

THE OBLATES
IN SRI LANKA



Fr. Emmanuel Fernando, OMI

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Revised and reprinted

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Preface

During the lockdown imposed by the Government of Sri Lanka due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I had an opportunity to look back on the apostolate of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) in Sri Lanka since 1848.

Having been initiated to the Catholic Church, educated and formed as a Religious priest by the Oblates during different stages, I became interested to do a bit of research and re-write providing more information regarding the contribution the Oblates have made in the field of formation and training of local priests, the education of the children and young people and other apostolates. Several Oblates have been creative and innovative in their ministries.

My presence in the diocese of Anuradhapura also made me to know more regarding the valuable contribution made by three Oblate pioneers, namely Fr. Reginald de Silva, Gilbert Perera and Bishop Henry Goonewardena, to the diocese of Anuradhapura.

My affirmation of the missionary commitment of some Oblates does not deny the loving services of other Oblate Missionaries.

May the apostolic commitment of the Oblate pioneers (parish priests, educators, formators and prayerful discerners inspire and motivate also the Oblate candidates in initial formation.

Fr. Emmanuel Fernando, OMI

THE MISSIONARY OBLATES

Introduction

St. Eugene de Mazenod, who was born in a wealthy and influential family in Marseilles, France, had to leave France during the time of the French Revolution and lead a life of a migrant, living in Nice, Venice, Naples and Palermo for nearly 12 years. So people's life struggles were not foreign to him. On his return to France after his exile, while participating in a Good Friday ceremony in 1815, he underwent a deep spiritual experience of Jesus Christ's love for him. In that experience he felt called to care for the struggling poor and abandoned masses in Southern France. Hence he decided to become a priest and spend his life for the uncared disadvantaged people.

His spiritual experience led him to form also a small group of priests to devote their time and energy for the welfare of the neglected masses. Having obtained the approval for his group, called the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) from Pope Leo XII on 17 February 1826,¹ the zealous priests vowed to lead a life of simplicity, celibate love and faithfulness to their way of life. While this group was engaged in their commitment to the poor and the abandoned, Fr. Eugene de Mazenod was made a Bishop by the Pope in 1837. Requests for Oblates soon poured from Bishops in Canada, U.K, Ireland, South Africa and Ceylon (later Sri Lanka) to serve in their countries. Though the initial group was small, Bishop de Mazenod could not refuse their fervent

requests because he felt that those appeals to serve the poor came from Jesus, the crucified Lord.

The Oblates: “Specialists in difficult missions”

Many young men from many countries have joined the Oblate Congregation which maintains also a very lively family spirit. Pope Pius XI called the Oblates, “*Specialists in difficult missions*”. The Oblates are men of daring who are ready to go where the need is great. They are persons who are close to the people.

Pope St. John Paul II in his homily during the Mass of canonization in December 3 December 1995, the First Sunday of Advent, proclaimed Saint Eugène a “**Man of Advent**”, saying:

“Eugène de Mazenod, whom the Church today proclaims a saint, was a man of Advent, a man of the Coming. He not only looked forward to that Coming, but he dedicated his whole life preparing for it. His waiting reached the intensity of heroism, that is, it was marked by a heroic degree of faith, hope and apostolic charity. Eugène de Mazenod was one of those apostles who prepared the modern age, our age.”

Arrival of the Oblates in Sri Lanka

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

The Dutch who arrived in Sri Lanka (1640 – 1796) persecuted the Catholics and the Catholics lived for 30 years without the presence of Catholic priests, until the arrival of Fr. Joseph Vaz in 1687 from India. The few missionaries who served the Catholics secretly during the Dutch period did not have the opportunity and the facilities to concentrate on the formation and training of a native clergy

Though the Oratorians of Goa could not form a native clergy during the Dutch period in Sri Lanka, they did not manifest interest for such a purpose even after arrival of the British in Sri Lanka in 1802 and gained religious freedom under the British Governor Thomas Maitland on 27 May 1806, abolishing the disabilities suffered by the Roman Catholics in Sri Lanka.

After gaining religious freedom, the Catholics could not readily expect many Catholic priests from India or from Europe. However an Italian Oratorian Orazio Bettacchini who had come to Sri Lanka in 1842 during the British period and became also Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna went to Europe in 1845 in search of Catholic missionaries to serve the Catholics in the Northern part of Sri Lanka.

According to Fr. Martin Quere OMI, an invitation to send missionaries to Sri Lanka had come to Bishop Eugene de Mazenod, the Oblate Founder, through a French missionary, Fr. Andre Reinhard who had been working in Sri Lanka since 1844. He had made known to Bishop de Mazenod the great need Sri Lanka had of apostolic

workers. The General Council of the Oblate Congregation had studied the case in 1846. Due to lack of personnel an immediate positive response could not be given.¹ Such a situation compelled **Fr. Orazio Bettacchini** who had come to Sri Lanka and had become Pro-Vicar and Coadjutor of the Vicar Apostolic of Colombo, to go to Europe in 1845 in search of missionaries for the North of Sri Lanka that was entrusted to him,.

Arrival of the Oblates

Having failed to obtain help from the Congregation of Propaganda Fide in Rome, Bishop Orazio Bettacchini went to France. During his trip in France, he met Bishop Berteaud of Tulle who told him to approach Bishop Eugene de Mazenod, the Founder of a new Congregation of priests, in Marseille, France, and who has a heart as St. Paul's and tell him that it is a matter He had been a member of the Oblate mission-preaching team in Corsica and had left the Oblate Congregation in 1842. He had made known to Bishop de Mazenod the great need Sri Lanka had of apostolic workers. The General Council of the Oblate Congregation had studied the case in 1846. Due to lack of personnel an immediate positive response could not be given.¹

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of priests, in Marseille, France, and who has a heart as St. Paul's and to tell him that it is a matter of saving the poor souls. When he hears that word, 'poor', he will be unable to resist it.²

Bishop Orazio Bettacchini, who had met Bishop Eugene de Mazenod on 25-26 July 1847, had explained to him the situation of the poor Catholics in Jaffna and their cry for assistance. The word 'poor' and their cry for help had touched the heart of Bishop de Mazenod. That is why he had discussed this urgent need of Bishop Bettacchini with his Oblate General Council and approved it unanimously on 10 August 1847. On 11 August 1847, Bishop de Mazenod wrote to Cardinal Fransoni, the Prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, offering the services of the Oblates for the mission in Jaffna. Propaganda Fide on 7 September 1847 approved Oblate Founder's readiness to send Oblate missionaries to Ceylon (later Sri Lanka).

On the following day, Bishop de Mazenod wrote a letter to Fr. Vincens, the Novice Master, in which he had said: *"How can one resist so many powerful reasons for responding gratefully to requests for assistance in this great and good work? And so I have accepted this new mission, one of the most beautiful on earth, and I predict that one day this large island will be given over to our Congregation and that our Congregation will make the whole island holy."*³

The Oblate Founder dispatched the first band of four Oblates, namely Fr. Joseph Ciamin, Fr. Lewis Keating,

Coadjutor Brother Gaspard De Steffanis, led by Fr. Stephen Semeria, the leader of the group. They arrived in Galle on 28 November 1847. After staying in Colombo about a month and spending a long stay in Negombo, they reached Jaffna in February 1848 and began their missionary tasks in Jaffna

What a magnanimous gesture of the Oblate Founder! It was indeed a choice made after prayerfully listening to the Holy Spirit. It was a decision made to send missionaries to an island quite distant from his native France, not visited by him.

Bishop Eugene de Mazenod, not only willingly sent members of his Congregation to render their services in Sri Lanka but continued to correspond with them. During the 14 years, from the first arrival of Oblates in Sri Lanka in 1847 up to his death in 1861, he had sent 51 letters to Sri Lanka, most of them to Father (later Bishop) Stephen Semeria, guiding the Oblates.⁵

The Oblate Founder used to remind Fr. Stephen Semeria that the Oblates were sent to Sri Lanka to evangelise the non-Christians. Again and again, he repeated that their task was not merely to take care of a group of Christians. He wrote: *“I want new Christians, formed in another mould.”*

According to Fr. W.L.A. Don Peter (former Rector of St. Joseph’s College, Colombo and of Aquinas College of Higher Studies, Colombo, historian and educationist), Bishop de Mazenod's initial concern for his Oblates and

their work had been a factor contributing to the progress of the Oblate activities in Sri Lanka.⁶

Notes

¹ Martin Quere OMI, A History of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Sri Lanka 1847-1947, Vol 1, National Seminary, Ampitiya, Sri Lanka, p 11- 12; ² W.L.A. Don Peter, Historical Gleanings, 1992, p 157; ³ W.L.A. Don Peter, Catholic Church in Sri Lanka; A history in outline; The British Period; ⁴ Martin Quere, OMI, ⁵ W.L.A. Don Peter, Catholic Church in Sri Lanka;

LEAVE NOTHING UNDARED FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Bishop Eugene de Mazenod, the Oblate Founder, wanted the Oblates to “leave nothing undared for the Kingdom of God”. He used to remind Fr. Stephen Semeria that the Oblates were sent to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to evangelise the non-Christians. Again and again, he repeated that their task was not merely to take care of a group of Christians. He wrote: *“Are we never to occupy ourselves with the conversion of the pagans? I am looking, burning with zeal to see you on the offensive with the full force in that country. I cannot be satisfied that so much zeal and devotion result only in maintaining this sad, old, decrepit Christian community. I want new Christians, formed in another mould. Are you in your island only the parish priests of old Christians?”*

Though the Oblate Founder wanted the conversion to the Catholic Church to be the primary aim of the Oblates, the existing pastoral situation forced the pioneer Oblates under the leadership of their Religious leaders to have as their main concern the neglected groups of Christians. Ignorance was the major cause of superficiality among the Christians. Hence they were compelled to concentrate primarily on the renewal of the Christian life in the Vicariate of Jaffna. Hence the Oblate missionaries had to visit regularly the ten to twenty mission stations. Since there was hardly any Catholic education, they had to organize catechetical instructions for children and adults.

A great part of the year was spent in travelling. Once a year, they had to visit the mission stations for the patronal feasts of the respective mission stations. They would arrive a few days before the feast, hear the confessions, explain the catechism and bring about reconciliation in cases of disputes and disunity.

The Oblate Missionaries, like good humble shepherdic leaders, imitating Jesus, the Good Shepherd (Jn 11:52), trekked in bullock carts through the forests and the jungles, full of elephants, bears and snakes fearlessly, in search of the Catholics, and established Centres of worship and of instructions. In the coastal areas and in the hinterlands, they established parishes and spent their lives selflessly caring for the poor and the neglected. The European Oblates learnt the Tamil language spoken by the people in Jaffna in order to serve the people.

The pastoral needs of the people made the Oblate missionaries not to live under one roof but to spread over the vast territory and to be bound together by their Oblate charism. They were physically distant from each other. They lacked the modern means of travel. Postal services were poor. However they did meet together at the annual retreat.

Strengthening the Faith of the People

As an apostolic group, the Oblates had to take some initiatives within the given context at that time. They had to teach the fundamentals of the Christian faith and the

importance of the Sacraments. In order to achieve this objective, there was need to form catechists.

The Oblates realized also the importance of preaching missions. When Fr. Stephen Semeria succeeded Bishop Orazio Bettacchini, he began to organize parish missions. Though there were only a few Oblate missionaries and demanded many sacrifices from them, necessity forced the religious leaders to take this initiative.

Need for a native clergy

Fr. Stephen Semeria, having understood the missionary situation in the Vicariate of Jaffna and the need for native clergy, had proposed to Bishop Orazio Bettacchini on May 18, 1848 to establish a Seminary in Jaffna. Bettacchini sent him to Nagapatnam and Pondicherry to learn how the Jesuits were training the local clergy and how they were promoting the education of the youth.³

In consultation with Bishop Bettacchini, the Vicar Apostolic, Fr. Semeria had also written a letter on 22 May 1848 to Bishop Eugene de Mazenod, indicating his intention to begin a Seminary in the Vicariate of Jaffna to train native priests (presbyters) and for that important task to send two Oblates.

FORMING A NATIVE CLERGY

It was during the British period (1796-1948) efforts were made to establish Seminaries and encourage candidates to study for priesthood. There were **two main reasons** for such an undertaking. **First**, the suppression of the Oratory of Goa in 1833 by the King of Portugal. Hence Sri Lanka could not expect missionaries any more from the Oratory of Goa in India. The royal decree from Portugal was extended to the colonies in 1834 and implemented in Goa in 1835. The Oratorians who were in Sri Lanka, however continued their services as before. Sri Lanka's link with the Indian missionaries which began with Fr. Vaz' arrival in 1687, ended when the last Indian Oratorian in Sri Lanka, Fr. Mathaes Caetano died in 1874.

The second reason was the creation of a separate ecclesiastical territory (The Vicariate Apostolic of Sri Lanka) by Pope Gregory XVI by the Brief *Ex munere pastoralis ministerii* of December 3, 1834 detaching Sri Lanka from the diocese of Cochin, India, after it had been part of it for 275 years (since 1558)¹ Hence the cessation of the Oratory of Goa and the urging of the Holy See paved the way for the establishment of Seminaries in Sri Lanka and the encouragement of young men to study for priesthood.

The Congregation of Propaganda Fide (Rome) soon began to invite European priests, both religious and diocesan to go to Sri Lanka as missionaries, expecting also that European Oratorians would be well received into

the company of the Indian Oratorians who continued their services in Sri Lanka, but it was not very successful. However, Vatican sent Italian Oratorian Orazio Bettacchini to Sri Lanka who later became Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna.

Initiative of the Oblates to create a native clergy

Though Semeria was very keen on opening a Seminary to foster local vocations, he could not realize his dream in the Vicariate of Jaffna during his episcopate even after he succeeded Bishop Bettacchini as the Bishop of the Vicariate of Jaffna, due to some urgent missionary engagements.

The First Sri Lankan Seminary

Bishop Christopher Bonjean, OMI who succeeded Bishop Semeria in 1869 as the Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna, took the initiative to establish a Seminary. On 12 November 1874, that Seminary was dedicated to **St. Martin** of Tours and it became the first Catholic Seminary in Sri Lanka. On 23 December 1876, Nicholas Saverimuthu Sandrasagara became the first native student of that seminary and also the first native Oblate to be ordained by Bishop Bonjean, the founder of the first Seminary in Sri Lanka. ⁴

On 16 March, 1889, there was a significant ordination ceremony in the Cathedral, Jaffna when four Sri Lankan seminarians, all alumni of St. Martin's Seminary, were raised to the priesthood. John Pahamunay, a Sinhalese and

a convert, who had been in training to be a Buddhist monk and a brother of the Buddhist monk, Sri Saranankara Sumangala, who became the chief monk of the Siamese sect attached to the Malwatte Chapter in Kandy, was one, while the others were A.L. Poologasingham, Martin Joseph and J. Chrysostom. A.L. Poologasingham remained a diocesan priest while the others became Oblates. This first seminary established in Sri Lanka became in the years to come a source of supply of a large number of native priests (Oblates and diocesan clergy), for service in Sri Lanka.

After fifteen years in Jaffna as Vicar Apostolic, Bishop Bonjean, when he was transferred to Colombo in 1883, brought with him some Oblate Scholastics and diocesan major seminarians and immediately took measures to provide for their training by opening a major seminary (**St Bernard's Seminary**), staffed by the Oblates, which, in the course of the next three quarters of a century, until its amalgamation with the present National Major Seminary in Kandy in 1955, produced a large number of Lankan priests, both Oblate and diocesan. In 1926, Oblate Seminarians – Thomas Benjamin Cooray and Jerome Emilianus Pillai – were sent to the International Oblate Scholasticate in Rome to continue their Oblate formation for presbyteral life.

Bishop Bonjean was one who obtained financial assistance from Europe for the construction of the Seminary buildings in Jaffna and in Colombo.

Scholasticate of Mary immaculate

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

St. Aloysius’ Minor Seminary

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

St. Joseph’s Juniorate

In 1947, Fr. F.M. Bizien OMI, who became the Vicar of Missions of the Oblates in Sri Lanka, in consultation with his council, felt the need for an Oblate Juniorate where the

candidates could be initiated gradually to experience the Oblate way of life. Hence **St. Joseph's Juniorate** began with one aspirant on 10 January 1952 with Fr. Albert Pleiber OMI as an accompanier / formator. Today it's a private school directed by a team of Oblates, preparing candidates (Sinhalese and Tamils) up to G.C.E A/L.

Oblate accompaniers at the National Seminary

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

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

In October 1972, the transference of the administration of the National Seminary from the Oblates to the Catholic Bishops' Conference took place with Fr. James Cooke OMI as Rector. Though the teaching and the formation in the National Seminary went under the direction of the Bishops' Conference, the Oblate staff at the Scholasticate continued to assist in the teaching at the National Seminary. The Oblates offer their services also in **St. Francis Xavier's Major Seminary** in Jaffna and continue to assist also other Religious Congregations in Sri Lanka in the formation of their candidates for ministerial priesthood in their Houses of formation.

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

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

Renewal Programmes for Clergy

Since 2019, special formation / accompaniment and renewal programmes are conducted for candidates preparing for ministerial priesthood and for the clergy (The Religious and the diocesan) at Sangamam, Kopay, under the leadership of Fr. S. M. Selvaratnam OMI.

Oblate accompanier at a diocesan Seminary

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

New historic situation demands new Oblate response

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

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

Reflecting on the experiences I had as a formator at different stages of Oblate formation in our Oblate Province of Colombo, I can say there was a conflict of opinion regarding the beneficiaries of the services of the Oblates. At an Oblate Congress held in the eighties, a small group led by Fr. Tissa Balasuriya OMI, who had already opted for social apostolate leaving behind the prestigious Rectorship of Aquinas College of Higher Studies, Colombo, and had begun the Centre for Society and Religion (CSR) and who was close to the people in the slums of Colombo, wanted the Oblates of the Colombo Oblate Province to commit themselves for the socially and economically poor, thereby focusing the attention on social justice, while others (the majority) preferred to serve also the spiritually and psychologically poor. Hence I did observe a conflict of opinions. Though the Oblate Constitutions mentions that “we will hear and

make heard the clamour of the voiceless, which is a cry to God who brings down the mighty from their thrones and exalts the lowly (Cf. LK 1:52), I can say that the majority of the Oblates of our Oblate Province did not have an integrated spirituality at that time, although efforts had been made by the Oblate General Administration to promote an integrate socio-ecological outlook.

On 28 November 2006, at the Sri Lankan Oblate formators' meeting at the Oblate Scholasticate, Kandy with Fr. Paolo Archiati from the Oblate General Council I said, "South Asia as part of the global society, is experiencing very rapid changes. These changes are affecting profoundly the individuals, the groups and the institutions including formal religions. As a result, new ways of perceiving the world, the society and the individuals are also emerging daily. A new historic consciousness has emerged and it continues to grow daily." I continued, "In this situation, the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC) speaks of a new way of being the Church in Asia and of a new way of experiencing our faith. We, the Oblates in the formation ministry, also feel called by God to a new way of being Oblates to respond to the People's need for liberation, wholeness and salvation and also to respond to the call of eco-crisis. Such a vision-mission demands an integral spirituality, prophetic thrust, ongoing conversation and dialogue with culture and our major religions, openness and response-ability to the issues of poverty, justice, peace, ecology etc."

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

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

which embodies personal accompaniment of the candidates. Fr. Clement Waidyasekara OMI and Fr. Suranga Gunesekara OMI mentioned the positive results of the AIT programme.

Among the initial efforts to provide contextual theological education and formation, mention must be made also of the setting up of the **Oblate Theological Study Club** (OTSC) at the Oblate Scholasticate in 1993, with Fr. Hilarion Dissanayake as its Moderator. Special study days and seminars on the current human, socio-cultural, political and historical issues which challenges and affect the life and mission of the Church were conducted and guided also by special guest speakers invited by OTSC.

Need for a new Theologate

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

When Fr. Oswald Firth became the Provincial (2004), Fr. Clement Waidyasekara who was at the Oblate Scholasticate, Ampitiya, began an ad hoc group composed of Frs. Dalston Forbes, R.Luckhart, Hilarion Dissanayake, Merl Mendis, Sarath Silva, Dennis Iddamalgoda, Sr. Christine Fernando SCJM, Prof. Shirely Wijesinghe and Mr.Tarcisius Fernando to continue what was begun in 1994, in view of opening to a new Theologate for the Religious (men and women). They had a number of meetings at Tulana Research Centre of Fr. Aloysius' Pieris SJ for 3 – 4 years. They had planned a 4- year study programme, the method being class-room study supported by praxis. At that time, they felt that the Catholic Bishops' Conference and even some Religious Congregations were not fully supportive of the Oblate initiative. This led the Oblates to launch a pastoral formation programme (AIT) all on their own which I feel needs to be reviewed.

An updated Directory for the Oblate Formation

Since an updated Directory for the Oblate Initial and Ongoing Formation was a long felt need in the Oblate Province of Colombo, for rethinking the strategies and methods needed for the ministry of Formation (Accompaniment), it was produced in January 2010 and was approved by Fr. Wilhelm Steckling, Oblate Superior General, on February 10, 2010.

New Questions demand new responses from the Religious

Today we need to be very conscious of the new historical, socio- cultural, religious and ecological situation in Sri Lanka. The gap between the haves and have-nots is widening. People and our infra-human beings (Mother Nature) are being exploited and raped. Personal, social and ecological sins are being committed. Not only wilful murder but also wilful ecocide is a sin. Infra-human creation which has become our new neighbor needs our love, concern and care. God created human beings to care for God's beautiful creation and not to exploit for one's greed. Following the social teachings of the Church, we are called to promote social and ecological justice. There is the need for interreligious and intercultural dialogue of life with people of other faiths and cultures to realize a brotherly / sisterly Sri Lanka. In this situation, the Consecrated Religious including the Oblates, need a Biblical spirituality and a Biblical theology to respond meaningfully to the above-mentioned new historical, socio-cultural, religious, political and ecological questions arising out of nonacademic contexts. New questions demand new answers. Hence, faced with this situation, today's Oblates in Sri Lanka, as men of apostolic daring, need to remember the inspiring words of St. Eugene de Mazenod: "*Love embraces all; for new needs, it invents new means when necessary.*"

A new Theologate, therefore directed by a team of consecrated Religious, will certainly provide the

needed theological education, human formation and pastoral training for their candidates, to respond to their Congregations' mission-visions rooted in the charisms, and approved by the Church, in order to give glory to God.

¹ Alfred A. Hubenig, OMI, *S Eugene de Mazenod, Living in the Spirit's Fire*, p 111

² Martin Quere, *A History of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Sri Lanka*, National seminary,

Ampitiya, Sri Lanka, p 13 ; ³ *ibid* p 17 ; ⁴ *ibid*

SW.L.A. Don Peter, *Catholic Church in Sri Lanka; A history in outline; The British Period;* ⁶ *ibid*

OBLATE EDUCATORS

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.¹

The Oratorian priests, who were in Sri Lanka during the Dutch period, caring for the spiritual needs of the Catholics who were about 80,000 at that time, could not concentrate on the education of the children by constructing schools. Hence during the British period, the Catholic Church had to make effort to concentrate on having English schools since the Catholics also felt that they were lagging behind the Protestants in education.

Bishop Orazio Bettacchini, who was in charge of the Vicariate of Jaffna made effort to establish the Jaffna Catholic School Society in 1846 in order to promote education in the North of Sri Lanka. He went to Europe in 1847 to obtain the services of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI). Four Oblates, led by Fr. Stephen Semeria (later Bishop), who came to Sri Lanka in 1847 at the request of Bishop Orazio Bettacchini of Jaffna to Bishop Eugene de Mazenod, the Founder of the Oblate Congregation, were very conscious also of the difficulties the Catholics in Jaffna faced in providing their children education in English. They realized that their children could get well educated only in Protestant schools. Bishop Bettacchini who had already been persuaded by the leaders of the Catholics in Jaffna to promote education of

their children, began the Jaffna Catholic School Society in 1846.

Since the need arose for English-speaking European missionaries for English education, Bishop Bettacchini went to Europe in 1847 to obtain the services of a group of Oblates for his Jaffna Vicariate. Bishop's commitment and the collaboration of the Catholic leaders of Jaffna paved the way also for the establishment of two English schools, namely Jaffna Boys' Seminary and Jaffna Girls' Seminary and sent Fr. Semeria to India on 22 May 1848 to study how the Jesuits, great educators, were performing in the field of education. He returned to Jaffna on 15 July 1848.

The Innovative Oblates in Sri Lanka

Right from the beginning, the 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 had committed themselves also to the formation of the local clergy and to the apostolate of education.

Fr. Stephen Semeria OMI, who was consecrated Bishop in 1857 and who became the Bishop of Jaffna, succeeding Bishop Bettacchini, also realizing the urgent need for

English-speaking Oblates to promote education and develop the boys in Jaffna, appealed to Bishop de Mazenod to send English-speaking 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. At the invitation of Bishop Semeria, the Sisters of the Holy Family from Europe came 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. Ernest 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 28th November 1855.²

Fr. Bonjean began the year of the Novitiate in Jaffna on 19th November 1857, and professed his vows as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate (OMI) on the 20th 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 5th July 1868, succeeding Bishop Semeria who passed away on the 23rd January 1868 when he went to Europe.

Bishop Bonjean transformed the Catholic School Society of Jaffna initiated by Vicar Apostolic Orazio Bettacchini into St. Patrick's College. Having served as the Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna, he came to Colombo on the 20th April 1883 since Rome had transferred him and on the 06th January 1887 he became the Metropolitan Archbishop of Colombo.

Commitment of Bishop Christopher Bonjean to Education

Fr. 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, Fr. Bonjean 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 principles which should guide Catholic education. It was a call to Catholics to understand the need for education of their children.³ 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 subcommittee 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-Assisted schools to be administered by each religious denomination (Buddhist, Hindu, and 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'**.⁴ He spoke; he wrote; he campaigned for quality education in Sri Lanka. Soon the Catholic Church opened and raised 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, Oblate Archbishop Christopher Bonjean's the contribution he made in the course of time to the Church in Sri Lanka, in both Jaffna and Colombo, especially in the field of education, is enormous. He stands out as the greatest Churchman in the history of the Church in the British period. He might in fact be called 'the Second Apostle of Sri Lanka,' the first being of course Fr Joseph Vaz.⁵

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), Grade 1 and Grade 11 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, **St. John's College**, Dematagoda.

In the North Central Province: at **St. Joseph's College**, Anuradhapura and 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 Weeratunga 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 Weeratunga, 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.

The late Fr. S. Ignatius Pinto, OMI was a lecturer in European history in the University, Founder and first Catholic Chaplain of the Newman Society of the University of Peradeniya and architect of the beautiful Church of Our Lady of the Seat of Wisdom at Perdeniya campus.

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 extracurricular activities, such as Sinhala & English Literary Associations (including speech and drama), Sports (football, basketball, and cricket), Debate Teams, and 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 Carrier Motivation. Present Director is Fr. Thevasahayam Jesupalan, OMI.

St. Joseph's College, Trincomalee was begun on the 27th July 1867 by the Irish Oblate Fr. Louis-Marie 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 30th 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 Alfred OMI

In 2008, Fr, Dennis Iddamalgoda 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 01st 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 dramas. The present Rector is Fr. E. Godfrey Joel, OMI and A. Regikumar |OMI is the Vice Rector.

The Oblate Institute of Higher Learning (OIHL) was established on 21st May 2016 through the initiative of Fr. Oswald Firth OMI during the Bi-centenary Jubilee celebration of the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) and the Academic Year (2016-2017) was inaugurated on 1st October 2016. As highlighted by St. Eugene de Mazenod Founder of the Oblates, “we must lead people to act like human beings, first of all, and then like Christians, and finally we must help them to become saints.” This is the very rationale that underscores our efforts in education. The Oblate Institute of Higher Learning (OIHL) is an attempt to continue and bring to fruition the dream of the Founder, and a response to a crucial need to promote justice, peace and reconciliation in a country wounded by a long civil war.

Oblate engagement in Sri Lanka has been at all levels, from Primary to University and has embraced all kinds of learning in technology, academics, Mass Media, music and making inroads into the formation of the clergy and the Religious Sisters and Brothers.

OIHL, which was begun at the Centre for Society and Religion (CSR), Colombo 10, was shifted to Dev Arana, Minuwangoda. The Administrative Financial Director is

Fr. Asanga Viraj OMI and the Secretary is Fr. Eric Wasalathanthrige OMI.

Notes

¹ W.L.A. Don Peter, *Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, A History in outline, The British period*

² Philips Jesuthasan OMI, *Our Tribute, Oblate Scholasticate, Kandy*, p 159-160 ³
Justin Gnanapragasam, *Catholic Education in Sri Lanka during its first century as a British colony (1796-1901)*

⁴ W.L.A. Don Peter, *ibid* ⁵ W.L.A. Don Peter, *ibid*

PATHFINDERS AND INNOVATORS

It was Oblate Bishop Christopher Bonjean, who inaugurated the July 2 annual festival at **Madhu** in 1870, which grew in popularity over the years and became the one festival in Sri Lanka which brought the biggest number of Catholic worshippers to one spot from all parts of the island.

When the war was declared in 1939, the shrine at **Tewatte**, Ragama, gained prominence due to a Vow made by the then **Archbishop of Colombo, Jean Marie Masson OMI**, made to Our Lady (26.5.), 1940 that if Sri Lanka was spared the horrors of War, he would build a Votive Shrine in her honour under the title of Our Lady of Lanka. The fulfilling of this vow and building of the votive Shrine (later declared a Minor Basilica by the Pope) was carried out by his successor, Archbishop Thomas Cooray OMI (later a Cardinal).

St. Jude's Shrine at Indigolla built and became a place of pilgrimage due to the foresight of **Fr. Philip Dissanayake OMI**.

As already mentioned the first parish mission in Sri Lanka was preached by Frs Constant Chounavel and Christopher Bonjean at Kayts from September 19th to October 29th, 1857. The Oblates have maintained the tradition of “**Mission-preaching**” and “**Novena preaching**” by setting up two Houses for Oblate Preachers (Nazareth, Wennappuwa and Amaithy Aham, Vavuniya) and became noted preachers.

Many Oblates have been chaplains to the sick and the infirm in the hospitals in Colombo. **Fr. Claude Lawrence OMI** had been a chaplain to the prisoners and to the sick in the Hospitals in Colombo for more than 45 years, using an old push-bicycle for his apostolate. **Fr. Adrien Duffo who cared for the prisoners, converted Sardiell of Utumankanda** in 1864.

A Reformatory, a Retreat House at Tewatte, a Catechetical Centre in Negombo and an Orphanage (Susithodaya) at Maggona are also due to the initiative of Oblates.

The Irish Oblate, **Fr. Charles Lytton**, Principal of St. Patrick's College advocated and sponsored the construction of the railway line to Jaffna. Travelling in the first train from Colombo to Jaffna in 1907, Fr. Lytton was given a heroic welcome by the people of Jaffna.

The Oblates were very much innovative in their missionary endeavours. For example, **Fr. Peter Pillai, became the Apostle of Social Justice Movement** in Sri Lanka, ably supported by **Fr. Tissa Balasuriya**, who took the initiative also to introduce the teachings of the 2nd Vatican Council to the Layfaithful, the Religious and the clergy and worked for social justice through the Centre for Society and Religion (CSR).

Fr. Andrew Peter Fernando OMI helped to translate the Holy Bible into Sinhala language (Catholic Edition). Bishop Edmund Peries was a noted historian and a preacher. **Fr. Marcelline Jayakody** promoted mass

media and music (cultural and liturgical). **Fr. J. B. Antoninus** set up SETIK in Kandy and worked for the upliftment of the plantation workers. **Fr. Lucien Schmitt** helped to establish the Social and Economic Development Centre (SEDEC) for socio-economic development of the poor. **Frs. Henk Schram and Stanislaus Fernando** were engaged in the apostolate of the Christian Workers' Movement (CWM). **Fr. Felix Mevel** introduced the "LAKRIVI" (Children's Movement) in Sri Lanka. **Fr. Michael Rodrigo**, who pitched his tent among the peasants of Buttala to uplift them, laid down his life for them.

The Oblates have also animated spiritually **the mandated Associations of the Layfaithful**, such as the Legion of Mary, Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVP), the Sacred Heart Confraternity and empowered Layfaithful through YCS, YCW and CWM and have also promoted socio-economic development of the poor (e.g fisher folk, the farmers and families living in the tea estates).

For nursing the Sick and the Elders

In 1886, Bishop Bonjean brought the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM) for nursing at the General Hospital, Colombo, in response to an appeal by Dr. Kynsey, Head of the medical department. In 1888, he got the Little Sisters of the Poor to open a Home for elders at Maradana.

The Holy Family Sisters of Bordeaux, France, came to Sri Lanka in 1861 at the request of the Oblates. Many convent- schools and welfare centres run by the Religious

Congregations also began in Sri Lanka at the invitation of the Oblates.

Properties

A Holiday House (Underbank) at Nuwara Eliya was bought by the Oblates and given to the Archdiocese of Colombo. Properties, such as the ones where the Archbishop's House, Aquinas College, St. Aloysius' Seminary and the Catholic Press are situated, were bought by Bishop Bonjean OMI with money brought from France. St. Francis Xavier's Major Seminary at Columbuturai, Jaffna, is built in a property bought by the Oblates. These properties were given to the respective dioceses.

Frontier Missionaries

Fr. M. Anthony Fernando who became the first Sri Lankan Provincial Superior of the Oblates (1962-1969) opened missions in India in 1968 and Malaysia in 1969.

Fr. Lucien Schmitt, who succeeded Fr. Anthony as Provincial Superior, sent Sri Lankan Oblates to Pakistan in 1971 and Bangladesh in 1973.

Fr. Louis Ponniah, who became the Oblate Provincial of the Jaffna Province in 1985, opened a mission in Norway and sent Fr. N. Arulnesan to United Arab Emirates. Fr. W. Steckling OMI (now a Bishop in Paraguay, former Superior General and his council officially transferred the General Delegation of Japa-Korea to the Oblate Province

of Colombo, headed by **Fr. Clement Waidyasekara** on April 10, 2010

Special mention needs to be made of **Frs Emmanuel Mariampillai and Stanislaus Philips** who became the first Sri Lanka Oblates to step into another country (India) for missionary tasks. Many Sri Lanka Oblates are now ministering in many countries among the poor and the abandoned.

An Assessment

According to **Fr. W.L.A. Don Peter** (former Rector of St. Joseph's College, Colombo and of Aquinas College of Higher Studies, Colombo, historian and educationist), the Oblates were leading missionaries and pastors in the island and the chief architects of the Lankan Church in the British period.. (cf. *Catholic Church in Sri Lanka - A History in outline- The British Period*).

MAZENOD COLLEGE, ANURADHAPURA

The desire to begin a College again with new awareness in order to serve the poor and the disadvantaged originated in the Oblates ministering in the South of Sri Lanka during a gathering (Congress) at Tewatte, Ragama , in 2018. The desired goal became real and actual when the Provincial Leader of the Oblate Province of Colombo, the Very Rev. Fr. Irwin Morais, OMI together with his Councillors made the decision with the blessing of Rt. Rev. Dr. Norbert Andradi, OMI, the Bishop of Anuradhapura and his Councillors, and authorized Fr. Dileepa Jayamaha, OMI, the parish priest of St. Eugene de Mazenod Church, Pothanagama, Anuradhapura to commence work in 2019 on the new project namely **MAZENOD COLLEGE** in Anuradhapura..

Background Information about Anuradhapura

The main occupation of the people in the North Central Province (NCP) of Sri Lanka, with its Provincial capital, Anuradhapura, is cultivation (of paddy, vegetables and fruits). A few families are engaged in fishing in the tanks (reservoirs). There are also wayside vendors of fruits and vegetables. A few families belong to lower middle class. Due to vagaries of weather patterns (widespread flooding and severe droughts) people languish in poverty, indebted to money lenders and to the banks which give loans. Material poverty and indebtedness with exorbitant interest to money lenders and to the banks had prevented many poor families to educate their children. **Hence, a**

correlation between poverty and the social isolation of these people and their educational standards existed. So no meaningful progress would take place until educational standard of the farming community in NCP was raised.

The Response of the Oblates

Being missionaries of the poor and the disadvantaged and ministering for many years in the diocese of Anuradhapura which embraces the two administrative districts of NCP, the Oblates, in the spirit of St. Eugene de Mazenod, the Founder of the Congregation of the Oblates, who said, "*Love embraces all; for new needs it invents new means when necessary*", felt energised to respond to the cry of the above-mentioned neglected families in NCP by starting a college that would ensure knowledge, skills, respect for each one's human dignity, religious beliefs, promoting respectful relationships among the students, teachers and the parents, thereby fostering also love for the country. Hence having become aware of the felt need of the people in N.C. P, the Oblates of the Oblate Province of Colombo became convinced that education would be the key that will unlock flourishing of life for the families in NCP, promising also gainful employment and social integration.

It needs to be noted that Bishop Christopher Bonjean OMI who transformed the Catholic School Society of Jaffna which was initiated by Vicar Apostolic Orazio Bettacchini into St. Patrick's College, Jaffna, devoted also

his time and energy for the education of Catholics and non-Catholics in the diocese of Jaffna which at that time included also the District of Anuradhapura. For example, the local language school begun in Anuradhapura by the Bishop Bonjean in 1874, became a registered Government English school under the leadership of Oblate Bishop Henry Joulain, with the name St. Joseph's College, on March 19, 1898. So the Oblates are not strangers in Anuradhapura. St. Joseph's College, Anuradhapura was also taken by the Sri Lankan Government in 1960.

A new beginning

The new **MAZENOD COLLEGE** began its classes on January 03, 2019 in the premises of the Rajabima Oblate Centre at 519/16, Jayanthi Mawatha, Anuradhapura, with **Fr. Dileepa Jayamaha OMI** as the Principal of the new College, with 37 children (boys and girls) in Grade 01 and with three lady teachers. **The official opening took place on January 07, 2018 in the presence of Very Rev. Fr. Irwin Morais, OMI, the Oblate Provincial Leader and Rt. Rev. Dr. Norbert Andradi OMI, Bishop of the Diocese of Anuradhapura. Among those present on this special occasion were Venerable Nugethane Pagnananda Thero, the chief Incumbent of Sri Sambuddhi Jayanthi Viharaya, Anuradhapura and Sivashri Balachandran, the Hindu Kurukkal (priest) of Anuradhapura.**

The Mission- Vision of Mazenod College

The Oblates dedicated to the ministry of education consider service as the inseparable twin of love. **Hence the motto of the College: *Servire in amore: to serve with love.*** It is through love manifested through compassionate service (the mission) they will endeavor to give glory to God (vision) and obtain salvation (Mt 25:40). Therefore they will try to dedicate themselves to lead the children, the parents and the teachers to act with dignity as human beings, loving and respecting one another, thereby maintaining also equality and inclusion among them. Since the students belonging to major Religious Faiths will also be beneficiaries of the services at Mazenod College, the Oblates educators / teachers will also try to enable them to embody in their lives the values and virtues of the Founders of their Religions.

Parents' Meetings every month

The Oblates continue to touch the lives of the families of the students who are mainly Buddhists through Mazenod College. The Principal meets the parents of the students every last Saturday of the month. A month before the Oblates inaugurated the college, the parents had their first meeting at Rajabima Oblate Centre on 8th of December, 2019. Mr. Benedict Perera, a veteran educationist spoke to the parents on the education system in our country, underlying the need to form our children intellectually, to develop their skills and form them holistically.

After starting the school, the second gathering of the parents was held on 26th of January, 2019. Fr. Savindu Senarathne OMI, conducted a session on the responsibilities of the parents and how they should live exemplary lives.

The third gathering was on the 23rd of February, 2019. Rev. Sr. Sonali HF, an experienced Government teacher in Swarnapali Girls' school, Anuradhapura, while sharing her experiences in the field of education, pointed out also some behaviour patterns of the parents which could have negative influence on the children.

On 30th of March, 2019. Mr. Jayamuni, a Chess Instructor gave a demonstration of the game of Chess to the parents and provided them with some basic knowledge about playing a game with their children. It was done in order to help the parents to have some quality time with their children and also to enable the children to have a partner to play a game of chess in their houses. In this way, we will be able to empower the children to think creatively.

Fr. Chrishantha Jayalath, OMI addressed the parents on 26 October 2019 on the upbringing and accompanying of the children and on the developmental psychology using also videos. Both the content and the methodology used by Fr. Chrishantha Jayalath were much appreciated.

Covid-19 pandemic shook the entire country and the education of the children was also badly affected since March 2020. Mazenod College however, was able to assist the children using digital technology (Online and

Zoom). On certain occasions, special meetings were held for the teachers using protective measures.

On January 03, 2022, Mr. Shiroman Joison Fernando, the Vice-Principal of Gateway College, Negombo addressed the teachers of Mazenod College on “*The Attitudes of a good Teacher*”. It was a very good seminar.

Sr. Sriyani Rodrigo of the Holy Family Congregation, a well experienced Principal of several Schools, has been a good collaborator at Mazenod College, Anuradhapura since June 2020 till January 2022, assisting very much in the training and animating of the teachers.

Through such seminars and encounters, the Oblate educators hope to maintain close contact and communication with the parents of our students, thereby accompany them in the process of life education and guidance, emphasising also discipline, decorum and demeanour of the parents and of the students.

Through Mazenod College, Anuradhapura, the Oblates are able to reach out and minister to the students, the parents and the teachers.

THREE OBLATE PIONEERS IN THE DIOCESE OF ANURADHAPURA

Introduction Religious freedom for the Roman Catholics in 1806 and the Apostolic Letter of Pope Gregory XVI enabled the arrival in 1842 of Fr. Orazio Bettacchini, the first European Missionary and first European Oratorian after Portuguese rule in Sri Lanka and in 1845, the arrival of Fr. Josepha Mary Bravi, OSB, the first SylvestrineBenedictine from Italy.

In 1847, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) arrived in Sri Lanka at the request of Bishop Orazio Bettachini made to Bishop Eugene de Mazenod, the Founder of the Oblate Congregation (OMI) and began their missionary work in Jaffna. Bishop Orazio Bettachini who had been the Pro-Vicar and Coadjutor of the Vicar Apostolic of Colombo was looking after the Catholics in the North of Sri Lanka. In 1849, he was made the first Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna.

In 1857, Bishop Joseph Mary Bravi, OSB, became the first Sylvestrine-Benedictine Vicar Apostolic of Colombo and Bishop Stephen Semeria, OMI, the first Oblate Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna.

On 5 July 1868 Bishop Christopher Bonjean OMI who became the Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna, succeeding Bishop Stephen Semeria OMI in 1874, initiated the construction of small church building in Anuradhapura. On 19 May 38 1874, he began a school for the children in Anuradhapura.

Till 1950, the Tamil Oblates have been serving the people of Anuradhapura as pastors and educators.

In 1950, when Bishop Emilianus Pillai, OMI succeeded Bishop J. Guyomar, OMI as the Bishop of Jaffna diocese, he requested the Archbishop of Colombo, Thomas B. Cooray, OMI to send Sinhala-speaking Oblates to cater to the needs of the Sinhala Catholics in the North Central Province (NCP).

The N.C.P has many tanks (reservoirs) to irrigate the land. Most of the people in N.C.P are cultivators (paddy, vegetables and fruits) and they are poor and often get indebted to money lenders and the Banks since the weather patterns affect their cultivation.

Though there are schools in the N.C.P, they often lack qualified teachers and also opportunities and facilities. Of late, education has become a commodity to be purchased due to the mushrooming of private tuition classes. The poor and marginalized who are struggling to lead lives worthy of human dignity are unable to find the wherewithal for the education of their children.

Missionary life in the Diocese of Anuradhapura

The diocese of Anuradhapura, in Sri Lanka, includes the two districts of the North Central Province (NCP) of Sri Lanka, namely Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa.

Anuradhapura, the Provincial capital of N.C.P is one of the ancient capitals of Sri Lanka, famous for its well

preserved ruins of the Great Sri Lankan Civilization. It is regarded as the country's first capital, established in 4 B.C., which had remained the royal capital for over 10 centuries. The civilization which was built upon this city was one of the great world civilizations. The city, now a UNESCO heritage site, lies 205 kilometers north of the present commercial capital Colombo. The majority of the people in N.C.P are Sinhala Buddhists. Other ethnic groups include Tamils (Hindus and Christian) and Muslims.

Apostolic Prefecture of Anuradhapura

Before N.C.P was made an Apostolic Prefecture in 1975, the district of Anuradhapura belonged to the diocese of Jaffna and the district of Polonnaruwa to the diocese of Trinco-Batticaloa.

At the outset, the district of Anuradhapura happened to be an outstation mission post of the parish of Vavuniya and Hingurakkoda in the district of Polonnaruwa was a mission post of the parish of Valaichchenai.

Preparation of a New Missionary Path

From 1951 till 1963, the Archbishop Thomas Cooray OMI of Colombo, through the services of Sinhala speaking Oblates who were ministering in his diocese, cared for the needs of the Catholics of N.C.P. The first Sinhala Presbyter who was sent was Fr. Philip Dissanayake, OMI, Parish Priest of Gampaha at that time. Later, however, a permanent presbyter in the person of

Fr. Reginald de Silva, OMI was sent on 01 October, 1951 to reside at Alagollewa (at that time under the diocese of Jaffna), where there was a Catholic community and to see to the needs of the people living in the district except that of the parish of Anuradhapura which was retained by the Diocese of Jaffna. In 1961 the mission of Alagollewa was divided and Fr Lawrence Perera OMI who had arrived to assist Fr Reginald in May 1959 became the parish priest of Alagollewa and Fr. Reginald went to Kala Oya where he constructed a new Church building and obtained the services of the Holy Family Sisters to look after the orphans and to help him in the pastoral activities.

With the arrival of Rev. Fr. Reginald de Silva OMI, the district of Anuradhapura saw the dawn of a new era. In this arduous missionary tasks, he was ably assisted by Fr. Lawrence Perera OMI and Fr. Gilbert Perera OMI. More parishes were gradually carved out e.g., Kala Oya, Talawa and Kekirawa. Hingurakkgodā in the Polonnaruwa district, remained as a mission post of the parish of Valaichchenai (Diocese of Trinco-Batticaloa). Most of the presbyters who worked at Anuradhapura at that time were Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI). There were a few diocesan presbyters too who came intermittently. In the district of Polonnaruwa there were the Jesuits till 1943 and then Fr. Sam Alexander till his death in 1956. They were intrepid missionaries who served the people selflessly.

In 1963, as the missionary work was expanding, the district of Anuradhapura was handed over to the

Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), thereby the Archbishop of Colombo was relieved of his responsibilities to this area.

On 30 August 1964 with the shifting of St. Joseph's Church to the New Town of Anuradhapura, the Holy See formed the New Ecclesiastical District of Alagollewa and Fr. Michael Croos, OMI was appointed its first Regional Vicar.

With the gradual missionary progress made, the entire area of the North Central Province was separated from the Dioceses of Jaffna and of Trincomalee – Batticaloa and made the Prefecture Apostolic of Anuradhapura in December 1975. Fr. Henry Goonewardene, OMI was nominated its first Prefect Apostolic. He was consecrated bishop on 10 July 1982 in the premises of St. Joseph's Cathedral, Anuradhapura, his episcopal motto being, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Mt 1:3).

On 18 March 1982, the Prefect Apostolic of Anuradhapura (N.C.P) was made a Diocese and Fr. Henry Goonewardene, OMI was named the Bishop of the diocese of Anuradhapura by the Pope.

Situation of the Diocese (1951 - 1963)

Geographically, of all the dioceses in Sri Lanka, the diocese of Anuradhapura is the biggest and the pioneer missionaries had to travel using the primitive means (e.g., bullock carts) through the thick jungles infested with wild

animals (elephants, bears) and snakes in order to meet the Catholics living in scattered areas, exposed to the wild animals.

The pioneers suffered from malaria, diarrhea and chronic kidney disease with little or no medical facilities available at hand. Even today people in certain parts of the North Central Province are not completely free from these threats (of animals) and the diseases and everyone often succumb to the threats and diseases.

Fr. Reginald's Missionary Challenges

With the opening of the colonization schemes in the decade prior to Fr. Reginald's arrival, the work-load had become more since more Catholics were coming into the new settlements. Fr. Reggie, as we he was popularly known, had been the handpicked missionary of Archbishop Thomas Cooray for the task and he stood up to the expectations of his Superiors. In addition to the difficult task of tending the flock at hand in different mission centres, it befell on him to go in search of the newcomers displaced in the new settlements who were in distant places.

On the 1st of October, 1991, when the presbyters of the Diocese of Anuradhapura and Bishop Henry Goonewardene were present at Kala Oya to felicitate Fr. Reginald de Silva, who was completing 40 years of his life and ministry in the N.C.P, Fr. Gilbert Perera OMI, who had been closely associated with Fr. Reginald in the diocese of Anuradhapura for many years, speaking on

behalf of all the presbyters working in the diocese, said, *“It is nothing but fitting to pay tribute to this valiant and outstanding missionary in appreciation of his services to the people of N.C.P, the present diocese of Anuradhapura. One required courage and unshakable faith to remain steadfast in ministry when most of the people whom he had to deal with were the least responsive, not quite known even to the priests of their parish of origin, also with shaky religious background and often with family problems beyond any settlement according to the ecclesiastical discipline of the day. Such were the missionary challenges Fr. Reginald de Silva had faced and he had remained faithful to the task with no complaint or grumbling.”*

Fr. Gilbert continued, *“With no equal to share one’s views or problems one becomes an isolated creature, an island by himself. The loneliness he experienced on such occasions was no doubt a mental agony. However, being a man of faith and prayer, Fr. Reggie weathered against all such difficulties and battered against the forces adverse both to his physical health and spiritual wellbeing. Many a time he suffered from malaria, diarrhea and many other ailments. He survived all such maladies and never did he ask for better places or safer pastures conducive to good health out of discouragement or disgust. For monthly retreats he had to travel all the way from Alagollawa to Madhu or Vavuniya. The closest priest-companion was always more than 30 – 35 miles away.”*

Continuing his word of praise, Fr. Gilbert said: *“Fr. Reginald had realized that the children in their mission centres needed more attention than the adults if the Church was to be fairly well established in time to come. To meet that demand he started the two Children’s Homes at Alagollawa for both boys and girls of the outstation mission centres. They were maintained with the subsidies from the late Archbishop of Colombo, Thomas Cardinal Cooray OMI and donations from the benefactors, especially of the parishes of Colombo Archdiocese. The parents of the children too contributed their mite as and when they were able to do so. At first these two Homes were managed by lay persons. The total number of occupants in both Homes always exceeded 100 children. These children were imparted with a good knowledge of Catholic doctrine and they were able to participate in the liturgy of the Eucharist and other religious exercises more often than they would have done at home or at their mission centres. During their free time they were afforded with an opportunity to engage in agriculture and horticultural activities so that they would be able to fit back into their home environment after leaving school. He was instrumental in shifting the first old church building and the school from the old site to the present site where the church and school buildings stand today.”*¹

¹ Fr. Gilbert Perera OMI, *The Missionary Oblate*, no 4, July - Dec. 1991, p 46-50, Mazenod House, Farm Rd., Colombo 15).

Fr. Reggie's faithful collaborators

While writing about the life and the ministry of Fr. Reggie, I am reminded of what St. Paul says in his epistle to the Romans (ch 16) regarding his collaborators. Hence mention must be made of three persons who were very close to Fr. Reggie in the first three decades of his ministry in the diocese of Anuradhapura. According to Fr. Gilbert, they were his cook, M. Marianu Perera of Udammitta, Ja-ela, W.D Manuel Appuhamy of Batagama, Ja-ela and his driver M.K Benjamin of Alagollawa. Marianu Perera, while being a cook also served as the organist, choir master, altar server and lector at daily Mass and other liturgical services. Manuel Appuhamy worked for many years as the only catechist, travelling the length and breadth of the mission field on a push bike, teaching religion to the children and instructing adults on matters of religion.

Fr. Reggie had been a Vicar General in the diocese of Anuradhapura. Since his arrival in 1951, he has been serving in the district of Anuradhapura, till his retirement, for 40 years rendering arduous labour of love to the flock entrusted to his care.

Fr. Reginald de Silva's funeral took place on July 14, 2010 at Kala Oya and was buried at Kala Oya Church. Speaking at the funeral, Madampe Sumanatissa Thero, Chief Buddhist monk at Siri Wijaya Bodhirajaramaya in Kala Oya said: *"He was a model for interreligious dialogue and often used to come to our temple. He*

respected all the religions.” Bishop Norbert Andradi OMI of Anuradhapura diocese recalling Father Reginald’s excellent lifelong service to the Church said, “He was a committed priest who worked hard to help people, especially during calamities such as floods. He put up homes for the elderly and for the children in the diocese.”

The Commitment of Fr. Gilbert Perera OMI

Oblate Father Gilbert Perera was a missionary who reached out to the unreached in many parts of the diocese of Anuradhapura. He was one who would go in a vehicle, park the vehicle by the side of the road and spend much time walking in search of the Catholics scattered in the jungles. Such apostolic journeying paved the way also for the gradual getting together of the Catholics.

Fr. Gilbert had been a very zealous Oblate missionary who had spent nearly forty one years with people in the diocese of Anuradhapura (North Central Province). Anyone writing the missionary life of the Church in Sri Lanka cannot forget the services he also had rendered for the birth and the consolidation of the faith of the Catholics and also the gradual formation of parish communities in the diocese of Anuradhapura.

I too had known and associated closely with the late Fr. Gilbert Perera since 1958, when I was also undergoing Oblate religious and missionary formation at the Oblate Scholasticate at Ampitiya. I can say that Fr. Gilbert Perera OMI had been imitating St. Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, the itinerant missionary. As an Oblate, he had

been journeying often through the jungles, reaching out to the unreached in the geographically vast area of N.C.P, especially in search of the Catholics.

Fr. Gilbert Perera was a great lover of the poor, conscious worker, dedicated to the Church, outspoken and abstemious in his ways. He was a single-minded Religious presbyter who sought the will of God always. He was one who led a life of simplicity in accordance with his vowed life, eating frugal meals and often walking in the hot sun, visiting the poor and also travelling long distances by public transport to meet his parishioners in order to minister the sacraments of the Church. He knew their names and their living conditions. He knew also the art of finding his scattered parishioners living in the midst of the Buddhists. He was an Oblate missionary who had manifested his selfless love through deeds of service to the poor and the abandoned people living in the diocese of Anuradhapura.

Fr. Gilbert Perera, a people-oriented missionary Oblate who had been visiting the outstations from Kekirawa, was able to obtain land from the government and build a church in the town of Habarana, a Buddhist environment, and obtain the kind services of two Holy Family Sisters - Sr. Flavia Perera and Nirmalie Mercie- in 1983, to reside at Habarana and be of service to the 22 Catholic families. Since he was very keen to teach Christianity to the Catholic children in the Maha Vidyalaya, Fr. Gilbert obtained the services of the Holy Family Sister Anselm Fernando. Fr. Gilbert, encouraged by Bishop Henry

Goonewardene, helped the Sisters to start also a Preschool for the children on 18 July 1983.

Fr. Gilbert Perera had been appointed as **the Vicar General** of the diocese of Anuradhapura by Bishop Oswald Gomis in 2002 and he became **the Administer of the Diocese of Anuradhapura** from 2002-2004, when Bishop Oswald Gomis was appointed by Pope as Archbishop of Colombo on 6 July 2002. Fr. Gilbert was also **the Director of Seth Saviya**, the diocesan Centre for Social Apostolate.

Fr. Gilbert Perera had laboured in the parishes of Alagollawa, Medawachchiya, Kekirawa, Polonnaruwa, Maduruoya, Nochchiyagama, Padaviya, Habarana and Anuradhapura, from May 6, 1963 till January 2007 (except for 4 years, 1966-1969). The parish hall at Medawachchiya dedicated to Fr. Gilbert Perera OMI is a symbol reminding the selfless service he had rendered to the people.

From 1998, when the spiritual and the pastoral care of the Sinhala Catholic migrant fisher-families at Kokilai who were under the parish of Mullaitivu, came under the diocese of Anuradhapura, Fr. Gilbert Perera who was the parish priest at Padaviya at that time, began visiting Kokilai, an outreach mission of nearly 50 km, once a month, and catered to their spiritual needs and celebrating also the Eucharist. As the director of Seth Saviya, he was also instrumental in helping the fisher-families at Kokilai, who had lost their loved ones and others who had lost their

houses, boats and the engines due to the mighty waves of the Tsunami in 2004, with the generous donations received from benefactors.

Born at Dippitigoda, Kelaniya on October 16 1929, Gilbert Perera was baptized in St. Francis de Sales' Church, Dalugama on November 16 1929. He studied at St. Joseph's College, Colombo and entered the Oblate Novitiate at Mont Eden, Kalutara on 16 September 1953 and made his vows as an Oblate Missionary on 8th September 1954. He did his philosophical and theological studies at the National Seminary, Ampitiya under the Oblate Fathers while undergoing Oblate apostolic formation at the Oblate Scholasticate, Ampitiya. He was ordained a priest by the late Bishop Leo Nanayakkara OSB on 8th April 1961 at the Oblate Scholasticate, Ampitiya.

Fr. Gilbert Perera OMI spent his last days at the Oblate House, "Marian Grove", Kohuwela. He went to his eternal reward on 26 September 2008 and was buried in the premises of St. Joseph's Cathedral, Anuradhapura. May he rest in peace with God whom he had loved and served.

HENRY GOONEWARDENE OMI

First Bishop of the diocese of Anuradhapura

Bishop Henry Goonewardene OMI, (popularly known as Father Joy and after episcopal ordination as Bishop Joy), gave glory to God through his mission which embodied his simple life style and loving service, the active presence and collaboration of lay Catechists and of the Women Religious and of the priests.

Among the pastoral means he adopted, mention must be made of the active presence and apostolates of lay catechists in the mission centres, diocesan pastoral gatherings composed of Lay faithful, the consecrated Religious, care of the children, the orphans and the elders and the setting up of a Minor Seminary.

A young Oblate presbyter (priest), quite intelligent and devoted, when invited by Superiors to be a lecturer and a formator of future Oblate presbyters, Fr. Joy preferred to be in the 'field' with the people. He was noted for his great zeal to make known Jesus and His message to people. He had the spirit of daring to reach out to the unreached and the struggling families and to console, comfort and find material assistance for them.

Having served in the Archdiocese of Colombo and in the diocese of Chilaw (in the parish of Nikaweratiya which included Galgamuwa and Anamaduwa when it was part of the diocese of Chilaw), Fr. Henry Goonewardene was called by the Oblate Provincial to serve in the North Central Province (NCP) of Sri Lanka.

No sooner Fr. Joy became the Prefect Apostolic of Anuradhapura, he shifted his residence temporarily to Polonnaruwa, renting out a room in a Chinese Guest House since Polonnaruwa being a Buddhist town, nobody was ready to accommodate a Catholic priest. With the help of Mr. Reggie Amarasekara, A.S.P (a Catholic) Fr. Joy was able to find a section of an auctioned land, $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre in Polonnaruwa (new town) and build two houses, one for the Sisters and the other for the priest. The first Mass was celebrated with few Catholics in the priest's house on 8 December 1976. The FMM Sisters had come to Polonnaruwa a few days later. Though there was opposition and protests of the Buddhists initially, a group of Buddhist young men assured Fr. Joy their support saying if liquor shops and beef stalls could be built in Polonnaruwa, there was no reason why a church building (a sacred place for worship) could not be built in Polonnaruwa.¹

On 18 March 1982, the Apostolic Prefecture of Anuradhapura (N.C.P) was made a Diocese and Fr. Henry Goonewardene, OMI (Fr. Joy) was named the Bishop of the diocese of Anuradhapura by Pope John Paul 11. He was consecrated bishop on 10 July 1982 in the premises of St. Joseph's Cathedral, Anuradhapura, his episcopal motto being, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Mt 1:3).

¹ Fr. Anthony Jayamanne OMI, *Bishop Joy, A Missionary Bishop of our Time*, Pubudu Press, Ragama, p 17-18.

Bishop Joy, the first bishop of the diocese of Anuradhapura, was also very conscious of the many needs of the Catholic farmers living in the outskirts, especially in the colonization schemes of N.C.P and also the lack of presbyters to serve them. Hence in order to keep the Catholic faith alive and consolidated in the families living in the outskirts, Bishop Joy knew the art of facilitating the 'birth' of new parish communities and of new mission centres and of placing many women catechists in the mission centres.

Bishop Joy had practical wisdom as an evangelizer. Quite aware of the Buddhist environment in N.C.P, he adopted simple unassuming dispositions and behavior patterns in order to strengthen the mission posts. For example, in certain situations, he would even spend the nights in motels, allowing the Religious Sisters to use the buildings which were built for the presbyters. The Sisters would start a pre-school for the children and gradually win the hearts and minds of the families in the Buddhist environments. The Sisters by their loving presence and service to the people would pave the way for the active presence of a resident presbyter, the celebration of Eucharist and a new beginning of evangelization. In this way, Bishop Joy prepared "the way of the Lord, making His Path straight".

Like St. Paul, Bishop Joy was an itinerant missionary who spared no pains to preach the Gospel, make known Jesus and build Christian communities in several villages and towns in N.C.P. He was a great traveller for Jesus Christ.

He showed much enthusiasm to consolidate the Catholic faith of the families who had come to N.C.P from Thoduwawa, Iranawila, Ja-Ela, Kalaeliya, Kandana and had settled down near the reservoirs of Maduruoya, Vilachchiya, Vahalkada and Polonnaruwa for the purpose of fishing.

Mission Centres and Nursery Schools.

Bishop Joy placed great importance to the role of the lay catechists and placed them in mission centres where the priests could not easily be present and serve.

+...Bishop Joy opened a nursery school in a cadjan shed for the children of a fishing community from Kala-Eliya, Ja-Ela at Thopawewa, Polonnaruwa and Franciscan Sisters (FMM) went to take care of the education of the children.

+ ...opened a convent at Horowapotana and with the help of the Holy Family Sisters residing there, reached out not only to the few Catholics living there but also to the families of other Faiths through the nursery schools and the Lakrivi (Children's apostolate).

+ ...opened a mission centre with a nursery school at Tissawewa bordering the Sacred City of Anuradhapura, managed by the catechists.

+ ... started a mission centre at Kahatagasdigiliya and placed two catechists to look after the scattered Catholics.

+ ...built a small chapel at Pothanegama, with Oblate Coadjutor Brother Victor Wilfred residing there to minister to the 40 Catholic families.

+ ...began a mission centre at Medirigiriya and with the help of two permanent catechists cared for the Catholics living in the jungle.

+... constructed a small church building and a house for the catechists at Rajangane to care for the people dispersed in the jungle.

+ ... a small centre for two catechists at Rambewa.

+... a new church building at Medawachchiya for worship.

+... at Padaviya a small chapel, a mission house and a house for the catechists to look after a very extensive area bordering the three civil districts of Anuradhapura, Trincomalee and Mullaitivu.

+.. at Parakramapura, Padaviya, a small room for a catechist.

During ethnic riots in Sri Lanka in 1983

During the ethnic riots in Anuradhapura, Bishop Joy, in his ordinary priestly garb, was on the roads of Anuradhapura, helping the Tamil victims to reach places of safety with the help of the priests and the Sisters.

Bishop Joy, conscious of the financial situation and the struggles of the Catholics, made effort to promote selfhelp

projects. 55 From the time, Bishop Emilianus Pillai OMI of the diocese of Jaffna requested Archbishop Thomas Cooray OMI to care for the Sinhala-Catholics in the district of Anuradhapura, many Congregations of Women Religious had come to serve the people (both the Catholics and the people of other Faiths). Bishop Joy appreciated their active presence and their dedicated services as teachers, catechists and providers of care for the orphans and the Elders in the parishes of Anuradhapura, Medawachchiya, Nochchiyagama, Kala Oya, Polonnaruwa, Kekirawa, Habarana Alagollawa and Hingurakgoda. He was also concerned about the contemplative Rosarian Sisters at Walpola in the parish of Medawachchiya, who continue to pray for various intentions of the diocese.

In 1989-1990, Bishop Joy began a **Catechetical Centre** and appointed Fr. Anthony Jayamanne OMI in order to train catechists and for conducting various pastoral programmes. In 1994- 1995, he built **St. Luke's Communication Centre** to provide Catholic programmes to Rajarata Radio Station. He built a **Home for elders at Kala Oya** near the Church building to cater to the elders. During the Gam Udawa Programme of late Prime Minister, Premadasa, Bishop Joy was able to settle matters relating to the old church building at Mihintale and construct a house for the priest to reside and serve the Catholics.

Being an Oblate and the first Bishop of the diocese of Anuradhapura, Bishop Joy also maintained as one of his

priorities the formation of the clergy to serve the People of God. Hence he invited the Apostolic Delegate, Mgr Francois Robert Bacque to preside at the Eucharistic celebration and inaugurate officially **St. Peter's Minor Seminary** on 4 January 1990. Ten seminarians began on that day with Fr. Sunil Gunawardena as the first Director of St. Peter's Seminary, Anuradhapura.

Bishop Joy began **the Diocesan Apostolic Group** where the priests, the Religious and the full time catechists got together to exchange their life experiences, apostolates and sought the solutions with Bishop presiding. It met three times during the year. It helped to promote solidarity among the members and improve the quality of the apostolates in the diocese. Bishop Joy had the pastoral assistance of the Oblate Fathers Reginald de Silva, Gilbert Perera, Anthony Jayamanne, Bertram Thirimanne, Emil Perera, Luigi Hetttiarachch, Lawrence Jayatilake, Tudore Paulinus, Sarath Silva and Rohan Silva and many diocesan presbyters to make known Jesus Christ and His message in the diocese of Anuradhapura.

Bishop Joy appreciated very much the active presence of **Oblate Coadjutor Brothers Victor Wilfred and Peter Casmir Fernando** in the diocese. Brother Victor spent many years in an old building (which had become present Church building) at Pothanegama. He used to visit the families, both Catholic and Buddhist, and became a friend of many people. It was due to his befriending brotherly spirit and his special visit to see a Buddhist monk in the hospital the Catholics were able to transform the old

building into a place of worship. The church building is dedicated to St. Eugene de Mazenod, the Founder of the Oblate Congregation.

Brother Casmir who was residing at Kagama became a sign of loving pastoral concern and care. He was able to instruct the people and guide them. Bishop Joy appreciated the selfless services of the Religious Sisters in several places in the diocese.

Bishop Joy obtained also the services of the men committed to community life in the charismatic Pubuduwa Movement for their active presence and apostolate in the diocese.

Oblate Fr. Gilbert who had known Bishop Joy since 1974 wrote: *“Bishop Joy was a bit scrupulous about spending money. He had often said that we should not tarnish the image of the Church which is poor, by spending lavishly. Wealth is the root cause of all evil. His episcopal paraphernalia were old clothes borrowed from other Bishops. He often travelled by public transport, dressed as any other priest in white cassock and black cincture. He started using an old car – Morris Minor. On his first visit to Kekirawa as the first Bishop of Anuradhapura, the Government Agent of Kekirawa Mr. Dharmadasa Senadhira had said in his speech that he had expected the Bishop to come in a posh limousine but he was surprised to see him getting out of an old Morris Minor.”*

“Bishop Joy was satisfied eating a morsel of bread with a cup of tea or a glass of water. That was his style of life 58

regarding meals. On many occasion he had slept on a plain floor even without a mat or on a cadjan or on a piece of newspaper. He had led a poor life.”

“Bishop Joy gave priority to the extension of the Church of Christ, not for big buildings. He was satisfied with small buildings, with a kitchen and toilet facilities where two apostolic workers would live with minimum comfort. In places where he could not buy land he rented out at least a room in a private house to enable two catechists to stay and be of service to the Catholics. Often it was difficult to find persons who were ready to stay and serve the few Catholics living in a diaspora situation.”²

Due to ill health, Bishop Joy resigned from his episcopal responsibilities on 2 November 1995. He passed away on 17 April 2000 at the age of 74. He was buried in the St. Joseph’s Cathedral, Anuradhapura. —

²Fr. Anthony Jayamanne OMI, *ibid.*

Ministers of the domestic church

New pastoral needs in North Central Province (N.C.P) demanded new pastoral responses from the Oblate pioneers.

- a) **They went in search of the new comers** who had come to N.C.P, undergoing many hardships, gradually identifying the Catholic families. There were cultivators, fisherfolk and people engaged in other occupations.
- b) **They had to identify the basic needs of the families** who had settled down in the thick jungles, near the reservoirs lacking decent houses, sanitary facilities, medical help, transport facilities, postal services and opportunities for the education of their children.
- c) **Those pioneers had to find ways and means to help them** to begin their lives with confidence in the new environment. They had also to guide the new settlers to lead lives worth of human dignity.
- d) **Befriending the new settlers, the pioneer Oblates began to obtain more information regarding the background of the Catholics and assisted them especially regarding marriage and family life.**
- e) **The pioneers had also adopted a new pastoral approach** based on what St. Eugene de Mazenod, the Oblate Founder had proposed, namely to lead people to act like human beings, first of all, and then like Christians, and finally to become saints.
- f) **They began celebrating the Eucharist with the few Catholic families in their small huts.** They also prayed with them. The initial commitment of the Oblate pioneers has been continued by their successors.

