

FISHERS OF PEOPLE

SOCIO-PASTORAL INNOVATORS



REVISED EDITION

Fr. Emmanuel Fernando, OMI

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2020

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2020

Remembering with love

During my priestly life as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate (OMI), I had the opportunity to work also for the socio-economic and spiritual development of the fisher-families in Sri Lanka. I am grateful to my Oblate Superiors for permitting me to minister to them. I have included in this booklet some of my personal reflections on the fast evolving situation of the fishing community and on some the issues which affect this community in Sri Lanka.

In this revised edition of "*Fishers of People*", I have rearranged some of the chapters mentioning also the new socio-pastoral efforts made by a few compassionate pastors and the Religious. May their commitment and initiatives inspire also others to improve the quality of life of our fisherflock in Sri Lanka.

Fr. Emmanuel Fernando, OMI

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01.

THE CATHOLIC FISHERFLOCK: BACKBONE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Catholic fisherflock are the backbone of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka. This affirmation was also confirmed by a priest ministering in the diocese of Chilaw at the funeral of Anthony Fernando who was shot dead by the Police on February 15, 2012 during a protest against the sudden price hike of fuel which affected the livelihood of the fisher families. At the funeral, the priest whispered to me: “I suggested to our Bishop to invite all the priests serving in the diocese of Chilaw for the funeral to manifest our solidarity, saying what would be the situation of our diocese without the Catholic fisher-families”.

The Catholic fisherflock in Sri Lanka have many reasons to merit this title – *“the backbone of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka”*. “The population of Mannar in fifteen twenties was composed of people belonging to the Parava and Carea castes. Both groups earned their living by pearl fishing. Around 1536 the fishermen and their families were baptized by the Franciscans. When St. Francis Xavier’s fame reached the fisher-families of Mannar, whose inhabitants were ethnically linked to the fishermen of South India who were engaged in pearl fishing, their elders went to Manappad in the Fishery coast to ask Xavier to cross over to their island to baptize their

people. Since he was unable to come he sent someone else to Mannar¹. Becoming a Christian and being under the protection of Portugal did not please Sankili, the King of Jaffna. So in 1544, he massacred more than 700 newly baptized fisher-families at Mannar. According to Fr. S.G. Perera, S.J, “the people of Ceylon living along the sea coast could not but be struck by the event, and they decided in a body to embrace Christianity”². “In the year 1556, the Franciscans converted and baptized about three thousand people called Karavas along the coast of Sri Lanka”³.

The Dutch, who arrived in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) about the 17th century, started persecuting the Catholics living in the Western Coast of Sri Lanka. They belonged to the Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church. In Negombo, Mudaliyar Affonso Pereira, a prominent and a staunch Catholic led the resistance to the persecution by the Dutch. He was well known to St. Joseph Vaz and other Oratorians. Negombo Catholics clung tenaciously to their Catholic faith and found ways and means of practicing it in spite of all the attempts made by the Dutch to root it out.⁴ In 1750, the leaders of the fisher-communities of the missions of Grand Street and Sea Street sent written petitions to the Dutch Governor, refusing to bow down to his demands.⁵

¹ Fr. Martin Quere, OMI, *Christianity in Sri Lanka under the Portuguese Padroado, 1597-1658*,

² Fr. S. G. Perera, S.J, *Catholic Negombo, A brief sketch of the History of the Catholic Church in Negombo under the Portuguese and the Dutch* (a manuscript)

³ Fr.V. Perniola, S.J, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, The Portuguese Period, Vol 1, 1565 -1565*,

⁴ Fr. W.L.A. Don Peter, *Historical Gleanings, Colombo, 1992*

⁵ Fr. R. Boudens, OMI, *The Catholic Church under Dutch Rule, Rome 1957*

As a result, many leaders, including Mudaliyar Affonso Pereira, were banished from Sri Lanka to Batavia(Indonesia) by the Dutch.⁶

The Catholic fisherflock still remain the core of the Catholic Church

The social stratification among many Catholic families in Sri Lanka have changed a lot over the years and today we find many Catholic families belonging to different castes are also engaged in fishing industry. However, as Catholic fisher-communities, they have kept their faith and they have continued to support the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka. They still continue to remain the core of the Catholic Church in our country. In several parishes, they have given to the Church one tenth of their daily earnings (revenue) from their fishing. The collection of the one- tenth revenue was rented annually through an auction and the money thus collected was used for the construction of church buildings, mission houses (presbyteries), schools and colleges, repairs of church buildings and maintenance of priests. Even though this system had ceased to function in the seventies in many parishes, the Catholic fisherflock still continue to support the Church with their earnings. In several places of migration, they have constructed beautiful churches, taught the people of the locality the methods of fishing and enable them to lead lives worthy of human dignity.

6.Fr. R. Boudens, Fr. W.L.A. Don Peter, op.cit.

The Catholic fishermen continue to contribute also to the Gross National product (GNP) of Sri Lanka. They are a self-employed group, providing also means of livelihood for thousands of people (helpers, fish vendors, businessmen, the poor etc.). They are also like shock troops going out with their boats to rescue people affected by the floods. Therefore they are a wonderful resource both for the country and for the Catholic Church.

However, there are many Catholic fisher-families who are also socially marginalised and are deprived of the basic necessities to lead lives worthy of human dignity and as children of God.

Different Categories of Catholic Fisherflock today

A) Small Fishermen

Fishing has become an important industry with the introduction of mechanization of their fishing craft, new methods of fishing and with new daring spirit to go for deep sea fishing.

But many traditional fishermen who owned their fishing craft (theppang, oru (thoni), kattamaram, vallam,) and fishing gear, are becoming hired workers in their own industry. The ownership is being gradually taken over by people who have money-power (Mudalalis/ businessmen). The hired fishermen receive a salary determined by the owner of the fishing craft and fishing gear. As hired workers, they lose also the freedom

to decide the methods of fishing and determine the price of the fish they catch. They are compelled by some owners of the fishing boats to set out to sea in inclement weather risking their lives. These fishermen struggle to eke out an existence by their traditional methods of fishing. Many families live in cadjan huts, undernourished and prone to sicknesses and indebtedness. Due to poverty, they do not have the wherewithal to pay for the education of their children. Being undernourished, their children will fall asleep in the class if and when they go to school. They need good housing schemes coupled with better water, electricity, sanitation, medical and educational facilities.

B) “Mechanised” Fishermen

Vast majority of our fishermen have given up their traditional fishing craft (theppang, outrigger boat (oru), vallam) and have begun using small mechanized boats for fishing. In 1958, 26 feet boats with inboard marine diesel engines were introduced and in early sixties, 17 ½ feet fibre-glass outboard powered fishing boats were launched. Very often the active fishermen borrow money from money lenders and / or pawn their jewelry to purchase small mechanized boats and nets.

Often many active fishermen who own mechanized boats have no control over the price of fuel and of fishing gear. Often poor fishing and the price hike of boats, engines, fuel and nets make them unable to meet the basic needs for living. So they also pawn their jewelry or borrow from money lenders who charge exorbitant rates of interest. Indebtedness

becomes a reality in their lives while making the pawnbrokers and money lenders become richer every day. Often indebtedness leads to discontinuance of education of their children as well. Besides, a big gap between the rich and the poor is also generally created in the fishing villages. To tide over the problem of borrowing and indebtedness to money lenders and moneychangers, the fisherfolk need to be educated to form credit unions and manage such credit societies.

C) The Multi-day Trawler Fishermen

Today, many of our Catholic fishermen are also forced to go for deep sea fishing beyond the continental shelf using their multi-day large fishing vessels (trawlers), braving the vagaries of weather, to eke out an existence worthy of human dignity.

There are so many Catholic fishermen who spend 3-5 weeks in the sea in their fishing trawlers. People, who visit Beruwala, Dikkowita, Negombo, Chilaw, Kalpitiya, Mannar, Jaffna, Mullativu, Trincomalle and Valaichchenai and many other fishing centres and jetties along the coastal belt in Sri Lanka, will be able to meet some of our Catholic fishermen from different dioceses and parishes and come to know personally their life-style, the situation of their family life, their needs, anxieties and concerns regarding their children.

The multi-day trawler fishermen are in need of assistance from the government. They need well equipped jetties, light houses, communication Centres, suitable disaster management assistance, auction rooms and other marketing facilities so

that they can carry on their fishing industry without much fear and trepidation, even in stormy weather.

Catholic multi-day trawler fishermen need help to keep their Catholic faith alive and active especially when they are away from their homes for 3-4 weeks. An effort was made a few years ago by Salesian Fr. Felix Mellawarachchi, when he was parish priest of Mount Carmel Church at Palliyawatte. A new jetty was constructed in his parish at Dikkowita. He soon befriended the multiday trawler fishermen of the parish and listening to their needs, he felt the need to help them to keep alive their Catholic faith while they were in the sea in their trawlers. He introduced CDs containing special prayers, popular hymns and the Rosary and encouraged them to use them while going out for fishing. The fishermen were very grateful to Fr. Felix for introducing such a new method.

Since our Catholic multi-day trawler fishermen return home after 4-5 weeks, they need proper pastoral guidance from the parish priests for their family life and of problems affecting the upbringing of the children exposed to mass-media in today's society.

The multi-day fishermen, who are employed by businessmen (Mudalalis), the owners of the multi-day vessels, need also to have their own societies (unions) in order to obtain just wages, free days to relax and to be with their families etc. To achieve such desired goals, the active fishermen need adult education, unity and training in leadership.

In order to improve the quality of their life, the multi-day trawler fishermen also need to form credit unions and avoid as much as possible becoming indebted to money lenders and pawn brokers.

D) Purse Seine (Maadal, Karaivalai) Fishermen

Mudalalis (Businessmen, Professionals) who have received government permit to carry on fishing using Purse seine employ unskilled labourers for fishing in shallow waters during off-seasons in Western and Eastern coasts of Sri Lanka. However, the fishing is carried out under the leadership of skilled fishermen (called Mandadi) who are generally well paid. The unskilled labourers are given remuneration with meals and shelter (in cadjan huts (Waadiya).

The unskilled labourers employed by Mudalalis / Businessmen) are very poor and are in a very backward state. They lack good housing schemes coupled with better water, electricity, sanitation, medical and educational facilities. The officials from the Department of Fisheries should visit these areas and provide the above-mentioned facilities since they are people who are self-employed without an Organised Voice (e.g Trade Unions).

D) The Migrant Fisherflock (see page 32)

The migrant fisherfolk are self-employed and contribute to the national income, providing jobs for skilled and unskilled fishermen. They also supply fish, prawns, shrimps and cuttlefish for tasty meals. But they lack good jetties, housing

schemes coupled with better water, electricity, sanitation, medical and educational facilities.

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SRI LANKAN FISHERMEN FACE NEW PROBLEMS

The Poaching of the Indian Trawlers into Sri Lankan waters

The illegal trips (poaching) of Indian trawlers into Sri Lankan waters, using also Hi-tech bottom-trawling, combing the sea bed and destroying the marine resources and harvesting large quantity of fish, prawns and crabs, are preventing more than 30,000 active fishermen and their families in the Districts of Mannar, Jaffna, Mullativu , Puttalam and Trincomalee from ensuring their livelihood and maintaining their families. The issue of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing by South Indian trawlers in Sri Lankan waters costs Sri Lanka fishermen as much as Rs 5,000 million every year. Indian businessmen who are also owners of the trawlers and who earn vast sums of money from exporting seafood, compel their fishermen to cross the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL). Sri Lanka loses annually because of the illegal fishing by South Indian fishermen who violate IMBL and in the process destroy marine resources. “Studies conducted by the Fisheries Ministry has found that South Indian fishermen catch 312,000 metric tonnes of fish annually” (*Daily Mirror*, June 11,2015, p 2). Our Sri Lankan fishermen feel powerless to prevent or resist the movements of more than 300 big

Indian trawlers coming as close as 500 meters from the coastline.

The Indian trawlers using illegal techniques scrape the sea bed destroying the breeding grounds of fish thereby not leaving also any hope for a better future for our fishermen's children. Sri Lankan governments have failed to resolve the problem. Since both India and Sri Lanka are signatories of IMBL, both countries are bound to obey the treaty and not violate the treaty. Mere arresting of the Indian fishermen will not solve the issue. More than 20,000 of the fishermen deprived of their livelihood by the poaching of the Indian trawlers are Catholics. These Catholics have also joined non-Catholic fishermen to protest the illegal poaching of the Indian trawlers.

In 2013, Bishop **Rayappu Joseph**, the retired bishop of Mannar, had said: "Our fishermen have done all they can to urge the government to take action against this blatant robbery of their livelihood. They have taken a defiant stand against poaching by the Indians but to no avail and added that he had raised this matter on numerous occasions at the Bishops' Conference. He said that the issue was getting out of control with our fishermen finding it extremely difficult to even cover the cost of fuel for their outboard motors because of the depleted catch of fish" (*Daily Mirror*, Oct. 12, 2013).

Robbing the Marine Resources of Sri Lanka.

The Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Ms J.Jayalalitha was

outspoken on behalf of the Sri Lankan Tamils and their political rights. But concerning the economic rights of Sri Lankan Tamil fisherfolk, she was silent. She spoke on behalf of Tamil Nadu fisherfolk only, depriving the livelihood of our Sri Lankan Tamil fisherfolk and their families, living in the Northern, North Western and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka, by her attitude manifested on the issue of the poaching in Sri Lankan territorial waters by the Tamil Nadu fishermen. Some of our active fishermen stopped going out for fishing. Observing the plight of our fisherfolk, no Tamil politician from the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka showed any concern until one of the members of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), spoke in the Parliament. Our fishermen need the support of the Catholic Hierarchy of Sri Lanka and the Conference of the Major Religious Superiors in their struggles posed by the poaching of the Indian trawlers and exploitation of the marine resources.

Taking away without permission what belongs to Sri Lanka can be called robbery. Perhaps the big businessmen, the owners of the trawlers, who also control marketing and exporting of marine products and who earn large sums of money from fishing industry, are the main culprits who are committing this crime by forcing the poor Indian fishermen to intrude illegally into our Sri Lankan territorial waters and exploit our marine resources. Our Sri Lankan fishermen feel powerless to prevent or resist the movements of more than 300 big Indian trawlers. Arresting only the Indian fishermen

who are employed by the owners of the trawlers will not resolve the existing conflict.

As the Editorial of *Sunday Times* of October 18, 2015 pointed out, there ought to be a moratorium while talks between the governments of India and Sri Lanka are going on. Otherwise, in my opinion, Sri Lankan government is permitting the Indian businessmen and the owners of the trawlers who profit from the fishing industry to continue robbing what belongs to Sri Lanka.

When will the Sri Lankan government solve the recurring problem of the Indian fishing trawlers entering our Sri Lankan territorial waters, engaging in illegal methods of fishing, destroying our marine resources and depriving our active fishermen and their families their livelihood and flourishing of their lives? Does our government have another agenda? Does it find it difficult to stop the poaching of Indian trawlers because it obtains financial and technological assistance from India for its purposes? I pose these questions because so often our parliamentarians have said that they would stop poaching of the Indian trawlers in our territorial waters. But to date, no effective action has been taken, though both countries have also agreed to respect the **International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL)**. Bilateral agreements need to be respected.

Our Sri Lankan government must have as its primary goal the well-being of its citizens. The development of our country also means better quality of life for our people. Allowing our fishermen and their families in the North, North-Western

and Eastern provinces to suffer by not defending and protecting their right to fish in our territorial waters, earn their living, contribute to the National Income and foster the flourishing of their lives, shows the failure of our parliamentarians to fulfill the promises they so often make. Let justice and integrity of life flow like an unending stream in their lives.

Delaying to solve the issue makes the Indians to continue exploiting our marine resources in the Palk Strait. Therefore Sri Lanka's government must persuade the Indian government to respect the laws pertaining to International Maritime Boundaries.

Making the Sea-bed a Cemetery

The use of "leila" and "surukku" nets used by many Sri Lankan and Indian fishermen in our territorial waters is causing a lot of damage to our marine resources, the fishing industry and the livelihood of thousands of present and future generations of fisher-families. Often the fishermen dive into the sea and surround the shoals of fish and harvest them. The use of this technique is causing the depletion of fish species as well, besides destroying also the coral and other breeding grounds in the sea, thereby making the sea-bed a cemetery. It is also causing violent protests leading to breach of peace and harmony. . On February 1, 2016, the fishermen in Negombo staged a protest against the use of 'leila and Suruku' nets.

Since the Director of Fisheries had promised to find a solution to this problem, the fishermen called off the strike.

Businessmen who own fishing crafts also employ active fishermen to adopt this technique. Politicians support the use of this technique to win the votes of the fishermen and the businessmen. But the marine biologists and environmentalists have shown the harm that would be caused by the use of the forbidden nets.

The government's duty is to protect our natural resources, promote common good, and to maintain justice and peace by removing exclusion of some social groups and social inequality among all the Sri Lankans. It should avoid favouring through subtle ways the vested interests of some categories of people and politicians and / or political parties. Imagine what would happen to the present generation of fisher-families and to their children in the future and also to thousands of families who depend on fishing for their livelihood

At the rate the extinction or elimination of fish species and the fish breeding grounds are taking place, the Government's failure to take effective preventive action will lead to loss of livelihood leading to poverty, destitution, deterioration of children's education, malnutrition, sicknesses and death of fishermen and their families. If and when that happens, there will be occasions for violent protests and deaths which will reflect badly on the government and the people and of Sri

Lanka. Therefore common good must prevail, not the profit-oriented interests of individuals, businessmen and politicians.

Marine biologists feel that laila nets are being laid in close proximity to the Bar Reef, an important ecosystem situated off Kalpitiya area, which is declared as a sanctuary by NARA.

Pope Francis in his Encyclical, *Laudato Si*, wants people of good will to be concerned about ecological issues, fisheries being one of them. He expects government and civil authorities to promote common good, justice, inclusion and social equality. He says that there will be room for violence if exclusion and social inequality are not eliminated

Destructive Dynamite fishing.

“Blast fishing, commonly referred to as dynamite fishing, an illegal and destructive form of fishing is on the rise in Sri Lanka and it is a serious cause for concern, experts warn” (Asiri Fernando, *Sunday Times*, April 14, 2019). Quoting Dr. Sisira Haputhanthri, the Head of the marine biological resources division at the National Aquatic Resources Research and Development Agency (NARA), Asiri Fernando said that dynamite fishing is increasing in Mannar, Kalpitiya, Puttalam, Kinniya, Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara which have become hotspots for dynamite fishing and that fish caught with dynamite fishing is not fit for human consumption.

Dynamite is mostly used in shallow waters by fishermen to

gain a large catch in a short time. The explosive blast shock wave kills and destroys all marine life within its radius. Quoting Marine Biologist Nishan Perera, he says there is physical damage to coral reefs, including the destruction of coral structures. The damage to coral reefs and breeding grounds can be long lasting. Fishermen who use dynamite have themselves become victims of their actions.

Some active fishermen are forced by a few owners of the trawlers to use such illegal methods and at times to help also drug trafficking. Sometime the active fishermen who are not guilty are punished and imprisoned. The fishermen in such situations unable to defend themselves need the help of the clergy and the consecrated Religious.

Pope Francis in his encyclical, *Laudato Si* shows concern for marine life. He speaks of the harm that is being done by destructive fishing methods to marine life in the seas and oceans, thereby turning the seas into underwater cemeteries (no 40,41). Therefore the clergy and the Religious need to raise their prophetic voice against social and ecological injustices and victimization caused to the vulnerable fisher-families.

Hotels and Tourism causing displacement of the fisher-families

Several coastal fishing villages / centres are being taken over by the government and the hoteliers to construct hotels and

improve tourist industry, thereby causing displacement of the fisher-families from their traditional fishing grounds.

At a special meeting held on March 28, 1973, under the chairmanship of Fr. Anthony Fernando, OMI, the then Dean of Negombo Region, the priests agreed that the Mayor of Negombo and other Municipal Councillors should be told to stop issuing permits for the construction of new hotels and guest houses along the coastal belt in Negombo. At that time there were 10 hotels and 8 of these being between Kudapaduwa and Ettukkal. In a letter addressed to M.P and Mayor of Negombo, **Mr. Denzil Fernando** on May 8, 1973, the priests made the following observations. "Tourism should not be promoted at the expense of fishing industry in Negombo which is one of the biggest fishing Centres in Sri Lanka. Proximity to the International Airport does not mean that tourism should be developed to the detriment of the fishing industry. Hotels could be constructed in other parts of Sri Lanka where there are no people (or fewer people) without causing inconvenience to the fishermen in Negombo."

The hoteliers were buying land and were even blocking access to the beach which the fishing community so freely used from time immemorial. The priests also noted in that letter that they were rather concerned about the future of our Catholic fishing community in Negombo. "They are afraid that what happened to the Kandyan peasantry in the wake of developing tea industry could happen to fishing community in Negombo." The letter further noted: "Land is being acquired along the

coastal belt to put up hotels and shops to cater to the foreign tourists while pushing the local fishermen to congested areas without any possibility for expansion. Permissiveness, with the consequent form of care free behaviour of the foreign tourists is penetrating into these coastal Catholic areas.” It was at this time that I, on hearing about an intended sale of church property at Palagature, had to meet Cardinal Thomas Cooray, Archbishop of Colombo. He told me that he would not sell it without asking the fishermen. So, he was instrumental in preventing the sale of church property occupied by fishermen to hoteliers at Palagature, Kochchikade.

Today the hoteliers have their organization to promote their industry by constructing more hotels along the coastal belt in Negombo. With the encouragement and support given by the government for the promotion of tourism, many new hotels, and new shops are being constructed, causing the displacement of Catholic fisher-families.

The Sea plane project

Former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse’s development programme included Sea Plane airport construction project in Negombo lagoon in 2010. Concerned with the negative effects of this project on the livelihood of nearly 4000 fisher families living in eleven villages, the destruction of the breeding grounds of prawns and on the natural environment, the fisher families began to protest against this project. The sea plane struggle was won because

of the unity that was built among the fisher folk. **Fr. Sarath Iddamagoda, Fr. Sherad Jayawardane and Sr. Christine Noel Fernando, SCJM** were much involved with the fisher families in their struggle.

Removal of mangroves

At a meeting on February 10, 2020 between Gampaha District Forest Officer, **Devani Jayatilake** and the Fisheries and Inland Fisheries Industry State Minister **Sanath Nishantha Perera**, Devani Jayatilake, an educated person, had spoken of the importance of mangroves in the preservation of the ecosystem when the whole world is threatened by global warming and climate change. **Her daring speech has saved the natural beauty of the environment of the lagoon and the survival and livelihood of many families in Negombo.** She had pointed out that the District of Gampaha has the least forest cover (1.6 %) in Sri Lanka. **She bravely pointed out that the removal of the mangroves would cause the depletion of oxygen.** Some of the people at that meeting had failed to understand the importance of oxygen for the survival of human and infra-human beings.

Negombo lagoon which provides livelihood and employment to people living in more than eleven villages- mainly Catholic fisherfolk- is also getting polluted. Unwanted and unauthorized structures are also coming up disturbing the scenic beauty of the Negombo lagoon. Ignorance of what is good and beautiful is also a cause for evil today. Therefore people need to understand the connectedness between creation and human survival. They need to be educated to care for the environment which sustains them. Catholics in Negombo also

need ecological catechesis and ecological spirituality to care for the Earth which has become our new neighbour and is providing the resources (water, food, oil) for the sacramental life of the Catholics. **Ecological catechesis must include besides homicide, suicide and genocide, lessons on biocide (death of the species – living organisms), geocide (death of soil) and ecocide (death of the environment).**

Gampaha District Forest Officer Devani's daring speech on February 10, 2020 and the ignorance manifested by people, especially by the Catholics on that occasion, should challenge the Catholic clergy and the Consecrated Men and Women in and around Negombo, to imitate Jesus of Nazareth who taught people about the sacredness of creation. Adult catechesis is very much needed in Negombo

The Port City Project

The Port City Project by China Harbour Engineering Company was initiated by the former government headed by **President Mahinda Rajapakse**. The consequences of this project will be the massive excavation of sand, destruction of the rocky reefs, coral reefs and sand dunes, breeding of fish, the displacement and denial of livelihood for thousands of fisher-families living along the coastal belt from Moratuwa to Negombo / Kochchikade and also denial of job opportunities for fish sellers, repair Centres and Centres for sale of fishing gear. These facts have been made known through various protests organized by people with the support of leaders who are concerned with the harm that will be caused both to the fisherfolk, marine resources and to natural the environment.

The Colombo Port City project will affect more than 100,000

people who depend on the fisheries industry. Even the Environment Impact Assessment Report (EIA) has recognized the fact that fishermen will be affected. The fishermen did not want compensation but wanted the project be halted.

The United National Party (UNP) before the January 2010 General Elections had objected to this project and had promised to scrap this project once in power. But after the elections, people of Sri Lanka know that the UNP, as the key member of the Yahapalana Government headed by Mr. Maithripala Sirisena, had not been faithful to its promise. UNP had betrayed the Catholic fishermen living in the coastal belt from Colombo to Negombo/ Kochchikade, after getting their votes at the General Elections. This is a project funded by the Chinese Government.

Coming to know that financial assistance was sought by the Catholic Church from the Chinese Company to renovate the Basilica of Our Lady of Lanka at Tewatta, **the Christian Solidarity Movement** in a letter addressed to **Rt. Rev. Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith, the Archbishop of Colombo**, on July 28, 2015, noted: **“This involvement of the Church with that notorious company could be interpreted as the Church’s tacit approval of the same company’s destruction of the environment by constructing the Port City in Colombo which is ecologically and socially detrimental to the interior of country and the fisher community in the coastal belt.”**

On October, 01, 2016, protest- demonstrations were staged in some places between Uswetakeiyawa and Kochchikade by the fisherfolk led by the Religious leaders and several organisations pointing out once again the negative effects that

would be caused to the fisher-families, the education of their children and their grandchildren and to the marine resources and the natural environment.

Pope Francis, in his Encyclical, *Laudato Si*, wants the Catholic Church to be concerned about ecological issues, fisheries being one of them. However, initially open support was not coming from the Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Conference of the Major Religious Superiors, though those affected are mostly Catholic fisher-families. Since the people much affected would be the Catholics in the Archdiocese of Colombo, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith was soon compelled to express his concern on the alleged environmental impact by the Port City project and urged **President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe** to start a dialogue with the fishing community in connection with the project. He had also said that it is not too late even now to rectify the situation for the sake of the future wellbeing of the fisherfolk and the environment (*Daily Mirror*, October 17, 2016).

Sudden Price hike of Fuel and withdrawal of subsidies

The sudden price hike of fuel by the government of **President Mahinda Rajapakse** affected the livelihood of the fishermen in Sri Lanka very much and it made the active fishermen in several coastal areas rise up in protest. During a major non-violent protest organized by the fishermen at Sea Beach, Chilaw, who had kept away from fishing for two days, **Warnakulasuriya Anthony Fernando**, an active fisherman, was shot dead by Police on February 15, 2012.

On June 10, 2014, a letter signed by **Mr. Densus Fernando**,

the president of the Sea Street-Kudapaduwa Fishermen's Federation of Negombo (and signed also by the presidents of the fishermen's societies of Palagature, Kammalthota, Wennappuwa, Thoduwawa, Wattakkaliya, Sea Beach, Chilaw, Ambakandawila, and Kandakuliya), was sent to **President Mahinda Rajapakse** and to **Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith**, the President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference, with copies to Bishop Valence Mendis, the Secretary of the Catholic Bishops's Conference and to other local Catholic Bishops, and also to **Rev. Fr. J. Rasiah**, SJ, the former President of the Conference of Major Religious Superiors, stating the plight of the fishermen .

In the letter addressed to Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith and to other Bishops, the leaders of the fishermen requested them to plead with **President Mahinda Rajapakse**, to issue fuel at the price that was there before the unprecedented price-hike of fuel since it affected the livelihood of the fishermen very much. They also mentioned in that letter that the monthly subsidy that was promised by the Government had been denied for one year and it had caused sadness, pain and bitterness in the fishermen..

A letter dated June 21, 2014, signed by **Mr. W. Densus Fernando**, the president of the Sea Street-Kudapaduwa Fishermen's Federation, was also sent to **Pope Francis** sharing the sufferings and pains of the fishermen. On September 19, 2014, acknowledging receipt of the letter by Pope Francis and assuring that the concerns of the fishermen

have been duly noted , was received by Mr. W. Densus Fernando from the Vatican, prior to Pope's Apostolic Journey to Sri Lanka.

At a meeting in Colombo, President Mahinda Rajapakse, in the presence of Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith and Bishop Valencee Mendis and a few leaders of the fishermen's Organisations, decided to reduce the price of fuel. The fishermen were very grateful to Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith and to the Bishops for responding to their painful cries.

The Catholic fisherfolk always place their trust in the Catholic Church's leadership when they are confronted with oppressive forces. **Therefore the Bishops, the priests and the Religious should not wait to be persuaded and pleaded by the suffering masses. They need to decide to be in solidarity with the Catholic fisherfolk with genuine love and respond with sensitivity to their (fishermen's) struggles and find new responses without waiting to be invited when they (the fisherfolk) face serious problems which affect their livelihood. The fisherflock are sad when positive response from Church leaders is not forthcoming. Like Pope Francis they too need to take the initiative to show their compassion and mercy to people in painful situations because compassion is the summation of Jesus' life and teaching.** The Church without compassion has no validation from Jesus. That is why Pope Francis says: *“The Church needs shepherds of the people, living with the smell of the*

sheep in the midst of their people like Jesus , the Good Shepherd, not clerics of the State

The Free-Churches

Nowadays our Catholic fisherflock are also confronted by the Free-Churches and are tempted to join them. Some have already become members of those sects due to lack of a biblical literacy and biblical spirituality. Such an appropriate education needs genuine pastoral care which includes personal contacts and communication.

Social Isolation of the Fisherfolk

It is sad to see that vast majority of our Catholic fisher-families today find themselves in socio-cultural isolation due to lack of education. Many children leave school-education early. Some intelligent children lack the wherewithal for continuing education and are unable to obtain admission in better schools. Many parents themselves had also dropped out of school quite early. It is regrettable that vast majority of the fisherfolk who still form the core / the backbone of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka are in this situation. Are they and their children condemned to remain in social isolation? They need guidance and proper motivation to study and become good missionary disciples of Jesus.

In the early fifties, A. H. Mac Donald, a Canadian Fisheries expert, who visited Sri Lanka observed that, *“there is a correlation between the backwardness and poverty of the*

fishermen and their educational standards and so no worthwhile progress will be made until the educational standard of the fishing community is raised.”

In 1949, Mr. J. Fonseka started Loyola College to educate the poor children of Negombo in the church premises at Periyamulla. A few boys from the fishing community of the parish of Sea Street, Negombo who studied in Loyola College, Periyamulla were able to enter the University and became graduates. Among them special mention need to be made of Warnakulasuriya J. Martin Fernando who became the first Graduate of Loyola College in 1958, obtaining a First Class in Mathematics and also a lecturer in the University of Peradeniya.

Some of the children who have been assisted by the priests and the Consecrated Men and women Religious are now beginning to develop their talents and capabilities. Some have become priests, Religious, teachers, doctors, lawyers, engineers etc. I, for one, know that some Principals of Schools are becoming more conscious of the God-given gifts and talents of the children from fisher-communities. They also realize that value education is the key that will unlock life for the poor.

The children need therefore good opportunities, resources and facilities to study and to improve their living conditions and thereby to experience also socio-cultural integration and contribute to the progress of our country. The adults also need

education and enlightenment in the fast evolving today's society. The parish priests and the Religious can motivate the parents to educate their children.

Born to become not only Toilers and Housewives

All the boys born to the fisher-families need not become toilers of the deep sea (active fishermen) and all the girls need not become only housewives. Pope St. Pope Paul VI said: "Evangelisation would not be complete if it did not take into account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of people's concrete life, both personal and social"... "The human person who is to be evangelized is not an abstract being but is subject to social and economic questions" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no 29, 31). What St. John XXIII said about the self-advancement of the farming community in his encyclical *MATER ET MAGISTRA*, can be applied also to our fishing community.

The children need therefore encouragement, good opportunities and financial assistance to study and to improve their living conditions and thereby to experience also socio-cultural integration and contribute to the progress of our country. There is also the need to create awareness in the parents regarding the importance of education and enlightenment in the fast evolving today's society. Praiseworthy efforts are being made by a few parish priests, Religious and dedicated lay apostles to motivate the parents to educate their children.

Special Pastoral Care of the Fisherflock

Today, fisher-families have many social and economic problems. They are also divided due to party-politics. **I feel that there is an urgent need for setting up of special pastoral commissions in the coastal dioceses.** Such commissions can help to study the issues affecting their families and adopt new socio-pastoral strategies to promote a better quality of life. In these Unions, the fishermen need to be taught to articulate their needs and their rights non-violently to the authorities. Unless our fishermen are united to protect their human rights and progress, I am afraid many fishermen will be misled by leaders with ulterior motives.

The government should also appoint fisheries inspectors to help the active fishermen to educate them to organize their societies. Several years ago, there were government - appointed fisheries inspectors and fisheries co-operative inspectors visiting and assisting the fishermen' cooperative societies.

Scientific studies and / or occasional visits to the fishing centres alone will not suffice. Mere theological knowledge detached from human experience also will not help priests to respond to the new emerging needs and struggles of our Catholic fisherflock in Sri Lanka. Field-experience through exposure / immersion is very important. Our fisherflock may appear as aggressive and outspoken persons but they are obedient and expect transparency and accountability from parish priests regarding financial matters.

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THE MIGRANT FISHERFLOCK AND THEIR APPEALS

Migration of the Catholic fisherfolk had existed long before the advent of the mechanization of the fishing craft and the introduction of nylon nets and it continues to take place even today. There had been migration to the North Western areas like **Silavaththurai, Arippu, South Bar (Bay) and Thalaimannar from the Western Coast of Sri Lanka, especially from the parish of Sea Street, Negombo.**

Businessmen (Mudalalis), from **Maggonna, Pamunugama, Negombo and Wennappuwa** who owned purse seine (Maadal, Karaivalai), used to take several fisher-families to the Eastern coastal belt during the South-Western season since the sea along the Western coast was rough during that season. For example, Madel mudalalis from Maggonna went to **Kalkudah.**

In 1949, a group from Pamunugama-Bopitiya went to **Kallarawa** in the Kuchchaveli A.G.A Division. Among the people who went with the Mudalalis who owned purse seine only a very few were skilled fishermen. Others went to those areas as unskilled wage earners. They had to live in makeshift tents (wadies). While the skilled fishermen received reasonable wage, the unskilled were given food and a humble remuneration for their services. (for more info refer page 78).

Fisher-families from Karukkupane, Sea Beach (Chilaw) and Ulhitiyawa (Wennappuwa) went to Salapayaru, Sagarapura, and Pulmodai.

There was also a group of active skilled fishermen who migrated with their families to **Mankerni and Pannichenkerni** in the District of Batticaloa from the parish of Sea Street, Negombo in late forties.

Similarly another group of active fishermen went from Duwa, Negombo to **Kokilai and Nayaru**, in the Eastern coast of Sri Lanka to earn their livelihood. As time went on, several Sinhala-speaking Catholic fisher-families settled down in those areas. These families migrated to those areas in the Eastern Province and settled down long before the ethnic war began. **They were not ‘planted’ in those areas by politicians.** But some ordained ministers and the Religious are not aware of this fact. They lived peacefully in those areas. They built churches and supported the priests. Today, the priests and the Religious, as evangelisers, must appreciate in a special way their presence in those areas and foster their Christian presence in those areas.

These migrant and resident Catholic fisherflock at Kokilai needed the active presence of resident priest(s) who are proficient in Sinhala language to respond meaningfully to their socio-pastoral needs. Language is a means of their socio-pastoral needs. Language is a means of communication. Absence of active presence of Sinhala-speaking priests had

led to a few drop-outs from the Church.

MISSIONARY / PASTORAL RESPONSES

1. The late Bishop of Trincomalee-Batticaloa , **Bishop Ignatius Glennie, SJ** was very happy to have the migrant fisherflock from the parish of Sea Street, Negombo who came to his diocese in the early 1950's and to provide the needed spiritual and pastoral services. They settled down at Mankerni and Pannichchenkerni. At Mankerni, the migrant fisherflock built a beautiful Church and they have been cared by priests. Initially the parish Priest of Valaichenai used to provide the pastoral services. At present, the parish priest of Vakaraai takes care of these fisherflock who have settled down at Mankerni. When these migrant fisherflock at Mankerni lost their cadjan huts due to Tsunami in 2014, Caritas-EHED, Batticaloa provided them houses.

2. On February 2, 2015, at the invitation of **Bishop J. Kingsley Swampillai**, the then Bishop of Trincomalee diocese, Fr. Rohan Silva, OMI, the former Oblate Provincial of Colombo Province accepted the new Mission of Kallarawa, with residence at Kuchchaveli, to take care of the pastoral and missionary needs of the Sinhala-speaking fisher-families (residents and migrants) living in Pulmodai, Kallarawa, Sagarapura and Salapayaru. **Fr. Jesu Ramesh Warnakulasuriya, OMI** was appointed to take care of the fisherflock of Kallarawa Mission with residence at Kuchchaveli (for more information, refer page 78).

3. For many years, the diocese of Anuradhapura took care of the Sinhala Catholic-families of Kokilai. I know that the Oblate priests who were ministering in the parish of Padaviya (in the diocese of Anuradhapura) reached out to meet some of the spiritual and pastoral needs of the fisher-flock of Kokilai for several years. They did not mind the distance. The fisher-families at Kokilai who were affected by the Tsunami were also helped by Bishop Norbert Andradi OMI, bishop of Anuradhapura.

Having understood well the many appeals which had already been made in the past for pastoral care by the Sinhala-speaking Catholic fisherflock at Kokilai, **the new bishop of the diocese of Jaffna, Justin Gnanapragasam**, having discussed with Fr. Irwin Morais, OMI, the Oblate Provincial of Colombo, took the initiative and appointed a Sinhala Oblate, W. Leslie Fernando, OMI from the Colombo Province of the Oblates in March 2020.

4. At Silavathurai In the Diocese of Mannar: The parish priest of Silavathurai takes care of the sacramental and pastoral needs of the migrant fisherflock who are from the parish of Sea Street, Negombo.

The Fisherfolk in the Islands off Kalpitiya

There are more than 1000 fisher-families, both resident and migrant living in the islands of Utchimunai, Palliyawatte, Kirimundalama, Bottuwadiya, Mohottuwaram, Palugahathure, Pookkulam and Baththalangunduwa, in the North Western

coast of Sri Lanka, off Kalpitiya.

Some of their needs: Ownership of a plot of land, housing, fresh water, health and sanitary facilities, education of children, jetties, a light house etc. They also need unity and solidarity among the families since they are from different villages. The Government must try to provide the basic needs so that these fisherfolk in the islands will also live try to lead lives worthy of human dignity and help the economy of Sri Lanka. Non-violent group action of the fishermen guided by the priests is an urgent need to obtain the above-mentioned facilities from the government. The fisherfolk living in the above-mentioned islands are cut off from the mainland. For example, to reach the island of Utchimunai in a small mechanised boat from Kalpitiya jetty, about 1 ½ hours are needed, to reach Palliyawatte about 2 hours and to the island of Baththalangunduwa, the passenger -boat from Kalpitiya jetty takes more than three hours.

For the education of the children of the migrant fisher-families living in the island of Baththalangunduwa, Chilaw Diocese SEDEC had provided a school with the funds received from Italy through the kindness of the Sisters of St. Joseph's Home for Elders, Lansigama. Chilaw SEDEC and the fishermen's society maintained for many years a very committed layman who dedicated his life as a teacher, remaining in the island with his family.

APPEALS

The Catholic fisherfolk living in the island of Baththalangunduwa have appealed to the Archbishop of Colombo and to the Bishop of Chilaw for better spiritual and pastoral care. On 23rd March 2015, some leaders of the fishermen's society (Viksopamatha Grameeya Deevara Samitiya,) met Bishop Valence Mendis and had spoken of the need of a resident priest. On December 01, 2015, a letter signed by the secretary of the above-mentioned fishermen's society, was also sent to the Bishop requesting him to send a resident priest.

Though occasional pastoral visits to the island of Baththalangunduwa and conducting programmes for the fisherflock are good, what is urgently needed is the active presence of resident priest(s) **to promote more effective and fruitful socio-pastoral care.** Pope Francis says: *“I see clearly that the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm hearts of the faithful. It needs nearness, proximity.* (emphasis added).

CHURCH'S PASTORAL INNOVATORS AMONG FISHERFLOCK

Learning from the Past

Archbishop Thomas Cooray OMI (who became the first Sri Lankan Cardinal in 1965) having observed the plight of the fishermen in the Archdiocese of Colombo and the activities of the Leftist Movement (LSSP) led by Dr. Hector Fernando at Negombo among the fishermen, became very keen to start a project for the development of the fisherflock in the Archdiocese. The Leftists were telling the fishermen that the Catholic Church was exploiting them through the “Fish Rent” (10% of daily catch was paid to the parishes). In such a situation the Archbishop felt compelled to write a **Circular (No 17)** on August 15, 1949, inviting the parish priests of the coastal parishes in the Archdiocese of Colombo to organize fishermen’s associations fully managed by the fishermen themselves under the guidance of the parish priests. It was perhaps Archbishop Cooray’s first circular of socio-pastoral concern. The main objectives of the Association were: 1. To keep the Catholic fishermen together under the influence of the parish priest and thus protect their faith. 2. To safeguard the fishermen from perversion and disruptive Movements. 3. To improve the social and economic conditions of the fisherfolk.

Major P.A. de Mel, writing in the Catholic Messenger had said: “Towards the latter part of July or August 1949 a group of young men led by two white collar Government Servants

organized a meeting in Maggona Catholic school, at which the Asst. Government Agent of Kalutara, Mr. C.P.de Silva presided..... As Fishery Inspector of Beruwala I was also invited to attend this meeting. The purpose of this meeting was to form a Co-operative fishing society to operate madel in Maggona. Madels in Maggona were owned and operated by two or three persons who were members of Maggona parish. The madel owners and the parish priest quickly took action and organized a meeting of their supporters at which the Archbishop himself presided. I was also invited for this meeting. The objectives discussed at this meeting, if I remember right, are those mentioned in the Archbishop's circular no 17.”¹

Referring to the Circular No 17 of the then Archbishop Thomas Cooray OMI, Major P. A. de Mel wrote that the hurried action on the part of the Archbishop, to his knowledge was a sequel to the action taken by the two parties at Maggona in the latter part of 1949.

Besides the reasons given by Major P.A. de Mel, may I say that the challenge posed by various Left Wing Catholics made the Archbishop to take quick action on behalf of the fishing communities in the Archdiocese of Colombo. The spreading of the teachings of Karl Marx, Frederich Engels and V. Lenin by the Left Wing Catholics among the people of Negombo, particularly among the Catholic fishermen, organizing them and saying that the Catholic Church was exploiting them (the fishermen) through the “Fish Rent”, became a threat to the Church leadership. It is also important to note the personal

¹ Major P.A. de Mel, *Information regarding Fisheries in Ceylon since 1948* Catholic Messenger, September 21, 2003.

commitment of Archbishop Cooray to find alternate sites in the Eastern Province for the fisher-families of Sea Street, Negombo. The follow-up of Archbishop Cooray's Circular in the parish of Sea Street and the comments made by the Archdiocesan historian, Fr. Claude Lawrence, OMI (see pg 50) support what I have pointed out. However, Archbishop Cooray's affirmative actions for the fishermen of Negombo do not negate his concern for the fishermen of Maggona and for other coastal parishes in the Archdiocese of Colombo.

FOLLOW-UP OF ARCHBISHOP COORAY'S CIRCULAR AT SEA STREET, NEGOMBO

Quick response to the call of the Archbishop on behalf of the fishermen in the Archdiocese of Colombo soon came from the parish of St. Sebastian's Church, Sea Street, Negombo. **Fr. M. Anthony Fernando OMI**, the parish priest Sea Street, Negombo organised a fishermen's cooperative society with 850 active fishermen. They were for the most part illiterate and were fishing from rafts called theppang, which was nothing more than four soft wood logs tied together and shaped like a water-ski. They used a square sail on it, held up on a bamboo pole and a slit bamboo as an oar. The method of fishing was mostly the surrounding net and when the winds permitted they would go for herring with a set of drift nets. Their biggest problem was that they had only a few days of fishing. During the south west monsoon which lasted about 5-6 months, the wind was too strong and the sea was too rough and the fishermen could not venture to go for fishing. So the fisher-families were compelled to borrow money from the middlemen or pawn their marriage rings and chains. Hence

indebtedness became a way of life for the fisherflock in the parish of Sea Street. Hence during the south west monsoon, finding new fishing grounds in the eastern coast of Sri Lanka for members of the Fishermen's Cooperative Society to continue their occupation became necessary.

Archbishop Thomas Cooray, OMI who had been a parishioner of Sea Street before his ordination to priesthood, (Periyamulla, Archbishop's birth place was within the parish of Sea Street), knowing quite well the struggles of the fisherflock of Sea Street during the rough season, was compelled to approach **Bishop Ignatius Glennie, SJ** of the diocese of Trincomalee-Batticaloa, with Fr. Anthony Fernando, OMI, and make known the urgent need for the fishermen of Sea Street to migrate to his diocese during the off- season (Western monsoon). Bishop Glennie was very glad to welcome the Catholic fisherflock and assured the spiritual and pastoral services of the priests of his diocese.

Two suitable coastal villages - **Mankerni** and **Pannichchenkerni** – were found and the fisherflock from the parish of Sea Street could migrate and carry on their occupation there. During the North East monsoon, some families returned to Sea Street from Mankerni to continue their fishing. But they would go there again during the rough monsoon season in Western coast. Several families have settled down in these two villages.

Finding alternative fishing grounds in the Eastern coastal belt of Sri Lanka did not please a Mudalali (businessman) in the parish of Sea Street, Negombo. He became angry and began oppressing the active fishermen of the parish of Sea Street

who were members of the Fishermen's Cooperative Society. However, the fishermen continued to migrate during the rough season in the Western coast to **Mankerni** and **Pannichchenkerni**.

Prophetic Gesture by Archbishop Thomas Cooray

Marketing of fish in at Mankerni and Pannichchenkerni became a problem. So to tide over the problem, the co-operative society borrowed a loan from the Government and distributed it among the members but some members failed to pay back. However, Archbishop who cared very much for the fisherflock, residing at the annual meeting of St. Sebastian's Co-operative Society at Sea Street, Negombo on August 23, 1953, said: *“ I cannot understand the policy of the Government in stinting relief to the fishing industry when millions has been expended on other industries, in some instances to no purpose. The Archbishop congratulated the society on overcoming many handicaps and hardships and asked the members to be united and not lose courage because the Government had refused their Society a loan.*

He thought the Government should not victimize the whole Society because some 60 members out of 400 owed certain loans which they had taken. It must be realized that the Government was going the whole hog to extract a few hundreds from a few poor fishermen when no steps were being taken to get back lakhs of rupees from rich men of the fishing industry to whom the Fisheries Department had lent lakhs” *The Archbishop added: “We are not unreasonable but we are logical. All that we ask in the best interest of those Co-operative Societies, is that Government should*

show some latitude in keeping with the local conditions in framing rules for those co-ops fishing societies instead of trying to force down upon us cast iron rules imported from abroad” (Daily News, 25.8.1953 emphasis added)

Archbishop Thomas Cooray’s compassionate pastoral concern and care extended also to the growth of a vibrant Christian life of the fishing community of Sea Street. Fr. Anthony Fernando OMI, the then parish priest of Sea Street invited experienced Oblate preachers from “Nazareth”, Wennappuwa, to preach during the novenas in preparation for the feasts in the parish and began recruiting young boys from the fisher-families for priesthood and for Religious life.

Commitment of Fr. Joseph (Joe) Fernando

Fr. G. Joseph Fernando (popularly known as Fr. Joe), who was the Assistant to Fr. Anthony Fernando, OMI became the Parish Priest of Sea Street and committed himself to continue the work already begun by Fr. Anthony in the parish. Already Fr. Joe had been encouraged by Fr. Anthony to help the fishermen.

Fr. Joe who was very much interested in catechetical and liturgical apostolates, was called to promote an integrated socio-pastoral apostolate which embodied catechetics, liturgy and socio-economic development of the fisherflock. In order to know more about the life-patterns and their social psychology, he would go to the beach, sit down on their fishing craft (theppang) and by listening to their life-stories, became aware that the fishermen were very much past-oriented (very traditional) in their way of thinking and doing.

They had dropped out of school quite early and took to fishing as their way of life. Though the fishermen were illiterate and not innovative in their trade, Fr. Joe's pastoral approach made him love the fishermen and their families. Fr. Joe told me *"Though I am from the village of Duwana, I made the people of Sea Street Parish my brothers and sisters"*.

A New Evangeliser

Fr. Joe was one who was interested in promoting an integrated socio-pastoral approach in the parish of Sea Street. For this purpose, he obtained the assistance of competent persons. For the promotion of liturgical life, he obtained the services of the late Fr. Fred Sackett OMI, the Rector of the National Seminary, Kandy; for Biblical catechesis / spirituality, the late Fr. Jan Heemrood OMI, the Professor of Old Testament at the National Seminary, Kandy; for the formation lay apostles, Fr. Oscar Abeyratne, the late Frs Stanislaus Fernando OMI and Henk Schram OMI. With such assistance, Fr. Joe began to train some retired teachers in the parish to teach catechism to the children using a new approach.

He began to revive also a new liturgical spirit in the parish. In order to enable the parishioners to experience the spirit of Christian community during Eucharistic celebration, he began to create a suitable physical environment by removing not only the altar rails which separated the clergy and the faithful but also the pews reserved for a few privileged families and placed a large altar out of granite stone right in the centre, inside the church building (the main parish church) dedicated to St. Sebastian to signify the presence of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ during the Eucharistic celebration.

A Liberator of the Catholic fisherflock

As the parish priest at Sea Street, Fr. Joe too had to face big challenges posed by a Fish Mudalali (Middleman and a Municipal Councillor) who continued to oppress and victimize the fishermen. Fr. Joe had to liberate the fisher-families from the clutches of that businessman who provided loans to many active fishermen and made them migrate to coastal areas of his choice and controlled the price of fish. Whenever he contested at the Municipal Elections, the fisher-families were compelled to vote for him.

The Mudalali (the businessman) did not like Fr. Joe visiting and guiding the migrant fisher-families of his parish who were at Mankerni and Pannichchenkerni in the Eastern Province and for animating St. Sebastian's Fishermen's Co-operative Society. He even threatened Fr. Joe's life. But Fr. Joe, fearless in the face of obstacles with a spirit of a prophet, even risked his own life on several occasions to rescue his fisherflock from being oppressed by that Mudalali. It was at this time that Fr. Joe met Mr. W. Aronolis Appuhamy and his brother, Mr. W. Carolis Appuhamy (Mudalalis / businessmen) from Matara who were visiting the Eastern coast to buy fish from the fishermen. These two Mudalalis were prepared to buy fish at a wholesale price from the fishermen at Mankerni and Pannichchenkerni.

The heroic task of rescuing the fisher-families from dependence on the oppressive businessman and enabling them to have also a better self-image of themselves as active fishermen and flourish, involved bringing about attitudinal changes through personal contact, communication and seminars.

A Defender of the Catholic faith of the fisherflock

Like a prophet, Fr. Joe had to protect also the Catholic faith of the fisherflock in the parish of Sea Street since a Leftist Movement led by **Mr. Hector Fernando** was misleading the fisherflock saying that the Catholic Church was oppressing and victimizing them through the Fish Rent (a method of revenue for the Catholic Church). Fr. Joe, acting as parish priest at Sea Street, scrapped the Fish Rent and persuaded the fishermen – his parishioners - that they had the freedom to protect their Catholic faith from perverse teachings and be loyal to the Catholic Church freely without anybody's compulsion. The fisher-families of the parish of Sea Street, Negombo continue even today to remain faithful to the Catholic Church, and preserve also their Catholic heritage wherever they migrate for their livelihood.

Special Studies and Experience in Canada

The commitment of Fr. Joe on behalf of the fisher-families caught the attention of Archbishop Thomas Cooray, and in 1954, he sent Fr. Joe to **St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Canada** for studies in Development. During his two-year study programme which included exposure/immersion experiences, Fr. Joe met **Mgr. M. Coady, the Founder of the Antigonish Movement**, who was a great pioneer in promoting human development of the fisherfolk in Nova Scotia, Canada, through Adult Education and Economic Cooperation. Mgr. Coady's life and ministry also had a great impact on the life of Fr. Joe. (This fact I came to know while working under him at National SEDEC / Caritas).

A Moses-like liberator

On his return from Canada in 1956, Fr. Joe, with new knowledge and new skills, began to reorganize the Fishermen's Co-operative Society to rescue the fishermen from the oppressive power of the above-mentioned businessman and liberate them from indebtedness to pawnbrokers and enable them to and lead them to enjoy fuller life. Fr. Joe boldly brought together also the young active fishermen. 400 young fishermen met in camps on three weekends with Fr. Joe and they realized the urgent need for unity and education. In order to achieve these goals, they decided to have a reading room and to hold frequent meetings. A committee was set up and it came up with the need for a socio-economic programme. The programme included the following points: Each young fisherman contributed Rs 10/= a month to a credit Union (a common fund) and once a month the members of the union would gather for a lottery to determine the beneficiary of a boat which was given as a loan. That programme was carried out successfully.

A Great Change Agent

Fr. Joe was a great educator and a clever change agent. To bring a desired change in their occupation, Fr. Joe bought an out-board motor (engine) and fixing it to the theppang of a very brave fisherman, made him set out to sea. When the other fishermen came to realize that an out-board motor could help to go to the fishing grounds and return quickly, Fr. Joe's demonstrative action paved the way for quick mechanization of the fishing industry in the parish of Sea Street and in other coastal areas in Sri Lanka. The outboard motor enabled the young fishermen to go far from the land in search of fish even

during the rough weather throughout the year. Similarly, through the Union of the young fishermen, he introduced the use of nylon nets. Nylon nets are not heavy and the fishermen could carry double the original amount of nets. As a result of these changes, using outboard motors and carrying more nets, the young fishermen were able to set out far from the land in search of fish even during the rough weather throughout the year

With the use of nylon nets and outboard motors, the fishermen were able to increase their earning capacity. Soon Fr. Joe began to teach them the art of saving and pooling their meager savings in order to purchase their fishing gear(boats, motors, nylon nets) and avoid becoming indebted to the businessman (the Mudalali) and the money lenders who used to charge exorbitant rates of interest. .

Such an educational process of the 400 young fishermen led to the formation of the **Sea Street-Kudapaduwa Young Fishermen's Cooperative Society** in the parish of Sea Street and it expedited the process of mechanization of their fishing craft in the parish.

The young fishermen were also taught to invest some of their savings in a housing programme. As their earning capacity started to improve, the fisher-families began to construct new brick houses. Having a good house became the ambition of every family.

Becoming aware of the need for technical knowledge and skills for the fishermen of parish of Sea Street, Fr. Joe thought of starting a Fisheries School at Sea Street. Hence he encouraged and assisted some boys from the fisher-families of

the parish of Sea Street to study in the Universities.

In 1965, MISEREOR, Germany had given Fr. Joe financial assistance for Fr. Joe's educational programme of the young fishermen

A Companion of the Migrant Fisher-families

Fr. Joe was a zealous priest who accompanied the struggling individuals and groups in their journey of life empowering them for a better quality of life. He did not stay put inside the presbytery at Sea Street but visited the fisher-families who had migrated to Mankerni and Pannichchenkerni in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, and spent a few days with them, manifesting his pastoral care.

In order to ensure ongoing missionary and pastoral care for the migrant fisher-families from the parish of Sea Street, Fr. Joe obtained the services of the zealous parish priests of Thannamunai and Valaichchenai, and also the active compassionate presence of the Good Shepherd Sisters, **Sisters Gabriel, Joseph and Assumpta Maria**, who came to reside among the migrant fishermen at Mankerni, through the initiative of the far-sighted Provincial, **Mother Good Counsel, RGS**, and the kind and gentle attention of the Principal of the school at Mankerni. The Good Shepherd Sisters lived in a makeshift structure in the beach, taking care of the children in a Pre-school and building up the community spirit among the fisher-families. Jesuit Fathers also catered to the spiritual needs of the Sisters who were living at Mankerni.

Follow-up of Archbishop's Circular at Sea Street

Anyway knowing the concrete actions taken on behalf of the fishermen by the Archbishop Thomas Cooray after publishing his Circular No 17, and the response of the fishermen in the parish of Sea Street coastal parishes, we may also conclude what really prompted him to write a Circular. Commenting on the response to Archbishop's Circular, the historian of the Archdiocese, **Fr. Claude Lawrence, OMI** wrote in his book, *'History of the Archdiocese'*, ***"For a variety of reasons, not least of all the indifference of the men themselves to such a scheme there was no serious follow-up of this Circular at that time, except in the mission of Sea Street, Negombo."***

ACTION IN THE PARISH OF GRAND STREET, NEGOMBO

Fish Rent

In August 1964, concerned with the situation of the fishing population in the parish of Grand Street-Munnakkara in particular, Archbishop Cooray wrote to the parish priest, **Fr. Stanley Fernandopulle, OMI** saying, "Fish Rent as a method of Church revenue was established when practically the whole congregation was composed of a fishing population. Now only a section is engaged in that industry. Money was needed for building of the church. Now the church has been completed. As a result, the fish rent as church revenue properly so called has ceased to exist. As the function of the church committee from the beginning extended only to the church revenue, it is completely incongruous for that committee any longer to deal with the fish rent which belongs

to a section of the congregation. Moreover, if the church committee handles the fish rent, the public opinion created is that the church which is accused of fleecing the poor fishermen and of discriminating against them.” It was left to the parish priest, **Fr. Raymond Peiris** (later Catholic Bishop of Kurunegala) to implement such directive in the parish of Grand Street.

A Pilot Project at Grand Street Parish

In January 1970, I began my socio-pastoral apostolate under the guidance of Fr. Joe Fernando, the National Director of the Social and Economic Development Centre (SEDEC). I was asked to care for the fishermen of the Archdiocese. However, as the parish of Grand Street-Munnakkara, Negombo was an area of greatest neglect at that time regarding the situation as far as the fishermen were concerned, at the request of Fr. Anthony Fernando, OMI who had become the parish priest of Grand Street-Munnakkara, I was sent to reside at Grand Street by Fr. Joseph Fernando, SEDEC director, with the permission of Cardinal Archbishop Thomas Cooray, OMI to concentrate on the development of the fisher-families in that parish and also assist the other parishes in Negombo.

Since Fr. Anthony was very keen on improving the lot of the fisher-families, I began an educational programme for the active fishermen of the parish with the idea of forming a Fishermen’s cooperative society. The first successful cooperative society- St. Anthony’s Fishermen’s Cooperative society- was registered in September 1971 and it obtained loans from the Department of Fisheries to purchase 12 large mechanized boats and thereby improve their socio-economic

conditions. The activities of the cooperative society were supervised also by the officials of the Department of Fisheries and the fishermen repaid the loans which they had obtained from the Department of Fisheries. By 1973 this society owned twelve big 3 ½ ton fibre-glass boats and the fishermen managed this cooperative society well until its ‘take over’ by the United Front government of Sri Lanka.

Sea-Street-Kudapaduwa Fishermen’s Federation (SKFF).

The process of development begun with the young active fishermen led to the formation of new fishermen’s societies in the parish of Sea Street, Negombo, keeping alive the Gospel values, the principles and the spirit inculcated by Fr. Joe, who had become the National Director of the Social and Economic Development Centre (SEDEC) in 1968. It was **Fr. Cyril Gamini Fernando**, an Assistant parish priest at Sea Street, Negombo, who, together with **Mr. Srilal Fernando** (lawyer), convinced the members of the Fishermen’s Societies in the parish about the benefits that could come through the formation of a Fishermen’s Federation of the existing Fishermen’s Societies in the parish.

The Sea Street-Kudapaduwa Fishermen’s Federation(SKFF) was formed in 1985 and it comprises 14 small societies of the fishermen, including the 2 societies of Baththalanguduwa and Palliyawatte (islands off Kalpitiya), a society of the migrant fishermen at Mankerni (Eastern Province) and a society of the wives of the fishermen.

The Goal and the Objectives of SKFF

Having as its main goal the integral development of the fishing community (both resident and migrant), the Sea Street-Kudapaduwa Fishermen's Federation has some objectives, namely promotion of self-help and mutual help among the members, care of the coastal belt and sea-resources, loan schemes for members to purchase fishing gear, promotion of self-help projects of women's association, well-being of the migrant fisher-families, a non-levying Pre-school, non-violent action against injustice, resolving conflicts and disputes regarding family life of the members and property rights.

Action of SKFF

Sea Street-Kudapaduwa Fishermen's Federation has helped the fisherfolk, not only of the Parish of Sea Street, Negombo but also the fisherfolk of the whole country, for example, a) helping financially the victims (families) affected by Tsunami tidal waves in Negombo and Mankerni, to buy new boats, new engines, new nets, b) rescuing the people affected by floods at Ratnapura and Colombo, using their mechanised boats, c) assisting the fisherfolk victimized by denial of subsidies by the government, d) against the skyrocketing of price of fuel by the government in 2011e) acting against the illegal methods of fishing in Sri Lankan territorial waters, f) settling disputes in the fisher-families in the parish and, g) providing a **“disaster boat” and life-jackets** to rescue fishermen at sea. This Fishermen's Federation has become the **“Voice”** of the voiceless fishermen.

For many years, I served as an animator of the Federation and

organized also seminars to keep alive the spirit of solidarity among them. When the fishermen were faced with oppressive measures by the government, for example, by the price hike of fuel, the members had to be taught to express non-aggressively their just demands to the government and obtain reasonable assistance. Whenever need arises it has continued to take the cause of the fisherfolk before legitimate authorities and obtain what they truly deserve (eg when the price of fuel rose rapidly). However, good leaders need to try and preserve the original spirit, fellowship and solidarity within the Federation (SKFF).

IN THE DIOCESE OF CHILAW

A socio-pastoral project for the development of the fisher-families living in the diocese of Chilaw, was drawn up in 1970s under the direction of the late **Bishop Frank Marcus Fernando**, Bishop of Chilaw. At that time there were about sixteen parishes were catering to the needs of the fisher-families in the diocese of Chilaw. Their socio-economic, cultural and religious problems of the fisherfolk were identified and named. One of the aims of the project was to contact the fishermen and get them together in order to create awareness of their innate dignity, help them through group discussions to analyse their situation, discover the causes of exploitation, oppression, inefficiency and failures and make them understand that some solutions were within their reach if they formed their own cooperative societies and managed them with a sense of responsibility and mutual love.. Such an aim included training the fishermen in self-help, mutual help and community spirit. Having worked in the National Centre (SEDEC) and in the diocese of Chilaw, I know the project

aimed also at making the fisherfolk, architects of their own development

Among the priests who were much interested in implementing the project in the diocese in the seventies, special mention must be made of **Fr. Philip Setunga**, the then Director of the Catechetical and Chilaw SEDEC, **Fr. Michel Dumortier** who became the parish priest of the coastal parish of St. Roche's Church, Ambakandawila, Chilaw, **Fr. Don Emmanuel**, the parish priest of St. Anne's Church, Talawila and **Fr. Peter Rodrigo**, the parish priest of St. Mary's Cathedral, Chilaw. **Mr. Peter Lowe**, who had been working in the Fisheries Department and who had been sent on a study trip to Canada by the Government of Sri Lanka, had been a dedicated collaborator with the diocesan SEDEC of Chilaw diocese.

Sea Beach, Chilaw

Sea Beach, Chilaw had been a missionary area administered by the priests of St. Mary's Cathedral, Chilaw. In 1970 it became a parish. When **Fr. W. Don George OMI** became its parish priest, at his invitation, I began with the help of two Sisters of Perpetual Help Congregation, **Anne Mary** and **Lucy Sylvester**, a socio-pastoral animation programmes to create greater awareness of the dignity and resourcefulness of the fishermen, of collective self-reliance and of community formation through small group discussions and meetings of the zonal leaders. The two Sisters came from Ambakandawila, where they had their convent. **Fr. Gerard de Rosairo, OMI**, who was attached to the Oblate Preaching Band in Jaffna at that time, was invited by Fr. George for the spiritual animation of the fishing community of Sea Beach before the

annual feast of St. Sebastian, the patron saint of the parish of Sea Beach. Through these joint efforts of the priests and the Sisters, the spirit of unity among the fishermen also began to grow and they were able to form a parish council and also a Fishermen's Cooperative society in order to purchase mechanized boats and fishing gear, thereby improve their living standard¹. The fisher-families were also able to persuade the Authorities to provide better facilities for the education of the children and thereby obtain suitable buildings. Moreover, interest in the consecrated life (Religious life) also began to grow among the young girls at that time.

Ambakandavila, Chilaw

Fr. Michel Dumoutier who was parish priest of **Ambakandavila**, with the help of the **Sisters of the Congregation of the Perpetual Help** in the parish and the support given by the Chilaw diocesan SEDEC began organising in the parish four fishermen's cooperative societies, two Mothers' associations and apostolate of the youth, four Lakrivi (children) units, the Kithu Dana Pubuduwa group. Besides being assisted at the parish level, the Fishermen's societies, the Catechists, the Mothers' Association and Lakrivi (Children's Movement) received much encouragement and support from the respective Diocesan Centres. The Sisters, of the Congregation of the Perpetual Help, through their active presence in the parish

¹Fr. W. Emmanuel Fernando, OMI, *Some Reflections on Socio-Pastoral Concern*, 2008, p 80-84

helped very much in the building up of the community spirit among the people while responding compassionately to their struggles.

When I became the Pastoral Animator of Ambakandavila Parish in 1982, besides appreciating, encouraging the on-going programmes in the parish, I began to concentrate also on the formation of a dedicated Parish Council and on the education of the children, while encouraging some to pursue

studies in the Universities and in other Institutes of Higher Education. Education could unlock possibilities and facilities to improve quality of life of the fisherflock and their socio - ecological environment.

When President J. R. Jayawardena had decided to permit the setting up of the **VOICE OF AMERICA** (VOA) Radio Station by acquiring the land in the coastal village of **Iranawila**, Chilaw, as the parish priest (1982-1987), I had to make the fisher-families become aware of the problems they would face and I made the various associations in the parish of Ambakandawila-Iranawila to write to the President. Mr. W. Anthony Fernando, a member of the Diocesan Pastoral Council from the parish of Ambakandawila and I, as the Parish Priest of Ambakandawila, brought to the notice of the Diocesan Pastoral Council at its meeting, the difficulties, especially the displacement, the fisher-families of Iranawila would experience. From the moment the late Bishop Frank Marcus Fernando began to act assertively on behalf of the fishing community of Iranawila and thereby prevented the displacement of the fisher-families. The Government listened

to the appeals made and set up the project (VOA) at Iranawila without causing the displacement of the fisher-families.

When the “**COAL POWER PROJECT**” was proposed by the government at Norachchola, knowing very well that it would have negative effects also for the fishing population in his diocese, Bishop Frank Marcus protested with the people.

The Holy Family Sisters at Kurinjanpitiya, Kalpitiya have been involved for many years in an education programmes of the young people in that parish and in the care of the fisherfolk living in the islands off Kalpitiya. The Sisters also organized special life-education programmes for young girls in the parish of Kurinjanpitiya. It has been their belief that value education is also the key that will unlock life for the struggling masses.

Diocesan Pastoral committee for migrant fishermen

The Diocesan Pastoral Council of Chilaw had a sub-committee to care also for the migrant fishermen who belonged to the diocese of Chilaw. I had been also a chairman of that committee, visiting the migrant fishermen and their families in various parts of Sri Lanka (coastal, lagoon and reservoirs / tanks). Chilaw Sedec collaborated in the visits to the District of Trincomalee to meet the migrant fisher-families from the diocese of Chilaw.

IN THE DIOCESE OF JAFFNA

Efforts were made in the past to promote the development of the Catholic fisher-families in the dioceses of Jaffna by the

Oblates. Sri Lanka Oblates, **B. Antoninus , OMI**, and **F.J. Stanislaus, OMI** were much concerned about the plight of the Catholic fisherflock in the diocese of Jaffna. European Oblate **Victor Deslandes** who was at Passayoor in 1970 extended his services to the fishermen living in the island of Iranathivu. He had introduced a new kind of fishing nets and taught them how to use them to the best advantage. He was for many years an active member of the fisheries commission of the government. Another European Oblate **Emile Viard** also continued to help Iranathivu fishermen.²

In the nineteen seventies, at the invitation of Oblate **Fr. H. Moreau**, the parish priest in the island of **Iranathivu**, who was very much interested to improve the socio-economic conditions of the fishermen living in the island , **Fr. Joe Fernando**, the National Director of SEDEC/CARITAS was able to reach out in order to improve their living standards by providing big mechanized boats and a competent person to teach them the art of managing such boats. **Fr. J.B. Devarajah**, who was the diocesan director of HUDEC, Jaffna supported Fr. Joe in that project.

A Memorandum

A Memorandum³, signed by **Fr. Anthony Fernando OMI**, pointing out the many complex problems that were emerging

² **Fr. Martin Quere, OMI**, *History of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Sri Lanka (1847 -1947)*, p 323-324).

³ **Fr. M. Anthony Fernando, OMI**, *The Memorandum on the Need for a Lay Apostolate Movement for the Development of the Fishing Community , The Missionary Oblate*, no 29, Dec., 2003, p 36-40).

in the coastal fishing areas of Sri Lanka, and requesting the Bishops to set up a Mandatory Lay Apostolate Organisation, was sent on 20th November 1980 to Bishop Frank Marcus Fernando, the then President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference. Acknowledging the receipt of the Memorandum Fernando, Bishop Frank Marcus had written, "*It is well thought out and well presented....We will try our best to see what could be done. Certainly the problem is serious.*"

05

FR. JOE FERNANDO, the Catalytic Dean of the Negombo Region

I first met Fr. Joe Fernando as an altar server at Sea Street, Negombo and as a priest I worked under his guidance at the Social and Economic Development Centre (SEDEC) for nine years (1970 -1978). Hence what I write in this chapter is drawn from my personal observation as a parishioner of the parish of Sea Street, Negombo and also as a young priest I had observed their gatherings in the presbytery (mission House) at Sea Street.

“Under the direction of Cardinal Thomas Cooray, OMI, the priests of the Negombo region formed a team with Fr. Joe, their dean (animator /catalyst) and during a period of ten years (1958 – 1968) this team of priests planned and launched a number of social action programmes. They were not planned as a project but were started according to the needs and the financial resources available. From time to time, lay specialists were called in and such men were never wanting. They made themselves available and gave valuable help and advice . The inspiration for the programmes came from the Antigonish Movement and the Y.C.W.”

A Maha Vidyalaya (St. Peter’s Maha Vidyalaya) for Negombo

The first to be put into action was the fisheries programme in the parish of Sea Street, Negombo, in 1957. It was started as a parochial programme and had remained at that level. It was

also the joint commitment of the priests led by Fr. Joe that was responsible for obtaining a **Maha Vidyalaya (St. Peter's Maha Vidyalaya)** for Negombo. They were also able to promote youth apostolate among rural young men and young women by establishing a Centre (Christu Nivasa) in Negombo. The team was also able to persuade **Mother Good Counsel**, the then Provincial Superior of the Good Shepherd Sisters, to start a Centre for life-education and training of the poor girls in Negombo and she readily responded by providing such a **Centre at Hunupitiya**, a Centre for apostolate of the youth and the fisheries programme.

A Technical School for Negombo

It was Fr. Joe's far-sighted vision that enabled him to invite **the Salesians** led by **Fr. Henry Remery SDB**, to Negombo by offering them about 12 acres belonging to the parish of Sea Street, Negombo at Ettukkal, with the consent of the fisher-community of the parish and the approval of the Archbishop Thomas Cooray OMI . It was a time when most of the school drop-outs tended to become street urchins for want of technical skill. New industries were looking for skilled men. Hence the parish of Sea Street made a big sacrifice so that the Salesians could offer their services in Sri Lanka both to the Catholic Church and to the larger society, especially in the field of technical education and training of the youth including the ones of the parish of Sea Street.

Whenever disputes arose among the fishermen belonging to different coastal parishes of Negombo, Fr. Joe would intervene and amicably resolve them. As dean of Negombo region, he knew how to handle conflicts among fishermen and

promote reconciliation among the fishermen belonging to different coastal parishes in Negombo.

Looking back on the joint socio-pastoral action of the priests in the Negombo deanery, as a parishioner of Sea Street parish having observed their active presence and participation in the meetings, I can say that those achievements were made possible because, under the able leadership of Fr. Joe, the priests came regularly to analyse the socio-pastoral situation of the people in the deanery entrusted to their care, pray together and discern together and to make meaningful choices for action.

Need for a Religio-Socio-Economic Centre

The socio-pastoral experience gained through the group efforts during the 10-year period in the Negombo Deanery and the rapid social changes taking place made Fr. Joe to formulate and present a socio-pastoral project to Archbishop Thomas Cooray, OMI, underlining also the need for a well-organized Religio-Socio-Economic Centre in Negombo to implement programmes and projects.¹

Pastoral repercussions in the other parishes

Fr. Joe's apostolate of community formation of the fishermen in the parish of Sea Street through education and economic cooperation had also demonstrative effect in other fishing areas

¹ *The Religio-Socio-Economic Project at Negombo, Ceylon based on the Total Pastoral Approach of Vatican II* (a Manuscript)

In 1960's a few more priests took interest in the welfare of the fishing communities. Fr. Xystus Kurukulasuriya mobilized the fishermen of Dikkowita for educational and cooperative action and formed a fishermen's cooperative society. Fr. Quintus Fernando organized the fishermen of Pitipana with the view to introducing 3 ½ ton boats. "Mangalie" fishermen's cooperative society of Pitipana was one of the three best societies in Sri Lanka, until its "take over" by United Front government. Fr. Charles Senthilvel, OMI initiated a well-disciplined cooperative society at Palagature while Fr. Francis Fernando at Kalamulla introduced mechanized fishing through cooperative effort. In December 1971, there were 19 active fisheries cooperative societies in Negombo region.

Fr. JOSEPH (JOE) FERNANDO
THE FOUNDER-DIRECTOR OF SEDEC

The inspiration for the socio-pastoral programmes in Negombo deanery came from the Antigonish Movement (of Coady International Institute of St. Francis Xavier University) and the Y.C.W (Young Christian Workers' Movement of Belgium). The primary object of the programmes was integral development (socio-economic, educational, cultural, pastoral and spiritual) of the individuals and groups.

Having served as parish priest of Sea Street and as dean of the priests for ten years, Fr. Joe was keen to start a Centre in Negombo to continue the integral development of the people. For this purpose, he consulted Fr. Lucien Schmitt, OMI who, as parish priest of Hanwella, was involved in several development projects.

In the meantime, Coady Institute, coming to know the pioneering / success story of Fr. Joe for the development of the fisher-families, invited him in 1967 to share his experiences with the staff and students at St. Francis Xavier University and at the Coady Institute at Antigonish, Canada. At that time, Archbishop Thomas Cooray, OMI with Fr. Lucien Schmitt OMI, who was very capable of obtaining financial aid for development from funding agencies in Europe, was in Rome. Archbishop Cooray wanted Fr. Joe to meet him and Fr. Schmitt in Rome to discuss matters relating to the setting up of a Centre for development of the poor,

based on the Negombo experiment. In Rome, the three of them met the officials of **CARITAS INTERNATIONALIS**. The officials spoke of structures to serve the poor and the needy by distributing money. Fr. Joe spoke of the poor people - based grassroots institutions for development of the poor and the disadvantaged.

From Rome, they went to Aachen, Germany and met **Msgr. Dossing**, the Secretary General of **MISEREOR** and another Director in charge of the Asia Desk. Listening with much interest to Fr. Joe relating his success story in Negombo, the Directors at **MISEREOR** who were interested in people-based institutions for development, said, “Do at the national level in Sri Lanka what you have done in Negombo.”

BIRTH OF A NATIONAL CENTRE

Although Fr. Joe was keen on starting the Socio-Pastoral Development Centre in Negombo on his return to Sri Lanka, Archbishop Cooray wanted it to be the Archdiocesan Centre. The late **Bishop J. Emilianuspillai, OMI** of the diocese of Jaffna, coming to know of the contemplated programme, requested the Archbishop to make it a National Centre. Thus what began as rural people-based grassroots project in Negombo became a national socio-economic development programme of the Catholic Church in 1967 for the uplift of the poor and the disadvantaged in Sri Lanka. This programme embodies also the services of **CARITAS INTERNATIONALIS**, based in Rome.

Becoming a National Development programme, also meant being mandated by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri

Lanka. The Bishops' Conference named a Board of Governors, with **Fr. Lucien Schmitt, OMI** as President and Fr. Joseph (Joe) Fernando as its secretary. Among the highly qualified Board members were **Mr. G.I.O.M. Kurukulasuriya and Mr Michael Seneviratne.**

Initially, Fr. Joe had the use of Joe Nethasinghe Communication Centre at Kynsey Road, Colombo 8, for the "take off" of the socio-economic development programme.

Planning and organizing the secretarial work needed an administrative office and the services of a highly qualified and motivated persons. Soon, it became necessary also to have a suitable Centre and it was left to Fr. L. Schmitt, OMI to seek financial assistance from Funding Agencies in Germany and shift the administrative office to Kinsey Road, Colombo, 8 and name it the SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT Centre (SEDEC) with Fr. Joe Fernando as its Director. He was ably assisted by **Miss Marie Fernando** as his secretary **and Sr. Irene Seneviratne, FMM**, a qualified nurse who had cared for the sick in the General Hospital, Colombo for several years. Fr. Schmitt who remained a trusted friend supporting Fr. Joe and SEDEC, later became also the Administrator of SEDEC while Fr. Joe remained its Director. Miss Marie Fernando served the cause of the neglected poor in and through SEDEC with a deep sense of dedication for more than 25 years. I, for one, began to assist Fr. Joe at SEDEC from January 1970 till June 1979.

Founder-Director of SEDEC

As Founder-Director of the Social and Economic Development Centre (SEDEC), Fr. Joe instilled in the members of the Board of Governors, appointed by the Bishops' Conference, the meaning and the spirit of 'social apostolate', and obtained their expertise and their commitment to the poor and the powerless. With the collaboration of the Diocesan Directors of Social Action, he was able to begin a Social Animation Institute in Colombo and provide a 3-month course on Social Animation in Sinhala, Tamil and English and train community animators (Priests, Religious, Laity).

Fr. Joe collaborated with the Diocesan Directors of Social Action trying to create a Movement in the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka for the integral development of the disadvantaged and the marginalized. As Director of SEDEC, he was able also to reach out to the poor fisherfolk living in the island of Iranathivu in the Northern Province.

A Visionary

As Director of SEDEC, Fr. Joe had three main objectives. One was to meet the bishops and the priests to create awareness about the need for development of the poor and the marginalized based on the social teachings of the Second Vatican Council by setting up diocesan Centres for socio-economic development. Through the diocesan Centres, the objective was to have a group in every parish for the development of the poor of the parish. Through the parish groups it was Fr. Joe's intention to create awareness of the innate dignity of the poor individual persons, effect needed

attitudinal changes, and makes them own their institutions through education and group / community action. Thereby the poor could bring about fundamental changes in the socio-economic institutions, beginning with the economic because the most pressing needs of the poor are in the economic and thus become masters of their destiny, enjoying abundant life.

The aim therefore was to make the structures of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka for development get integrated in every parish pastoral ministry and to make the Catholic Church to become the liberator of the poor. In this endeavour, Fr. Joe was inspired by the teachings of the Encyclical on the Development of the people issued by Pope Paul VI, in which the Pope had said that the authentic development is for each and all the transition from less human conditions to those which are more human. The parish based groups could study the teachings of this papal document for the development of the poor of the parish.

Secondly, to get these principles inspired by the Social Encyclicals of the Catholic Church to the people through the diocesan Centres, Fr. Joe began the formation and training of social animators at Aquinas College, Borella with Fr. Schmitt always encouraging and supporting him. These training programmes of 2 – 2 ½ months' duration were conducted in Sinhala, Tamil and English. Several laymen and lay women from the dioceses and the Religious men and women from the Religious Congregations took part in these training courses.

Thirdly, there was also the need to create a Lenten Fund in Sri Lanka, through the spirit of self-discipline and sharing for the development of the poor and the disadvantaged, Fr. Joe

proposed to the Catholic Bishops' Conference the setting up of such a Fund. The Lenten Fund was approved by the Bishops' Conference.

Being a non-profit service organization of the Catholic Church, Fr. Joe placed the Centre at the service of the Nation, by supporting people's organisations and government's people-oriented action programmes. He collaborated with several Ministries such as Fisheries, Health, Housing and Social services. He served as a member of the Fisheries committee of the Government.

To lay a solid foundation to social action movement within the Catholic Church, he enlisted the services of many experts. He invited sociologists of the caliber of Professor **F. Houtart** of the University of Louvain, Belgium and his assistant **Ms G. Lemercinier** to undertake a study of SEDEC and its programmes.

An Enabler

A scholarship board to provide financial assistance to train Church personnel for social apostolate was established and Fr. Lucien Schmitt OMI was of great assistance to him to solicit help from German Catholic funding agencies such as MISSIO, MISEREOR and MIVA. The two calamities- Racial Trouble and Cyclone- demanded quick action from SEDEC. With many zealous Sisters drawn from several Congregations and the tireless worker, **Fr. J.B. Devarajah**, he was able to provide immediate relief to the refugees of Indian origin in the diocese of Jaffna. For nearly six months, Fr. Joe committed himself to the task of rehabilitating the victims of cyclone in

the diocese of Trincomalee-Batticaloa with a team of dedicated priests, Sisters and laity.

On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of SEDEC, commenting on the work done, Fr. Joe said that the achievements were not possible if not for the help given to him by the Board members, the various committees and the staff. He was grateful to the Catholic Bishops' Conference for the trust placed on him and particularly to Thomas Cardinal Cooray OMI and Fr. L. Schmitt OMI for their special support and encouragement.

Fed the Asian Bishops with the fruit of groundwork

The Asian Bishops had established the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC) in 1972 and they were concerned about the poor in Asia. **Jesuit Father Aloysius Pieris**¹, says Fr. Joe was also one who worked assiduously to feed the Asian Bishops with the fruit of the groundwork done by Asian theologians. As one who worked at SEDEC, Having been with Fr. Joe, the Director of National SEDEC, I know that he was influenced by the social teachings of the Second Vatican Council and by the Encyclical, *Populorum Progressio* of Pope St. Paul VI on the Development of People and that it was Fr. Joe, who was instrumental in getting **Oblate Father Tissa Balasuriya** to write the Paper on Economic Problems in Asia for **Cardinal Thomas Cooray, OMI** to be presented at the inaugural meeting of the Federation of Asian Bishops in Manila and which received much applause and much praise from the audience.

¹Aloysius Pieris, SJ, *The Genesis of an Asian Theology of Liberation*, p 128

International Recognition

Fr. Joe's commitment to the poor and the marginalized and their integral development won international recognition. In 1976, when he was named Vice- President of CIDSE, the International Body of Catholic Agencies, he became the first Asian and the first Sri Lanka to hold that post. In 1979, Coady International Institute of St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish Canada conferred an honorary doctorate on Fr. Joe for his development work. When he retired from directorship of SEDEC in 1980, he was called to the Vatican to take up an assignment at **CARITAS INTERNACIONALIS** (1979-1987), an agency that coordinates charitable works in the dioceses of the Catholic Church in the world.

“The Blue Print Joe”

Speaking of Frs. Joe and Schmitt, Mr. Charles of CAFOD could say that Fr. Joe depended on the people and in their strength to build people's destiny while Fr. Schmitt was capable of getting financial aid from funding agencies for development of the poor and the peripheral people. Fr. Joe was called “the blue print Joe” for he was a thinker, a social engineer, a prophet and a visionary. Besides these qualities, I say that he manifested his love for God through his love for the poor and the disadvantaged.

He was a person of deep faith in God, a devout priest of the Catholic Church and an ardent lover of the disadvantaged individuals and groups, particularly of the fisherfolk, the upcountry estate workers and the rural youth.

Remembering Fr. Joe affectionately

The Sea Street-Kudapaduwa Fishermen's Federation and the Fr. Joe Fernando Education Fund of Kudapaduwa, Negombo try to keep alive the memory of Fr. Joe Fernando in the parish of Sea Street, Negombo. On September 26, 2015, the Fr. Joe Fernando Education Fund organized and celebrated Fr. Joe's 90th birthday, with a thanksgiving Eucharistic celebration with his presence at the Church of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, Kudapaduwa and the members of the Sea Street-Kudapaduwa Fishermen's Federation took the initiative to obtain permission from the Archbishop to have the funeral service for Fr. Joe and his burial in St. Sebastian's Church premises, Sea Street, Negombo , on February 25, 2017. On the occasion of the first anniversary of his death), the members of Sea Street-Kudapaduwa Fishermen's Federation will organize Eucharistic celebration in St. Sebastian's Church, Sea Street on February 24, and will thank God for the gift of Fr. Joe to their parish community.

Fr. Joe, during his priestly life and ministry, had manifested his love for God through his preferential love for the integral growth and salvation of the disadvantaged individuals and groups. May he enjoy the everlasting intimacy of God and intercede for all the people who are struggling to experience dignity of the children of God and the spirit of community.

Fr. Joseph Fernando

Birth: Sept 25, 1925; Ordination: March 17, 1949;

Death : Feb 23,2017.

COMMITMENT OF THE OBLATES TO THE FISHERFLOCK

In the Kallarawa Mission

At the invitation of **Bishop J. Kingsley Swampillai, Bishop Emeritus of Trincomalee diocese** in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, the Colombo Province of the Oblates, after the formal discussion of **Fr. Rohan Silva, OMI, the former Oblate Provincial** with the Bishop on February 2, 2015, accepted to begin their services with new missionary enthusiasm in the newly established Kallarawa Mission. Having received the letter of presentation from Fr. Provincial, Bishop Kingsley Swampillai appointed **Fr. Jesu Ramesh Warnakulasuriya, OMI** as the Pastor of Kallarawa Mission with effect from February 13, 2015 and mentioned that the Centre of the Mission would be at Kuchchaveli, In the letter of Appointment, Bishop Kingsley Swampillai had also stated that Fr. Jesu Ramesh could receive my¹ assistance to organize the above mission.

The new Kallarawa Mission is detached from the parish of Nilaveli, Trincomalee which was begun by the Oblates in 1970 with the **late Fr. Betram Thirimanne, OMI** as parish priest and ministered by several Oblates till 2017. **The new Mission Centres are: Salapayaru, Kuchchaveli,**

1 Fr. Emmanuel Fernando, Omi, the Animator at Rajabima Oblate Centre, Anuradhapura.

Pudavakattu (Sagarapura), Kallarawa and Veeranthivu (Pulmoddai).

Oblates with New Enthusiasm

The migrant Sinhala Catholic Fisherfolk who had left that coastal belt during the ethnic war began to return to carry on their fishing. In order to provide the needed pastoral care to the returnees and to the Catholic fisher-families at Kallarawa and Sagarapura, who were living under trying conditions in the post war situation, Bishop **Kingsley Swampillai invited the Oblates of Colombo Province again to the diocese of Trincomalee.** The commitment of the Oblates with new enthusiasm in the new Mission / Parish has been especially to the fisher-families, both resident and migrant, without neglecting the people engaged in other occupations.

Shared Leadership

From August 2015 till November 2017, **Fr. Surain Dhanushka Fernando, OMI**, a member of the Oblate Community at Rajabima Oblate Centre, Anuradhapura, assisted Fr. Jesu Ramesh during week-ends and **Fr. Savindhu Senarathne, OMI**, who was also a member of the Oblate Community at Rajabima Oblate Centre, assisted Fr. Jesu Ramesh from December 2017 till February 2019. One of the observable features in the pastoral life of these Oblates has been their **shared leadership** to serve the people selflessly. Besides ministering the sacraments and other liturgical services, they have tried to respond to the felt needs of the

people and of the environment.

English Class

Fr. Jesu Ramesh was quick in his ability to bring together children belonging to the four major religions (Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus) to sit together for the classes conducted in English language on Saturdays at Kuchchaveli and promote also togetherness and fellowship among them. The Muslim children also used to travel from Pulmoddai for the classes and get-togethers. These classes and get-togethers also created avenues for inter-racial and religious encounters in the area. Fr. Jesu Ramesh' pastoral initiatives had good results among the youth and adults at Kuchchveli Mission and they also had demonstrative effects in the other parishes in the diocese of Trincomalle to start similar classes in English for children on Saturdays.

Lakrivi- Children's Movement

Besides the Saturday classes, the Oblates also began promoting the **Lakrivi- a Children's Movement** – which fosters togetherness, advancement of human and spiritual values and virtues and also leadership qualities among the children belonging to different racial and religious affiliations. Through these efforts, the priests try also to heal the fear, anxiety, estrangement and pain caused by the Easter Sunday terror attack on the Christians in the churches and on the foreigners in the hotels, on April 21, 2019.

Migrant Fisherfolk return

Another observable result of the above-mentioned activities has been also the openness and readiness of the Muslims to enable the Catholic migrant fisher-families to carry on their occupation in their neighbourhood in the post-war situation.

New Church building

With the generous financial contributions, Fr. Jesu Ramesh built a new church dedicated to St. Anthony in the coastal village of Kallarawa, where Catholics gather for the annual feast of St. Anthony in the month of June.

Living under trying conditions

Fr. Dhanushka, residing at Sagarapura concentrated also on Catechesis and education of children and **Fr. Savindhu** took the initiative to provide also the needed facilities / buildings for Eucharistic celebrations and community prayers. The three Oblates had to live with minimum comfort in the new territory (the parish) which had been destroyed by the ethnic war and the tsunami. Faced with poisonous snakes and wild elephants, they had to live and serve the people trusting in the protection of God and the maternal care of Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

On March 3, 2019, **Fr. Subash Fernando, OMI** succeeded Fr. Jesus Ramesh as the Pastor of the Kallarawa Mission. Like his immediate predecessors, Fr. Subash Fernando also

hopes to promote fellowship and solidarity among people of different Faiths in the parish and hopes also to educate, guide, counsel the people. Besides ministering the Sacraments to the Catholics living in the different villages (parish Centres) in the parish, Fr. Subash Fernando has taken the initiative to travel to Ginnapura which is near Kokilai lagoon in order provide Holy Mass on Saturday evening to the migrant fisher-families from Karukkupane (Chilaw). These fisherfolk generally look forward also to share their joys and sorrows with their priest counselor every week. Even during the tense situation in the country created by suicide bomb blasts on Easter Sunday, Fr. Subash continued to visit the migrant fisherfolk in his parish..

Families at Kallarawa.

Families from **Bopitiya-Pamunugama** in the Western Province of Sri Lanka came to the fishing village of Kallarawa in 1949. At that time there were about eleven families. They had come with the owners of purse-seine (Madal, Karaivalai). They did not have permanent houses. A small church building dedicated to St. Anthony was constructed at Kallarawa with the financial assistance provided the owners of purse-seine. The annual feast of St. Anthony was celebrated by Fr. Arulappa in 1951. By the year 1960, the number of families increased to about forty. These families did not have facilities for transport, health care and education of their children. Eventually this village became the largest purse seine Centre, north of Trincomalee town.

During the fishing season at Kallarawa, the fisher-families came annually from the Western coastal belt of Sri Lanka without fail. Between 1968 and 1977, there was a resident fishing population of about hundred families. In 1978 a school was built. During the off season (rough sea), the people were engaged in farming. The people lived joyfully at Kallarawa. After 1985 twenty new families settled down at Kallarawa. However, due to the war between the Sri Lankan government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the deaths of several people caused by LTTE between 1985 and 1995, the people became refugees in a school at the Mineral Sands Corporation. Those who lived in this village from 1949 to 1995 lost everything they owned. By June 1995, there were thirty seven families in the army camp. Bishop Kingsley Swampillai condemned the killings by LTTE (Island, June 21, 1995)

With the end of the war between the Sri Lankan army and LTTE, the fisher-families started coming again from the Western coastal belt of Sri Lanka. These families had to undergo untold hardships once again due to the tidal waves of Tsunami in December 2004. They lost practically everything they owned. Since Kallarawa was part of the parish of Nilaveli at that time, the then parish priest, **Fr. G.Gunanayagam, OMI**, spared no efforts to obtain financial assistance from generous Institutions and Organisations and provide houses and fishing gear (boats, engines, nets etc) for the fishermen at Kallarawa who were victims of Tsunami. Since February 2015, the Colombo Province of Oblates have

begun to commit themselves to bring a better quality of human and Christian life to the people in the new Kallarawa Mission in the diocese of Trincomalee.

W. CANISIUS FERNANDO

HE LAID DOWN HIS LIFE FOR THE FISHING COMMUNITIES

HE SERVED OTHERS SELFLESSLY

Mr. Warnakulasuriya Canisius Fernando, a devout Catholic, a faithful husband, loving father, caring brother and a loyal friend of the fisherfolk whom I had known personally and with whom I had often discussed and executed several development programmes laid down his life for his friends on October 5, 2007.

Canisius Fernando had five sisters and two brothers. Since he was compelled to help his father, who was a fisherman, for the livelihood of the family, he went only up to Grade 4 and then took to fishing. From his younger days, he started to mix with the young men, spending his free time singing songs and becoming also a frivolous person.

Motivated By Sr. Lucy

But a profound change took place in Canisius' life when he met Sr. Lucy Sylvester from the Convent of the Sisters of Perpetual Help, Periyamulla, Negombo. Sr. Lucy was one who loved the fisherflock at Kudapaduwa and made every

effort to motivate the young men and young women for a better quality of human and Christian life. Having been motivated by Sr. Lucy to love God and people, Canisius became interested not only in the activities in the parish but also to bring together young fishermen and form fishermen's associations. The spiritual motivation and energy he had received from Sr. Lucy led him to join the Sea Street-Kudapaduwa Fishermen's Federation (SKFF), become its treasurer and make it more active and more service-oriented. (Canisius had told me time and time again that it was Sr. Lucy who was God's instrument to bring about a profound change in his life).

Animated by Fr. Joe

Becoming a member of the SKFF, Canisius soon came to know Fr. Joe Fernando who had been a parish priest of Sea Street and the catalyst bringing about better quality of life of the fisherflock. Fr. Joe's presence and discussions with the leaders of SKFF, enabled Canisius to keep alive and active the motivation and the spirit of love for God and the people which he had already received through the life of dedication of Sr. Lucy. As the treasurer of the above-mentioned SKFF, he believed it was necessary to keep the spirit of love and service alive in the members of SKFF. Hence, he took the initiative to organise seminars and retreats with the assistance of Fr. Joe for the members of the SKFF, at St. Anne's Church, Talawila, at the Pastoral Centre, Bandarawela and at Oblate Centre at Polwatte, Minuwangoda. He did not limit his services only to the members of SKFF, but began to organize seminars also

for the wives of the members of SKFF. For their children, he organized a Children's Circle.

For the leaders of SKFF, Canisius organized regular meetings to discuss current issues and to take suitable action. Whenever the livelihood of fishermen was affected by certain actions taken by the Government, he was one who spearheaded non-violent action (e.g., discussions with the relevant Government members, non-violent protest meetings etc.).

A Person of selfless service

Canisius Fernando, as the treasurer of Sea Street-Kudapaduwa Fishermen's Federation, with the committee members of SKFF, took an active part in responding with the financial support of the generous benefactors to the urgent needs of the fishermen affected by tsunami, in Negombo and also the migrant fishermen from the parish of Sea Street at Mankerni in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, who also had lost their boats, nets and engines. Canisius and SKFF committee were also able to obtain the assistance of Caritas-EHED of Trinco-Batticaloa diocese to help the migrant fisherfolk at Mankkerni who were from Sea Street parish and at Mankkerni who had lost their houses, boats and fishing gear.

Canisius Fernando's services were not limited only to the fisher-families of Negombo. His spirit of dedication enabled him to reach out to the fisherfolk living beyond the boundaries of Negombo, at Chilaw, Udappuwa, Kalpitiya and in the

island of Baththlangunduwa. In order to consolidate fishermen's organisations in Negombo, he associated also with Samastha Lanka Deewara Samitiya in Negombo, and with his spirit of honesty and dedication, he became the treasurer of that organization as well.

Canisius Fernando was one who could converse in Tamil, Sinhala and English and had personal contacts with the leaders of the Indian Fishermen's Union in Tamil Nadu. Whenever our fishermen from Negombo region crossed the territorial limits and were held in India for unauthorized entry, the members of the affected families would approach Canisius to help them since he had personal contacts with the leaders of Indian Fishermen's Union who could also assist in getting the fishermen released.

Shot down inside the Madurai Central Jail

On October 4, 2007, a few days before the feast of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary at Kudapaduwa, Negombo, where he was born on September 9, 1963 and brought up, Canisius Fernando went to India on a mercy mission to see the four fishermen whose fishing boat had been apprehended by the Indian Coastal Guard on June 13, 2007, and had been sentenced to four months' imprisonment for unauthorized entry into Indian waters. They were to be released on October 8, 2007, and Canisius Fernando was kindly requested also by the relatives of the fishermen in Indian custody to go to India to make arrangements for their return to Sri Lanka. Though he was not disposed physically to undertake the trip to India, his

loving commitment to the welfare of the fisher-families made him to embark on the mercy mission to India. Canisius who had been to India on a few occasions earlier for similar purpose, had gone to see the four fishermen also with a letter issued by the Sri Lankan Deputy High Commissioner, in Chennai, certifying his identity and purpose of his visit. But on that occasion, he was prevented from bringing good news to Sri Lanka. Canisius Fernando was shot dead inside the Madurai Central Jail by the prison guard on Friday, October 5, 2007. He had laid down his life for the poor fisherfolk.

To date, we do not know the cause of his death. It is almost veiled in a mystery. A post - mortem held in Sri Lanka ruled that the death was caused as a result of a shooting. The Indian officials in Madurai had said that the prison guard who shot Canisius Fernando has been suspended and the matter was being investigated.

Canisius' death caused by the prison guard in front of the Madurai Central Prison raises a few important questions. Did the security guard have sufficient and proportionate reason to shoot W. Canisius Fernando, a Sri Lankan, and a visitor who was unarmed and who had gone with the needed documents? Is it an action justifiable nationally and internationally?

A Funeral Procession of Affection and Gratitude

What a grand moving funeral procession on the day of Canisius' burial in the cemetery at Sea Street, Negombo! I had not seen in my life such a manifestation of love by active

fishermen. Thousands of fishermen, young and old, from the coastal belt from Kalpitiya to Colombo and beyond thronged the streets to manifest their gratitude for the selfless services Canisius had rendered to them. I was told at the funeral that some fishermen from the Southern coastal belt of Sri Lanka were also in the funeral procession. All the fishermen accompanied the coffin piously with tears in their eyes, from his house at Munnakkara, Negombo to the Church of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary at Kudapaduwa where he was born and brought up. After a prayer service was conducted by the priests in the Church, the funeral procession continued from there to the cemetery at Sea Street, Negombo, where he was buried. Several priests from the Archdiocese of Colombo and the diocese of Chilaw were present at the funeral.

Canisius Fernando was the faithful husband of Nirmala Fernando and was a loving and caring father of two children – Stephni Sindusha and Stephen- lived a devout Catholic family life at Munnakkara, Negombo.

Tributes for a Hero among the fisherflock

1. Sharing the sorrow and pain caused by the death of W. Canisius Fernando, **St. Anne's United Fishermen's Society of Palagaturae, Kochchikade** declared: **"Dear Canisius, you lived and you died for us, the fishermen. That was your vision in your life. We offer you our deepest condolences.**
2. **The Society of the Displaced People of Deduru Oya Project**, Pothuwewa, Malagane, expressing its sorrow publicly on October 9, 2007, at the untimely death of

3. Canisius Fernando, stated that **Canisius was one who extended his affection he had for the fishermen also to the poor farmers who were affected by the Deduru Oya Project.** We, the members of our Society of Displaced farmers, also share the profound sorrow of the fishermen since our hearts too experience such pain. Hence we shall also continue our non-violent struggle.

4. The **KITHUSARA** Group, Kalutara made a statement on October 10, saying that the late **Canisius Fernando spared no pains to promote justice and peace with spiritual nourishment.** He was one who took initiative, even before the priests, to feed the fishermen and their families with spiritual insights. He belonged to the generation of Peter and Andrew. Kithusara Group went on to say that a true disciple is a hero. **Canisius possessed a heart of a true disciple burning with the fire of love. In the presence of people's pain, his heart was wet with an ocean-like tenderness.**

W. ANTHONY FERNANDO

A FISHERMAN FELLED BY A BULLET

Warnakulasuriya Anthony Fernando, a fisherman from Sea Beach, Chilaw was shot dead when the police fired on

February 15, 2012 at Chilaw, during a major protest organized by the fishermen who had kept away from fishing for two days, against the fuel price hike. The then parish priest of Sea Beach, Fr. W. Claude Fernando who took great care of the fisherfolk in that parish, tried to prevent the Police and the Special Task Force (STF) not to harm the fishermen during that protest.

Fishermen's Associations in Chilaw and Negombo decided to suspend fishing activities till the funeral of Anthony Fernando as a mark of solidarity and respect for him. They also decided to declare a period of mourning till the funeral was over. A vast crowd of fisher-families from Chilaw and Negombo, including many priests and Religious took part in the funeral and offered their condolences to deceased Anthony Fernando's wife and the two children. The priests were very helpful in advising the fisher-families to refrain from any violence in the aftermath of Anthony Fernando's death.

Anthony Fernando was married to Niluka Sudharshani and had two children, one daughter (Nipuni) and one son (Danushka).

STATEMENT OF OUR BISHOPS

The Catholic Bishops, Conference condemned this brutal killing of W. Anthony Fernando saying: ***“The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL) expresses its deepest regret over the brutal killing of Mr. W. Anthony Fernando, a young fisherman of Chilaw during the protest***

over the unexpected increase in the prices of fuel. CBCSL wishes to condemn in the strongest terms possible this most deplorable act of violence which inflicts irreparable loss and pain on his family and the community of fishermen.

CBCSL wishes to convey its deepest condolences to the bereaved family and the fishing community while imploring God's mercy on all the afflicted. It is our earnest hope that there will not be any repetition of such brutality carried out with such disregard to the inestimable value of life." Bishop Norbert M. Andradi, OMI, Secretary General (Catholic Messenger, February 2, 2012).

PROPHETIC EVANGELISERS NEEDED

First, I write about the presence and ministry of Jesus among the fishermen of Galilee and secondly about the need for the prophetic function of the Catholic Church among the Catholic fisherflock in Sri Lanka.

Jesus, the lover of the fisherflock

Sent by God, Jesus of Nazareth pitched his tent among the people and began proclaiming God's unconditional love by word and deed, and reached out to the fishermen (Mt 4:18-22; Mk 1:16-20; Lk 5:1-11; Jn 1: 35-44). The fishermen of Galilee in their society were "respectable" and middle class¹. Jesus loved them and remained very close to their families. He associated with them with compassion and came to know them, their anxieties and their hopes personally.

Very often Jesus walked with the fishermen of Galilee in the sea shore. He calmed the storms that arose in the sea (Mt 14:28; Jn 6:16-21) and in their lives and told them not to be afraid because he was with them. Though they were at times ambitious and aggressive, Jesus had faith in them and their ability to assume leadership roles in His missionary Movement (Lk 5:10-11; Jn 21:15-17, 19). He made a few of the fishermen to be his Apostles, men capable of teaching and preaching the Kingdom of God. They observed Jesus' life-

¹ Albert Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity*, p51

style and felt called not only to follow his teachings but also to imitate him.

After rising from the dead, Jesus went in search of the fishermen – Peter, Andrew, James and John – in the sea shore and enabled them to have a good harvest of fish (Jn 21:1-14). On that occasion, Jesus had a good meal with them with roasted fish. The Indian Jesuit theologian, **Fr. Samuel Rayan**, used to say that Jesus had His first Synod in the sea beach with Peter, the fisherman, and his companions, enjoying also a hearty meal.

Pope Francis, on January 26, 2020, the first Sunday of the Word of God, since he instituted it in his letter *Aperuit Illis*, reminded the people that the first people to be called by Jesus were fishermen. Jesus chose some of the fishermen, not people carefully chosen for their abilities or devout people at prayer in the temple, but ordinary working people. Jesus told them, “I will make you fishers of people, using the language they understood. Their lives changed on the spot. He called them where they were and as they were in order to make them sharers in his mission.”

Prophetic Gestures of Church Leaders needed today.

With a new consciousness arising out of the Sacred Scriptures and inspired by Jesus’ prophetic and salvific mission among the fisherflock of Galilee, the clergy and the Religious in Sri Lanka need to imitate Jesus, the Prophet and Saviour. It is in today’s ‘Galilees’ (the poor and abandoned areas) that the

ordained ministers and the Religious can meet today's fisherflock who are often oppressed and marginalized. It is in today's 'Galilees', the prophetic voice, in defense of the dignity of the fisherflock, their right to experience equality, better education and better quality of life, needs to be heard publicly and visibly. Therefore there is an urgent need to identify with the fisher-families in Sri Lanka in order to become not only their 'voice' since they are illiterate and uneducated, but also to be 'a prophetic voice' with them. Such a ministry will certainly respond to their emerging needs, anxieties and struggles and will empower them to experience a better quality of life, social equality and become capable leaders in the Church and in the society. Hence a new style of spiritual / pastoral leadership is needed in Sri Lanka, that will energise the priests and the Religious not to be clericalised and stay put in the presbyteries and in the Religious institutions most of the time.

Our Sri Lankan Catholic fisherflock who are very much religious minded and ritualistic need Biblical catechesis and Spirituality to know Jesus and his message in order to lead lives worthy of their Christian vocation as children of God. Catechesis must include also love and concern for creation (nature) which has become our new neighbour.

Second, education based on values and virtues can be also the key that can unlock better quality of human life of the fisherflock because the Second Vatican Council has affirmed, "nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in the hearts of the Christians" (GS no 1). So the ordained ministers

need to become good educators, not mere administrators to unlock flourishing of life for them. What Pope Francis told the Bishops, can be also applied to the priests: **“Be both pastors and zealous missionaries who live in constant yearning to go in search of the lost, never settling for simple administration.”**

Third, in order to achieve abundant life, the active fishermen, their wives and their children must also be taught to organize and form associations such as cooperatives and credit unions. The organized groups should be small enough to be manageable and big enough to be meaningful. For this purpose, the help of competent lay faithful can be obtained.

Fourth, as Jesus mixed with Peter and his companions in order to teach them to be united and love one another as he had loved them, the ordained ministers and the Religious in Sri Lanka too can associate with the fisherflock, who often feel socially marginalized in the society, in order to build community spirit and solidarity among them. Jesus became human to build community spirit among his followers. The building up of a community on love, justice and equality took priority in the life of Jesus and in the life of his Apostles and of the early Christians because Christian community is a new temple of God.

Just as the community love (koinonia) of the early Christians was able to bring down the ‘throne’ (oppressive power) of the Roman Empire and enable the Christians to experience

freedom, in today's society non-aggressive community spirit among fisherflock can become God's instrument to bring down the 'thrones' of the oppressive forces which cause de-humanisation of the fisher-families who are the children of God.

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**“I have come so that they may have life and that
abundantly” (John 10:10)**