a conflict of opinion regarding the beneficiaries of the services of the Oblates. At an Oblate Congress held in the eighties, a small group led by Fr. Tissa Balasuriya OMI, who had already opted for social apostolate leaving behind the prestigious Rectorship of Aquinas College of Higher Studies, Colombo, and had begun the Centre for Society and Religion (CSR) and who was close to the people in the slums of Colombo, wanted the Oblates of the Colombo Oblate Province to commit themselves for the socially and economically poor, thereby focusing the attention on social justice, while others (the majority) preferred to serve **also** the spiritually and psychologically poor. Hence I did experience a conflict of opinions. Though the Oblate Constitutions mentions that *“we will hear and make heard the clamour of the voiceless, which is a cry to God who brings down the mighty from their thrones and exalts the lowly (Cf. LK 1:52)*, I can say that the majority of the Oblates of our Oblate Province did not have an integrated spirituality at that time, although efforts had been made by the Oblate General Administration to promote an integrate socio-ecological outlook.

On 28 November 2006, at the Sri Lankan Oblate formators’ meeting at the Oblate Scholasticate, Kandy with Fr. Paolo Archiati from the Oblate General Council I said, “South Asia as part of the global society, is experiencing very rapid changes. These changes are affecting profoundly the individuals, the groups and the institutions including formal religions. As a result, new ways of perceiving the world, the society and the individuals are also emerging daily. A new historic consciousness has emerged and it continues to grow daily.” I continued, “In this situation, the Federation of the Asian Bishops’ Conference (FABC) speaks of a new way of being the Church in Asia and of a new way of experiencing our faith. We,

the Oblates in the formation ministry, also feel called by God to a new way of being Oblates to respond to the People's need for liberation, wholeness and salvation and also to respond to the call of eco-crisis. Such a vision-mission demands an integral spirituality, prophetic thrust, ongoing conversation and dialogue with culture and our major religions, openness and response-ability to the issues of poverty, justice, peace, ecology etc."

"To meet the new demands of this new historic situation, a new formation programme, "**Asian Institute of Theology**"(AIT), initiated by Fr. Clement Waidyasekara OMI, emerged to try and form the future Oblates to listen, analyse and understand what is taking place in the world and in the Church, especially in South Asia and respond meaningfully. The Oblate Formation Committee tries to be at the service of this Programme. The members of this committee meet regularly to reflect together on the formation process at different stages and be of service to the candidates in formation. The formation committee feels that there is a need for a wholistic spirituality at the different stages of Oblate formation that will resonate with the call for conflict management and resolution, wholeness and total health of the candidates in formation and which will energise them to listen, connect and collaborate with people and nature."

Fr. Anselm Silva OMI, taking my introductory speech as a base for the group discussion, said that the Oblates as Religious need to think of a complementary formation model of an alternative formation process since the National Seminary, Kandy is heavily oriented to parochial ministries. Fr. S.M. Selvaratnam OMI spoke of the violent and conflict situation in Jaffna with displaced people and the orphans and of the crying situation in which Oblate formation was taking place. He observed that the

new way of being Oblates demands radical changes in the formation process. He emphasized the importance of the formation of the formators for adopting the growth model which embodies personal accompaniment of the candidates. Fr. Clement Waidyasekara OMI and Fr. Suranga Gunesekara OMI mentioned the positive results of the AIT programme

Need for a new Theologate

Besides the above-mentioned efforts to develop a wholistic formation and spirituality relevant for our local situation, efforts had been made also to establish a **Theologate**, directed by the Consecrated Religious in Sri Lanka. Such a need arose since the theological education provided at the National Seminary in Kandy did not adequately respond to needs of the Consecrated Religious. To set up a new Theologate, efforts were made initially by Frs. Oswald Firth OMI and Aloysius Pieris SJ, supported by the Oblate team - Frs R. Luckhart, Hilarion Dissanayake, Edmund Murugupillai and myself - at the Scholasticate (1987-1994) in Kandy.

When Fr. Oswald Firth became the Provincial (2004), Fr. Clement Waidyasekara who was at the Oblate Scholasticate, Ampitiya, began an *ad hoc* group composed of Frs. Dalston Forbes, R.Luckhart, Hilarion Dissanayake, Merl Mendis, Sarath Iddamalgoda, Sr. Christine Fernando SCJM, Mr.Tarcisius Fernando (Tarsi) and Mr. Shirley Wijesinghe to continue what was begun in 1994, in view of opening a new Theologate for the Religious (men and women). They had a number of meetings at Tulana Research Centre of Fr. Aloysius' Pieris SJ for 3 – 4 years. They had planned a 4- year study programme, the method being class-room study supported by praxis. At that time, they felt that the Catholic Bishops' Conference and even some Religious Congregations were not

supporting the Oblate initiative. So the Oblates started a pastoral formation programme (AIT) which I feel needs to be reviewed.

New Questions demand new responses from the Religious

Today in our Sri Lanka context, our people and our infra-human beings (Mother Nature) are also being exploited and raped. There are the personal, social and ecological sins being committed. Not only wilful murder but also wilful ecocide is a sin. Infra-human creation which has become our new neighbor needs our love, concern and care. God created human beings to care for God's beautiful creation and not to exploit for one's greed. In this present situation, the Consecrated Religious including the Oblates, need a Biblical spirituality and a Biblical theology to respond meaningfully to the new historical, socio-cultural and political contexts. **A new Theologate directed by a team of Consecrated Religious will certainly provide the needed theological education, human formation and pastoral training for their candidates.** Today's Oblates in Sri Lanka also need to remember the inspiring words of St. Eugene de Mazenod: "*Love embraces all; for new needs, it invents new means when necessary.*"

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