

# THE OBLATES IN EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

## Fr. Emmanuel Fernando, OMI

In 1798, the British government had entrusted education in the colony (Ceylon) to the Anglican clergy and in 1841 to the School Commission which was predominantly Protestant, with financial support from the government.

### **Arrival of the Oblates in Ceylon and their Apostolate of Education**

On the 28<sup>th</sup> November 1847, a group of four Oblates (three priests and one Oblate Coadjutor Brother) led by Fr. Stephen Semeria arrived in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) from France, in response to an urgent need for missionary apostolate made by Bishop Orazio Bettachini, the Pro-Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna, to Bishop Eugene de Mazenod, the Founder of the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. The Oblates began their missionary tasks in Jaffna in 1848.

Bishop Bettachini, knowing very well the difficulties Catholics in Jaffna faced in providing their children education in English and that their children could get educated only in Protestant schools, had therefore begun the Jaffna Catholic School Society in 1846 to promote education in Jaffna Peninsula. He soon realized the urgent need for teachers qualified in English. To overcome this difficulty, he appealed to Bishop De Mazenod to send Oblates who could also teach in English.

Right from the beginning, these pioneer Oblates and the others who followed them, have been innovative in their apostolates to the poor and the abandoned in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), motivated by the inspirational words of Bishop Eugene de Mazenod: *“Love embraces all; for new needs, it invents new means when necessary.”* Hence, besides teaching the truths of Christianity, administration of the Sacraments and providing guidance to the Catholics, the Oblates committed themselves also to the apostolate of education of the young boys. Fr. Stephen Semeria OMI, who was consecrated Bishop in 1857 and who became the Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna, succeeding Bishop Bettachini, realizing also the urgent need for English-speaking Oblates to promote education and develop the boys in Jaffna, appealed to Bishop de Mazenod to send Oblates from the Anglo-Irish Province of the Oblates. Three Oblate Brothers, Robert Byrne, John Joseph Brown and William Bennett arrived in Jaffna in 1859. Bishop Semeria also invited the Sisters of the Holy Family from Europe in 1861 to undertake the education of the girls in Jaffna.

### **Development of Catholic education in Ceylon**

The real development of Catholic education in Sri Lanka took place with the arrival of Fr. Christopher Bonjean to Ceylon (Sri Lanka). During his 9 years of priestly ministry in India as a member of the Society of the Foreign Missions, Fr. Bonjean had come to know the urgent missionary needs in Jaffna through Fr. Pajeau, a member of the Society of Foreign Missions and he started to correspond with Fr. Semeria. With the approval of his Superior (Religious Leader/ Animator), he came to Jaffna on the 28<sup>th</sup> November 1855.

Fr. Bonjean began the year of the Novitiate in Jaffna on 19<sup>th</sup> November 1857, and professed his vows as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate (OMI) on the 20<sup>th</sup> November 1858 and began his missionary journeys and missionary tasks in the Vicariate Apostolic of Jaffna, concentrating also on the education of the Catholic clergy and the education of the children and the young people. He was consecrated Bishop and appointed Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna by Rome on the 5<sup>th</sup> July 1868, succeeding Bishop Semeria who passed away on the 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1868 when he went to Europe. Bishop Bonjean transformed the Primary School of Jaffna initiated by Vicar Apostolic Orazio Bettachini into St. Patrick's College. Having served as the Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna, he came to Colombo on the 20<sup>th</sup> April 1883 since Rome had transferred him and on the 06 January 1887 he became the Metropolitan Archbishop of Colombo.

### **Commitment of Bishop Christopher Bonjean to Education**

Bonjean, of French nationality, who had studied English in India, was a good writer and an orator. In 1860, his booklet in English entitled, “*A few words on Catholic Education in Ceylon*” asking the Catholics to educate their children was published by the *Examiner Press* in Madras. In that booklet, called the “**Educational charter of the Catholics**” of Sri Lanka, he invited the Catholics to be vigilant and struggle for the Catholic education which had been denied for them by the British government. In that booklet, he laid down clearly the Catholic position regarding education, He contributed also a series of letters to the *Colombo Examiner*, an influential journal at that time, opposing the system of “Common mixed schools”, in which Christian pupils of various denominations were to be taught a common form of Christianity.

In 1865, the Legislative Council appointed a sub-committee to inquire into and report on education in Ceylon. Bonjean was one of those consulted by that committee regarding matters related to education and he became the voice of the Catholic Church in the field of education in Ceylon. Bonjean proposed a system of state-aided schools to be administered by each religious denomination (Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim). In accordance with Bonjean’s suggestions, the Government decided in 1869 that any religious denomination could open schools for its children which would be given a grant by the government. The Denominational or Assisted School System that would benefit all religions thus came into being due to the painstaking commitment of Archbishop Bonjean and he came to be known as the ‘**Father of the Denominational School System in Ceylon**’. He spoke; he wrote; he campaigned for quality education in Sri Lanka. Soon the Catholic Church opened schools in urban and rural areas to teach Christian doctrine and raise the quality of life of the neglected people through education. Generally each parish had either a mixed school attached to it or one for boys and one for girls. There were bigger and well-equipped schools / colleges in towns for secondary education. As part of the system, there were also state-aided Catholic Training Colleges for the training of Catholic teachers for Catholic schools. The Oblates in Jaffna and in Colombo were Principals of such schools. Archbishop Bonjean took the initiative to establish St. Joseph’s College in Colombo for integral education of Catholic children. According to Fr. W.L.A. Don Peter, historian and educationist, Oblate Archbishop Christopher Bonjean’s contribution in the field of education in both Jaffna and Colombo in the field of education has been enormous.

### **The take-over of the catholic schools**

After the take-over of the catholic schools in 1960 by the Government, led by Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), senior secondary schools were given the option to go private without state aid and without the right to levy fees from the parents. The Church was able to maintain only a few schools since the (UNP) government of Mr. J.R. Jayewardene decided to grant from 1980 in the form of teachers’ salary.

After the take-over of the Catholic schools, many schools do not have Catholic Principals or an adequate Catholic staff or proper teaching of religion.

### **Special Contributions through Oblate Colleges**

Special mention must be paid of the contribution the Oblates have made through the colleges. For example:

In the North , at **St. Patrick’s College**, Jaffna, **St. Henry’s College**, Illavalai and **St. Anthony’s College**, Kayts,

In the South: at **St. Joseph’s College**, Colombo, **St. Peter’s College**, Bambalapitiya, **De Mazenod College**, Kandana, **Aquinas College of Higher Education**, Colombo and **Don Bosco College**, Kaluaggala,

In the North Central Province: at **St. Joseph’s College**, Anuradhapura,

In the Eastern Province: at **St. Joseph’s College**, Trincomalee.

### **Household names**

The names of well-qualified Oblate educators (Rectors of the Colleges) – Fathers Charles S. Mathews, Timothy M.F. Long, L.A. Singarayer, F. J. Stanislaus, N. Arulnesan in Jaffna and Maurice J. Le Goc, D.J. Anthony, D.J. Nicholas Perera, Basil Wiratunga and Peter Pillai in Colombo - have become household names in Sri Lanka.

Fr. D. J. Anthony was a Sinhala Scholar, Free education patriot, General Manager of Catholic schools and the founder of the teacher-training college at Bolawalana, Negombo. Fr. L.A. Singarayer had been Principal of the Training College at Columbuturai, Jaffna. Fr. Basil Wiratunga, was a pioneer for schools and seminary education and Fr. D.J. Nicholas Perera, who while in England, joined the Ceylonese delegation to meet the Secretary of State for reform in the Constitution of the Government of Ceylon for freedom.

**A life-size statue of Fr. Fr. Timothy M. F. Long OMI**, erected in front of the historic Jaffna library, is a great sign of appreciation by people of Jaffna for the contribution made by him in the field of education.

As educators, the Oblates have paid special attention to the promotion of genuine values, skills and virtues while maintaining discipline and decorum at all levels.

### **Publications**

Fr. Le Goc's book on "*Introduction to Tropical Botany*" written in 1920 became the standard text book in Sri Lanka and India. The other book on botany written much later was "*Chapters on Nature Study*" which was widely read in Ceylon and India. Another interesting book he wrote in 1932 was "*Simplified Astronomy*", which was the first modern work on Astronomy in Ceylon.

Fr. Peter Pillai became the architect of the concept of the system of the Private Non-Fee Levying Schools. He served on the University Senate and was the President of the Head Masters' Conference attached to the Government. He was a great educator and apostle of social justice in Sri Lanka and began the journal "*Social Justice Review*". He was the founder of Aquinas College of Higher Studies, supported by Archbishop (later Cardinal) Thomas Cooray OMI.

Oblate Fr. Michael Silva's book on Music, *Chiranthana Singhala Sangeethaye Pravanatha* was accepted as a text book at the University.

**Ownership and Administration of the Oblate Colleges** The Oblates, having laid solid foundation to education and having promoted it, very generously handed over the ownership and the administration of their colleges to the dioceses, where they had been serving the people.

### **Educators of Orphans and of the under-privileged**

**Susithodaya, Children's Home at Maggona**, is a Centre, begun by the Oblates in 1895, initially assisted by Franciscan Brothers, to respond to the needs of children a) abandoned by parents due to financial or personal problems, b) of single parents, (c) of parents addicted to alcohol or drugs, (d) living with guardians and (e) delinquents. Susithodaya provides residential programmes for the above-mentioned categories of children (10 yrs to 18 yrs) from Grade 6 to GCE Ordinary / Advanced level. The children are trained in extra-curricular activities, such as Sinhala & English Literary Associations (including speech and drama), Sports (football, basketball, cricket), Debate Teams, Home gardening project. The Dept. of Probation and Child Care and Juvenile Courts which sends the children also organises various programmes at Susithodaya. Fr W. Jesu Ramesh OMI is the Director of Susithodaya, Children's Home.

**St Vincent's Technical School at Maggona** is a Technical School begun by the Oblates in 1897, which provides training for students both resident and day scholars. The Programmes include Automatic Mechanic

(02 yrs), Electricity (01 yr), Wood Work (01 year), welding (01 yr), and Spoken English Course (01 yr). On completion of the training programme, exams are held and students are awarded the National Vocational Qualification Certificate (NVQ). These training courses are affiliated to the Tertiary Vocational Commission in Sri Lanka. There are also other programmes which are organised by the Department of Probation and Child Care and the Department of Youth Affairs. Fr. H. Sameera D. Fonseka OMI is the Director of St Vincent's Technical School.

### **Birth of new historic consciousness in the Oblates**

A new historic consciousness began to emerge in the Oblates regarding education in the new socio-cultural and religious environments in Sri Lanka.

“**Lakrivi**”, a Children's Movement, begun in Sri Lanka by Fr. Felix Mevel, OMI in 1954, takes education to the villages-urban, semi-urban and rural areas-, and trains the children, irrespective of their race, religion or gender, in genuine human and religious values and virtues, thereby promoting also social inclusion, equality and friendship among them. It is an extension education programme. Lakrivi Movement also organizes libraries, trains the children in communication skills and leadership in their life situations. Special social leadership training is provided for the local animators of the cells. The present director is Fr. Asanga Aruna Nanayakkara OMI.

**Eugene Academy at Keeri, Mannar**, begun by the Oblates in March 2003 has been a great blessing to thousands of young men and young women who have got through O/L and A/L, and intending to enter the Universities, College of Education and College of Nursing. Subjects taught: English, Sinhalese, Information Communication Technology (ICT), Leadership and Career Motivation. Present Director is Fr. Thevasahayam Jesupalan OMI.

**St. Joseph's College, Trincomalee** was begun on the 27<sup>th</sup> July 1867 by the Irish Oblate Fr. Louis Mary Keating (sent by Bishop De Mazenod to Sri Lanka in 1847), as an English medium school with 18 students, in a single room in St. Mary's Cathedral premises. At that time there were only vernacular schools at Trincomalee. When Trincomalee- Batticaloa became a separate diocese under the Jesuits, it was handed over to them in 1902 and it came back to be administered by the Oblates from the 30<sup>th</sup> September 2003. Beneficiaries: students from all the parishes and from all the religions, from Grade 01 to 13 A/L. Programmes: Bio-science, physical science, Commerce, Arts. Present Rector: is Fr. A.Vijayakamalan Adlfre OMI

In 2008, Fr, Dennis Iddamal goda OMI began the **Mazenod English Institute at Katuwapitiya, Negombo** and it continues to impart basic knowledge of English with an integral formation. The Institute's programmes include Basic English immersion and Information technology. The duration of the immersion programme is three months. The day scholar students - boys after O/L and girls after A/L - are given the option to follow the course as residential students. Fr. Lakshman Fernando OMI is the present Director, assisted by Fr. Christy Nirmalarajan OMI.

In 2014, the Oblates opened **Lebrara Library, an Educational Resource Centre at Kilinochchi**. Programmes: Evening classes for the school children. Day classes for the O/L students who failed in their first attempt. English Diploma course, IT, Sinhala Language, Elocution, Sri Lanka Festival of music, dance and speech. The beneficiaries of the programmes are poor children who are unable to pay the tuition fee and also students who are not given a second chance to sit for the O/L examination. Present Director is Fr. S, Anpurasa OMI.

**St. Henry's College, Ilavalai**, a school to respond to the thirst for knowledge of the boys of Ilavalai and of the adjoining villages was begun by Fr, Liguori Rodrigo, OMI, the parish priest of Ilavalai (1907-1910). The Oblates had administered it from 1938 to 1953 and from 1956 to 1976. Well known Oblate

educationists - Frs Charles S. Mathews, L.A. Singarayer and F. J. Stanislaus, P.J. Jeevaratnam and J.A. Francis - had been Rectors of St. Henry's College. From the 01<sup>st</sup> August 2017, the College is being administered again by the Oblates. Beneficiaries: Students from Grade 6 to 13 (A/L). Programmes: co-curricular activities, environmental education, sports, social science club, eco-clubs and drama. The present Rector is Fr. E. Godfrey Joel, OMI and A. Regikumar | OMI is the Vice Rector.

Another desired goal emerged among the Oblates during the Oblate Congress on September 17-21, 2018 held at the Retreat House, Tewatte, Ragama, to become educators with the view to serve the poor and to engage in a dialogue of life with the Buddhists, motivated by the spirit (charism`) of their vocation. This desired goal became viable and feasible with the inauguration of **Mazenod College in Anuradhapura**, an English-medium Institute, for boys and girls, on the 07<sup>th</sup> January 2019, with the motto, "*servire in amore*" (*to serve with love*). Service is the inseparable twin of love, through which we are called to witness to Christ. Every month a Parents' meeting is held with an input talk given by a competent person. Fr. Dileepa Jayamaha OMI is the Principal and Fr. Shane Winston De Rosayro OMI, the Vice-Principal.