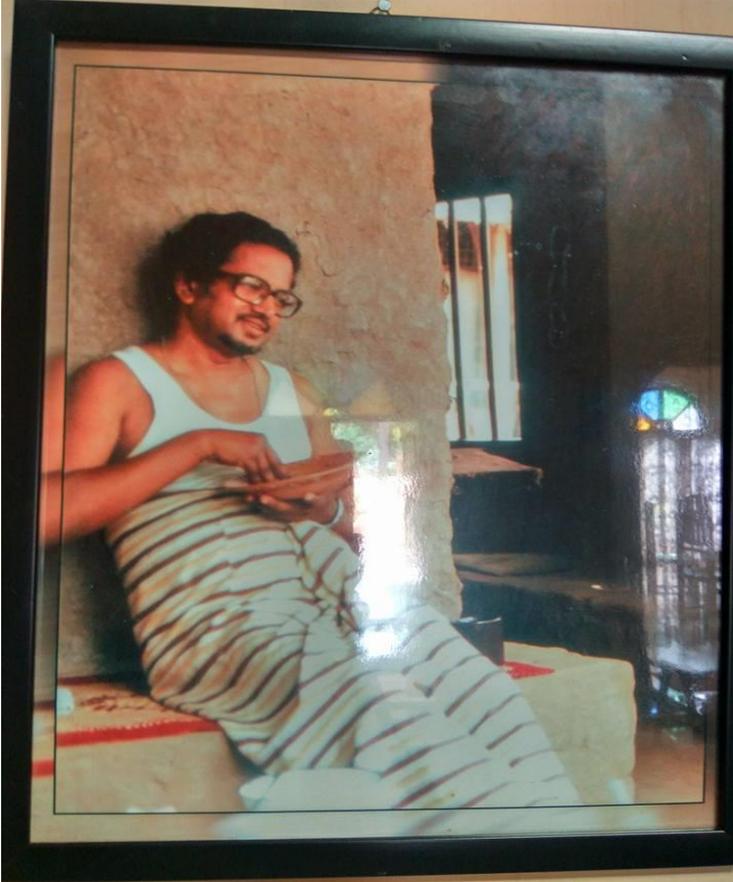


# *The Missionary Oblate*



**Fr. Mike, with two doctorates, pitched his tent among the peasants of Buttala**

**No 62**

**July-Dec., 2022**

# *The Missionary Oblate*

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## **WHY THIS PRESENT CALAMITY?**

Arnold Toynbee had said, “Of the twenty one notable civilizations, nineteen perished not from conquests from without, but from decay within.” What has made the pearl of the Indian Ocean descend to the present pitiful situation – no money, no food, no medicine, no fuel, no gas, power cuts, galloping inflation, disruption of education, no hopeful political leadership?

As the price of essential goods and services are skyrocketing, pregnant mothers will be under-nourished and their children who will see the light of day, will also be under-nourished and will not have the physical quality of life to study and earn their living. They will succumb to various sicknesses and will die due to lack of financial resources to seek medical care. Sri Lanka which had maintained good quality of life and of education in the past will become very poor and the image of the country will also suffer internationally.

As a result of the above-mentioned oppressive situation, the Government elected to power by 6.9 million people has seen thousands of people - young and old – protesting against it in the streets since March 3 this year (2022). The main reason for the protest has been selfishness and the greed for power, prestige and wealth of persons whom the people sent to the Parliament of Sri Lanka. The other reason for the present calamity has been the hanging on of the aged lawmakers in the Parliament and the lack of good

statesmen – competent, skillful, young and honest – in the Parliament.

Many people with a feudal mentality have also sent unqualified and incompetent persons to the Parliament not so much to work for the common good of all the citizens but to obtain all that is necessary for their own personal living and livelihood. Many persons have exploited this mentality of people and have obtained their consent to enter Parliament after enticing them with unlawful favours.

Economy has collapsed, democracy is dying and corruption is alive!

Edmund Burke said, “All that is necessary for evil to succeed is for good people to do nothing.” Such a saying should challenge also our Catholic schools and colleges to reflect on the quality of Parliamentarians they have produced. They have produced many professionals but not many good leaders and statesmen who are also spiritually and intellectually empowered with the social teachings of the Church.

.....

## **PROPHETS AND CHARISMATICS**

Long before the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council, there had been efforts made by some priests in Sri Lanka to be missionary disciples of Jesus in new ways, responding to new needs and pains of people. I like to point out Fr. Henk Schram OMI as one of such visionaries. After the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council, Michael Rodrigo

OMI and the diocesan presbyter, Oscar Abayaratne became two new path finders in the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka.

**Fr. Henk Schram OMI** <sup>1</sup> arrived in Sri Lanka from Netherlands on June 4, 1946 and soon became a very ardent apostle of the workers in Sri Lanka. Even long before the Second Vatican Council, Fr. H. Schram was convinced very much regarding the place and role of the Catholic worker in the Church. He was a good friend of Mgr. Joseph Cardijn (later a Cardinal), the Founder of the Young Christian Workers' Movement (YCW) in Belgium, which had become an international Apostolic Movement in the Church already before the Second Vatican Council.

Fr. H. Schram had a special love for the poor urban industrial workers and their families. He was a convinced speaker and a writer. In order to meet the urban workers, he decided to live in a small room in the old church building in Maliban Street, Pettah, Colombo, (now replaced by Paul VI Centre), opposite Fort Station. Living in that room, he used to buy his meals from small eating houses and such meals caused his stomach disease.

Fr. Schram's simple life style and his love for the poor workers attracted the urban workers and he began to teach them the 'See, Judge, Act' method of the YCW Movement and thereby produced also good Trade Union leaders. His love and his life spent for the uplift of the struggling poor workers in Sri Lanka, drew also the attention of Fr. Leo Deschatelets, the then Superior General of the Oblates, who invited him to participate in the Oblate General Chapter of 1966. His apostolate with the

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<sup>1</sup> Philips Jesuthasan OMI, *Our Tribute*, Vol 111-Part 2, Oblate Study Club, Oblate Scholasticate, Kandy.

urban industrial workers did not please the Government. Having served the poor workers in Sri Lanka for 20 years, he had to return to the Netherlands in 1966.

While undergoing Oblate formation for mission at the Scholasticate, Kandy (1958 - 1965), Fr. H. Schram's social apostolate among the poor urban workers and his life-style made a deep impression in me and I felt also attracted to the social apostolate.

**Michael Rodrigo**, an Oblate presbyter, with his two doctorates- one from the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome and the one from Institute Catholique de Paris, did not want to be a professional Religious but a Religious professional, taking the form of peasant among the poor peasants of Buttala. Encouraged by the late Bishop Leo Nanayakkara, OSB of Badulla, Michael Rodrigo went to live among the Buddhists, adopting also a simple life-style, not to convert them and thereby increase the number of Catholics in Sri Lanka but to bear witness to Jesus Christ, who though divine, became a feet-washing servant.

Michael Rodrigo wanted to make the oppressed peasants to be conscious of their inalienable and inviolable intrinsic dignity as human persons and also to help them become agents of their own development. What energized him to launch such a new way of his presbyteral life was his own understanding of his spirituality. He believed that people would achieve also their personal salvation through a life of selfless love manifested through deeds of service, even without being baptised (Mt 25:34-40). Worship, prayer life and the sacraments are spiritual means (aids) to become selfless lovers of people. The spirituality of Fr. Michael Rodrigo made him lay down his life for the peasants of Buttala.

**Fr. Oscar Abayaratne**, a presbyter of the Archdiocese of Colombo, had undergone a conversion in his life during his stay in Rome, through the spiritual guidance of Valerian Gaudet, OMI, a French Canadian a missionary in South America, and his assistance to take part actively in a prayer session of a charismatic family in England. On his return from Rome, Oscar launched a charismatic movement (**Kithu Dana Pubuduwa**) in Sri Lanka, in which the members began practicing the spirit of prayer, community life of sharing, concern for social justice and simple life style. They were very much inspired by the Word of God and the life-style of Jesus. Oscar was supported by the late Cardinal Thomas Cooray OMI, Archbishop of Colombo, by the late Bishop Frank Marcus Fernando of the diocese of Chilaw and also by the late Bishop Edmund Fernando OMI who had been Fr. Oscar's spiritual director during the years of his formation in St. Bernard's Seminary at Borella.

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***“Whole theologies have been constructed without any reference to social justice because those people who constructed such theologies lived in a social context where questions about poverty and oppression did not arise at all, let alone as faith questions. “***

*-Albert Nolan, OP in **Hope in the Age of Despair**, p 14-15*



**Fr. Henk Schram OMI**

## **Rev. Fr. Henk Schram OMI, a deeply committed worker-priest**

(**Mr. Vivian Silva**, from Moratuwa, a very ardent YCW leader and a friend of the Oblates sent me this write-up <sup>1</sup> (as noted below), saying ‘this is how the then young Father Henk Schram OMI explained the origin of his Mission in Sri Lanka’ (Editor).

### **MY CONVICTION**

*“I went to Ceylon in 1946 and my main work there consisted in helping to organize a Workers’ Movement. For about 13 years I lived in a slum neighbourhood, close to the Port of Colombo, the Capital City of Ceylon. I had to return to the Netherlands because of my illness.*

*I am convinced that without worker-power, nothing very much will change in international politics and*

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<sup>1</sup> The Missionary Oblate journal, no 29, July – Dec., 2003, p 52-55), 40, Farm Rd, Colombo, 15

*consequently nothing will change among the poor people in the Third World, - two thirds of the world's population. In fact nothing will change in the very sophisticated form of exploitation that is taking place here.*

*You have to develop a style of work which gives priority to people, all people. That is why before you launch any action you have to realise that it concerns the world in totality; that it has to do with all human beings. You are dealing with people as human being, not animals. A human being becomes truly human only when he becomes aware of his life situation; a life situation which he shares with others; and when he, from that awareness of his situation, begins to act,*

*together with others, to change of his situation, begins to act, together with others, to change his situation.*

## **HOW DOES ONE START FROM SCRATCH?**

*The way we made our first approach to people in Ceylon was like this: we started a canteen, where people could drop in for a cup of tea at a very nominal price. And we were there all the time, close to the Port. People started coming to us at first with all sorts of personal problems: for example, that they were looking for a job, or that they did not have enough to eat. We started helping them, but soon we began to realize that everybody could be sacked from their jobs, that almost everybody's salary was low. So we realised that it was important to get people together and organize them. That is how we moved on to Trade Union work.*

*You have to start with what people themselves feel is important and not take them into problems which they do not perceive as their own. For almost an entire year, we did nothing else but be with the people, chatting, drinking a cup of*

*tea, smoking a cigarette with them etc., slowly you get to know who is who and who is more aware of situations than others. Gradually you begin to discover that there is more to it than being nice and kind to each other. That people have a lot of things in common. A small number of people begin to discover each other because they realize that they have a common engagement. Here then is your first group. Of course some people will drop off, but others will continue.*

*When these people move on to common action, not just random activity, but when they start working systematically towards some goal, for instance setting up a Trade Union, you have a work group. From this one could move on to the third phase: a Team. This is closeknit group of people who engage themselves towards common long term goals.*

*When you want to set up groups, it is important to discover the people who are just a little bit more aware and willing than others. That is where you can make a start. After some time there will be several groups. Then you need full-timers. These are people who have already been active in groups and who are willing to be active in a wider scale; to bring various groups who are engaged in similar activities in contact with each other, so that they could exchange experiences, learn from each other, or decide when they should launch a common Campaign.*

*In the workers' movement one often makes the mistake of wanting quick results. One becomes so preoccupied with changing structures that one forgets the people for whom it was all meant in the first place.*

*In various action groups here, I notice what I call that cursed "dutchness". They want quick results. Again and again*

*one notices that activities want results that they can directly see and measure. This is not possible, where it concerns the deepest value of human beings. You cannot immediately see what you are achieving or where it will lead. We are talking about authentic workers' Movement, where people really know what it is all about.*

*It is only in this way that you build up real strength. It is only then that radical changes can be effected."*

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**Fr. Michael Rodrigo's Oblation**

Lord Jesus,

I give you my hands to do your work,

I give you my feet to go your way,

I give you my eyes to see as you do,

I give you my tongue to speak your words,

I give you my spirit that you may pray in me,

Above all I give you my heart that you may love in me,

Your Father and all humankind,

I give you my whole self that you may grow in me,

So that it is You, Lord Jesus, who live and work and pray in me

## **Remembering** **Fr. Michael Rodrigo OMI,** **a man of knowledge and affable qualities,**

*Sr. Milburga Fernando (an eyewitness)*

On the eve of November 10, 1987 as the sun went down on the crimson west, dragging and drowning with it all the hopes of the people of Buttala, Father Mike was gunned down at Suba Seth Gedera while he was engaged in the offering the sacrifice of Communion on the altar with his community in the little Chapel.

As soon as the ripple of news spread, the people came with haste, sobbing their hearts out to pay their respects to their great leader, lying peacefully on the altar of sacrifice, a true testimony, of a laying down of his life for his friends whom he had loved and served for seven whole years. That evening before the sacrifice, he stood at the foot of the altar, read an excerpt from St. Oscar Romero, the former Bishop of El Salvador, paraphrasing and interpreting it to make it his own. ***“I have often been threatened with death, I must tell you that as a Christian I don’t believe in death without the Resurrection, if they do kill me, I shall rise up in the hearts of the people. I’m not boasting, I say this with great humility. As a priest, I am obliged by divine command to lay down my life for those whom I love. This means all the people, especially the poor of Uva Wellassa, with whom we have bonded together in our origins and our destiny, and in short, the whole inhabited earth, “for all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”*** For God is self-emptying love who is

enfleshed in the neighbour, through whom God becomes really present. Martyrdom is a grace from God which I don't think I have earned, but if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, let my blood be the seed of freedom and a sign that hope may soon be a reality to our people. If they do kill me, tell them that I forgive and bless those, who do it. I shall die, but may my people never perish." True to his words, he continues to live in the hearts of the people as their testimonies confirm:

**Madhuri** gazing on the martyr's body blurted, "Sisters, why are you desolate? Why do you weep? It is absolutely clear that Father Mike's life shines as a brilliant light in this obscure situation in Buttala. He will continue to give us life, light and hope. Now we are not afraid to face death. He has courageously set the example. His memory will live on to eternity as we go on being witnesses to it".

**Padma Paranagama:** testifies, "Father, you are living forever, when death threats were closing in upon you, you confided in your close associates in your own words, *"There are death threats to me, but I am not afraid to die. If I'm killed, may my blood be the seed sprouting forth freedom and hope for the people."* Beckoning Sister Benedicta and Sister Milburga and the others, Fr. Mike prayed invoking God's immeasurable love and mercy. His own life was secondary to him. His love for humankind was uppermost in his life and it was a totally self-emptying love. The passing away of this great humanitarian, was ratified on the altar, what more can one expect of this life? The life and death of this Saint will be etched in the history of Wellassa for us and our children

and their children, will go on remembering and reliving this history forever. The brilliant light of the saint who kindled the village, is seemingly extinguished. Nay, it will go on shedding its brilliance eternally to overcome crime violence and oppression levelled on us by the evil forces of the powers that be.”

**Deepika** writes: “We thought that it is quite an unnatural occurrence for Christians to come to a village that is predominantly Buddhist. But soon, they took to us with much ease. They began to associate with the people in a very inclusive and friendly manner which won the hearts of the simple village people by and by. Suba Seth Gedera became the people’s second home. There were many reasons for this. Free medical services were available for the needy, was one of them, a combination of both Eastern and Western medicine. The youth, naturally frequented the place to read and enhance their knowledge as there was a mini library and sufficient newspapers, providing an all-round news bulletin, the village had never heard of before. The person responsible for this treasure trove, the one who identified with the villager, wearing the villagers’ attire was Fr. Michael Rodrigo, affectionately called Father Mike by the people. He was so unassuming and simple, that it took us some time to find out that he was one of the most learned stalwarts in the various sciences, even having a doctorate in Buddhism. It didn’t take long for the Buddhist clergy and the people to accept his group into their milieu. Father Mike treated everyone with profound respect, sensitivity and humanity. He studied the needs, problems and aspirations of the people, working out solutions with the people themselves. Soon,

the villagers were engaged in their health and educational concerns, finding solutions and engaging themselves in interesting livelihood projects. This is what alarmed the miscreants totally engaged in violent, oppressive, illegal and malevolent deeds to put an end to Fr Mike.” One can emulate Fr. Mike’s good example, epitomize qualities like simplicity, humility, sincerity and honesty. I was able to learn many a lesson from him, to make my life successful. We learnt that the green light for the official procedure towards his Sainthood had been given. But the people of Buttala rose up with one voice to call him blessed on the day he gave up his life on the altar of Sacrifice. He was profoundly human and Christ-like, a meeting point of the Divine and the Human so said the people in one voice. We salute you Fr. Mike. Our tribute will continue in history forever.

**Jinadasa** recalls with much nostalgia that it was a pleasure to work with Fr. Mike. “I became acquainted with him, as I admired his wealth of knowledge, his affable qualities, his scholarly familiarity of Buddhism and his catchy humour. I thought to myself that Buttala will be blessed if there were more people like him. Fr. Mike had a passion for Education, he always advocated that education is the key to find solutions to the burning problems that villagers face. He complied with the stance of Nelson Mandala `that Education is the most powerful weapon which can be used to change the world”. Jinadasa further adds, “how Fr. Mike at a meeting `*Minis Samagi Havula*’ discussed the importance of Education. Education should be the vehicle to teach humanness and human values. The school creates the atmosphere, it

provides the ambit to share and experience these values. People like him are too good for this world. He was a true leader, who felt the pulse of the people, he was committed to serve the poor and bring some solace to them, his life was snuffed out but he has left indelible foot prints on the soil of Buttala and lasting memories etched in the hearts of the people he served.”

Father Mike was a multi-talented priest with a double doctorate in Theology and Philosophy. He was offered a prestigious position in the Institute Catholique de Paris, France. A big climb in the ladder of success with honour, power, wealth and global connections where he himself would be writing the drama, producing, directing and starring in it as it were. Verbally, he had already accepted the offer, a little while later comes a second offer, an appeal from the late Bishop of Badulla, Rt. Rev. Dr. Leo Nanayakkara. It was to serve the poor in the Diocese of Badulla. The Bishop defines his context with the two realities of Asia, as the continent of the poor and the continent of religions and cultures. It was an appeal to initiate direct and recast a programme of contextual theology in his newly founded School of Ministries (including the priestly ministry) as a response to the double challenge of poverty and dialogue. Saddled between these two opposites, Fr. Mike wrestles between his ego- drama and God’s field-drama. (Hans Urs von Balthasar). He then retreats to deep prayer and reflection and confesses to his elder sister, that God is asking him to sell all what he has in order to buy the pearl of great price and the treasure hidden in the field. Further quoting the Bible, “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the

whole world, and lose himself? Since then, he stood firmly with Jesus at the Cross with profound faith and faithfulness firmly convinced that the Resurrection of Jesus has conquered death Fr. Mike committed himself to this way of proclaiming the Good News to all of humankind and especially to the poor.

He studied the problems of the area with great intensity, the past history of Colonial rule by the British cannot be overlooked. History has recorded Uva-Wellassa was an agriculturally thriving land known as the granary of the Kandyan Kingdom. It was not only famous for rice, it also abounded in other edible crops such as jak, breadfruit, coconut and yams that were invaluable for the village people. Besides there had been libraries containing technological resources and engineering skills, ancient irrigation skills and hydrological resources, medical know-how and in addition strips of rain forests replete with medicinal trees and herbs. One could say it was a miniature or replica of the Garden of Eden. Incidentally, a professor of Egyptology in London in his excavations in Egypt, has even found the real garden of Eden, a most beautiful place still surrounded by mountains, valleys and springs with beautiful fruit trees all around leading down to an inner sea. Brutal force was unleashed to crush the 1818 Rebellion. Under the then Governor Robert Brownrigg. Every form of livelihood came under attack, the British went on rampage scorching the fields, crops, cattle, homes and a large number of youth were mercilessly killed. This area of plenty was ravaged and left desolate. The people of Uva Wellassa even after the elapse of 165 years could not erase this bitter experience

etched in their memory, anything new especially an alien religion earned their aversion and suspicion. This still hangs as a big block on our reputation.

It is against this backdrop, Fr. Mike and his band of faithful supporters had to forge ahead. First and foremost, they had to win the confidence of the Buddhist clergy and the 99% of Buddhist people; hence with much patience perseverance, and constant dialogue, their efforts were rewarded. The 'tide turned' by Vesak 1982. Fr. Mike and his group with the collaboration of an eloquent lyricist farmer's help re-wrote the Buddhist Devotional songs based on the 'Saradharma and Dasaparamitas' the ten perfections, closely reflecting the values of the Kingdom. It was listened to by about 700 devotees. This event cleared all suspicions and their sincere effort received much recognition and appreciation by Venerable Alutwela Sumanasiri and Koteneluwe Upatissa and other monks of the area. On May 1987, he officially affirmed his collaboration in the village effort of the Buddhist-Christian Dialogue and conscientization by placing his signature to the constitution and agreement.

With this assurance he engaged himself with several livelihood projects targeting different groups, the farmers, the youth, the women, health workers etc. His main focus was to impart knowledge and form a nucleus who could reach out to the various strata of society and teach them to come out of strangulating poverty. One way was the monthly, '*Story Hour*'. He used to read excerpts from E.F. Schumacher's '*Small is Beautiful*'. The ideas expounded were very much in alignment with Fr. Mike's

ideas which gave him added impetus to integrate them in his endeavors as he too believed in sustainable development which should go hand in hand with environmental protection. He looked upon the environment specially the forests, as the home for the village people, as the poor depend on the environment for fuel, fodder and animal stock. He also discerned the stark reality of poverty and malnutrition, the vicious circle in which the poor are trapped, and the only viable solution is to improve the rural agricultural and ecological mechanism. Fr. Mike discovered that the ideas suggested by Schumacher and his own perception on sustainable development were complementary and would be beneficial to the rural community. He envisaged smaller working units and communal ownership utilizing local labour and resources, while the emphasis is laid on the person and not the product. He was averse to massive projects involving increased specialization resulting in profit maximization causing irreparable harm to the environment carried out by multi-national organizations wherein the human becomes a mere cog in the wheel. It is this liberative approach as against the Trans-National Corporations' approach that stirred up suspicion and hostility with the would-be powers. Fr. Mike looked at development from a different perspective wanted to impart the right kind of knowledge which will make the poor free and independent.

After studying the needs of the people and assessing the traditional methods of the farmers which were liberative he got the farmers and the University students in the field of Science and Agriculture on to the same platform to

share their knowledge. The students contributed their scientific knowledge, while the farmers their indigenous traditional methods. The result was the enhancement of conservationist, eco-friendly, lucrative farming methods. Fr. Mike's aim was to find affordable locally appropriate sustainable solutions to the most pressing needs of the people while preserving the environment. The fertilizer needed for agriculture was successfully met, recycling raw materials from the village itself. According to a familiar saying, 'give a man a fish, it is a short-term help, if you teach him the art of fishing, he can help himself and his family'

A comprehensive study of Father Mike in his involvement with Buttala goes beyond the concept of his being a Catholic priest who loved and served the people of Wellasa until his untimely death in 1987. There is another vital dimension which has been neglected in the tributes written about him annually. From the very inception, of Suba Seth Gedara, Father Mike was very much an environmentalist steeped with profound respect for God's creation made him creatively involve in sustainable development which was centered on agro-ecology that was rationalized by Buddhist and Christian thought. Father Mike combined indigenous farming methods with science to develop that alternative economic structure that went against the then national development models of the state with their Trans National Corporations.

In his last monthly reflection and prayer when the community gathered together in His Name. 'Where two

or three are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of them' (Matthew 18:20) Father Mike said, "The sword of Damocles is hanging over us, we are overshadowed with death threats, interventions by the secret police, the military and the CID. At a time like this is there a court of appeal and what do we do? Let's turn to Jesus. I can clearly hear his voice. 'Why are you afraid, don't be afraid O ye of little faith.' If we examine the charge sheet against us: It is crystal clear that we have only stood firmly against crime, violence and oppression levied on the people by death dealers the local, national, and international middlemen and the sociopolitical leadership, dealing death to the – Anawim Yahweh (The poor of God). They little realize that every heartbeat of theirs becomes a calculated drumbeat on their march to the grave. But every move to prevent crime, violence and oppression will bring about a fullness of life for our people. 'For he came that we may have life and have it to the full.' This is eternal life and abundance of life destroying death and death dealing. We are living life and not death. Let us choose life and death will not touch us.' These were the passionate sentiments of Fr. Mike, the prophet expressing the passionate feelings of God the Supreme Prophet in whom is summed up the whole purpose of prophesy.

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Fr. Michael Rodrigo OMI was a very active member of the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) committee of the Oblate Province of Colombo.

**A Tribute**  
**to**  
**Rev. Father Michael Paul Rodrigo, O.M.I.**  
**(1927-1987)**

**Fr. Romesh Lowe OMI**

**Introduction**

Michael Rodrigo was a religious priest who belonged to the Order of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. He held two doctorates in theology and was a professor at the National Seminary, Kandy, Sri Lanka for sixteen years before he opted to live the rest of his life with poor peasants at Alukalavita, Buttata, Sri Lanka. He was regarded as the leader of liturgical renewal of the sixties in the Catholic Church of Sri Lanka.<sup>1</sup>

Rodrigo developed a new model of Christian-Buddhist “Dialogue of Life at the Village Level.” He made a pioneering effort to take the dialogue into the rural interior of Sri Lanka from its comfortable zones of conferences and seminars. This dialogue of life goes beyond the mere dialogue of religions as systems of dogmas, rituals, and institutions to encounter persons in their life reality. For Rodrigo, dialogue in Sri Lanka with the religions, cultures and people means basically a dialogue with the poor. Commenting on the Triple-Dialogue spelt out at the FABC’s Tokyo session, 1979, Rodrigo emphatically

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. B. Fernando, “Michael Rodrigo: a Controversial Priest,” in: *Dialogue* (NS)-Michael Rodrigo Memorial issue, vol. 15, nos.1-3, EISD, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 1988, (pp. 7-10),

supported *Dialogue of Life*, distinguished from the Dialogue of Understanding, and that of Prayer and Religious Experience, as the most practical and cogent in any part of the world.<sup>2</sup>

### **Rodrigo's Mission-Vision at Buttala**

Rodrigo's dialogical theology was born out of the concrete experience of living in the periphery of the Church, where he met the *religious poor*, mostly Buddhist, in their living situation. This voice of the poor was brutally killed on the 10<sup>th</sup> November 1987 while celebrating the Eucharist in his mud-hut named "**Subaseth Gedara**" (House of Good Wishes) at Buttala, a rural and a 99% Buddhist village. He described his mission and vision as follows:

I came out to the village (Alukalawita) in July 1980, also as an act of reconciliation and recompense for the damage British Christians did to our peasantry in 1818. I have learnt at the feet of the people, the poor masses, and at the feet of the Gurus of the village whom I always revere – the Buddhist monks who slowly but surely try in many places in Sri Lanka to lead the people to the living out of the *Dhamma* in practice. Every day I learn from the people, farmers and peasants specially, patience, renunciation, acceptance of their lot, suffering, hope in solidarity and what

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. Rodrigo, "Towards a More Intensive Dialogue with Buddhists," in: *Dialogue* (NS), vol. 12, nos. 1-3, EISD, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 1985, (pp. 5-16),

are generally called the Sāradharma, virtues of sharing, brotherhood, rejection of greed (*tanha*, or avarice). Through our Village Effort at Dialogue, (. . .), may there be a saner approach to Dialogue, to the poor, to the liberation thrust that we may move slowly but surely to the future of removing as best as we can, the milestones to Armageddon.<sup>3</sup>

His vision was to create self-sustainability in all spheres of life through religious harmony, educational empowerment, leadership training in leadership qualities and information technology skills. Hence, by recompense what Rodrigo meant was to resuscitate the peasants to full human dignity through a symbiotic dialogue of life while struggling to make amends for loss or harm they suffered in the hands of evil forces. Rodrigo strongly believed that if the Sri Lankan Church wants to become a truly liberated local church she should learn to look at society from the viewpoint and the standpoint of the poor.<sup>4</sup> Only such a

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<sup>3</sup> From “Fr. Michael Rodrigo’s Mission in his own Words,” in: *Fr. Michael Rodrigo: Prophet, Priest and Martyr*, (A Christian Workers’ Fellowship pamphlet), Colombo, Sri Lanka, 1989, p.14.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. M. Rodrigo, “Bible and the Liberation of the Poor,” in: *Dialogue* (NS), vol.15, nos. 1-3, EISD, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 1988, (pp.61- 83), pp. 74-75. This was the major Christian position paper presented at the international conference on “World Religions and the Liberation of the Poor” organized by Ecumenical Institute of Study and Dialogue (EISD) and held in Colombo, Sri Lanka in August 1987. This was also the last paper the late Fr. Michael Rodrigo read at an international conference prior to his assassination in November of the same year.

Church will safeguard its universal, catholic character. The following simple words of a village youth leader sum it all in brief what Rodrigo envisaged as the local church of Sri Lanka and her mission to be.

I accept Jesus as a founder of a noble religion, one who showed sincere affection for people. He loved all as equals and showed it by his life (...). At the start, some young people watched you carefully; how will you act towards us? Did you come to turn us to your ways somehow? Were you part of an international spy-group or spy-ring to eventually sell out our village? – These were questions harassing us youth. But we went beyond observation, worked with you as you worked with the people. There we discovered the true face of what you call ‘sabhāva’ the church.<sup>5</sup>

### **Rodrigo’s main Theological Thought**

A key concept in Rodrigo’s theology is the idea of Christ’s Passover and our moral Passover from selfishness to selflessness. This Passover is commonly spoken of in the Sri Lankan/Asian context as a Passover from death to life, darkness to light, from self-love to selflessness, from bondage to captivity, from ignorance to knowledge. According to Rodrigo, Christ by his life-giving death and resurrection transferred all Passover

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. M. Rodrigo, “Buddhism and Christianity: Towards the Human Future,” in: *Dialogue* (NS), vols.13&14, EISD, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 1986-1987, (pp. 94-110), here p.101.

symbolization to himself. Christ, by what He is and what He did and what He does is the Universal and primordial Symbol. Christ, therefore, is the Symbol of the true Passover, which is human beings' liberation in its deepest form. Rodrigo pursued this concept as the theme in a doctoral dissertation.<sup>6</sup> Rodrigo showed that the reality of Passover is central to Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism (Saivism) and Islam interpreted according to each religious tradition. Thus he viewed self-sacrifice (self-emptying) and selflessness as the basic matrix of all religions.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, he made a radical point when he recognized self-sacrifice and selflessness as truly and fully human. The falsely human is the tendency to egoism and self-aggrandizement because of human being's proneness to evil in many ways. Thus, for Rodrigo, unless the basic human traits of self-sacrifice and selflessness are operative in societies and religions they cannot be considered as truly human and liberative. When these Passover elements are ignored by any society or religion it plunges the world into chaos and violence. According to Rodrigo this is exactly what happened in Sri Lanka under the colonial powers which promoted greed (*tanha*)

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. M. Rodrigo, *The Moral Passover From Selfishness to Selflessness in Christianity and Other Religions in Sri Lanka (Ceylon)*, Doctoral Diss., Institut Catholique, Paris, January 1973. This dissertation was in two volumes. Volume-I was published as *Quest*, vol. 54, 1979, and Volume-II as *Quest*, vol. 65, 1981 by CSR, Colombo, Sri Lanka. Also a summary form of the Volume-I was published as *Logos*, vol.27, no.3, 1988 by CSR, Colombo, Sri Lanka. The *Quest* and *Logos* are two publications of CSR, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. M. Rodrigo, "Buddhism and Christianity: Towards the Human Future," in: *Dialogue* (NS), p. 96.

and selfishness. This trend is being perpetuated even after the colonial era through the subtle mechanism of neocolonialism, which operates on Capitalist principles. The Sri Lankan Church should take the lead to make this moral Passover or transition realized not only in individuals but also in society through authentic inter-religious dialogue.

Rodrigo built this theological argument on the radical self-emptying love of Jesus, the *kenosis* (Phil. 2:5-11). This spirituality of radical self-emptying or selflessness is an eminent need that must be fostered by both Christians and Buddhists for them to grow together in true brother/sisterhood in Sri Lanka. Thus he strongly urged that in the common search for truth in the religio-pluralistic context of Sri Lanka the *kenosis* of the Christian community must be matched with the *anatta/anātma* (non-egoity or selflessness) of the Buddhist *sāsana* as closely as possible.<sup>8</sup> Here, Rodrigo appreciated Lynn De Silva's contribution to the study of *anatta* and *kenosis*.<sup>9</sup> Rodrigo maintained that if Jesus who emptied himself is the Truth, the Way and the Life, Christians who profess to follow him must lose themselves as the leaven in the dough. For Rodrigo, the self-emptying of Christ is a model for imitation rather than a proposition for theological debate. Hence self-emptying always demands a radical discipleship of service. If Christians do not join Jesus in his *kenosis* they are not Christians. Rodrigo

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ibid. p.95.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. M. Rodrigo, "A Basis for Dialogue in Community: A Christian Point of View," in: *Dialogue* (NS), vol. 4, nos. 1 and 2, EISD, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 1977, (17-26), here p.21.

maintained that it is in the measure that a Christian loses himself that he will evangelically find himself, in the process of being and becoming, “all things to all men” (1Cor 9:19-23).<sup>10</sup> In such a radical self-emptying process a Christian will begin to see the humility of the hidden Christ in the religious aspirations of the people who belong to various religious traditions. As Rodrigo believed it is also in the same process that a true Christian will see the glory of the Risen Christ as He emerges from His hiding place, for He is essentially a God risen but hidden.

### **Spirituality of Rodrigo’s Theological Thought**

As noted earlier Rodrigo in his theological argument on *kenosis* was certainly influenced by Lynn De Silva’s contribution to the study of *anatta* and *kenosis*. De Silva’s the most original contribution to theology is well demonstrated in the exposition of his proposed biblical understanding of *anatta* drawn upon the relation between the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* and the Christian teaching of the *pnema* (Spirit). Keeping to the limits of this write up we would briefly state that in his argument De Silva says that authentic self or human “I” is found only in relationship with divine “Thou” (God). That is to say that “I” is not in “me” or in “thee,” but in the relationship between “me” and “thee.” It is within this “I”-“Thou” relationship that De Silva understood biblical *anatta* which denies the self without yielding to a nihilistic view, and which affirms the authentic self without yielding to an eternalistic view of the self, such as an immortal,

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ibid. pp.20-21.

immutable soul, an unchanging entity, or undying essence.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, he underscored that modern biblical scholarship rules out any dichotomous concept such as body and soul but affirms the reality of the integral person. The dualistic notion of body and soul is an alien infiltration from Greek philosophy into Christianity. Therefore, De Silva pointed out that the “biblical view of human person is holistic and not dualistic, and the notion of “soul” as an immortal entity that enters the body at birth and leaves it at death is quite foreign to it.”<sup>12</sup> De Silva argued that a great deal of the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* has biblical support, for instance, Ps.90: 3-5; Rom.8: 18-25.<sup>13</sup> However, Pieris while appreciating De Silva’s cross-scriptural reading of the Pāli Tripitaka and the Hebrew Bible in his well-known study on the ‘Self’ in Buddhism and Christianity states, “In this symbiotic approach, no room is left for diluting or distorting the

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Lynn De Silva, “Theological Construction in a Buddhist Context,” in: Gerald H. Anderson (ed.), *Asian Voice in Christian Theology* (hereafter, *AVCTh*), Orbis, Maryknoll, N.Y., 1976, pp. 37-52. Also see Idem.

“Christian Reflection in a Buddhist Context,” in: V. Fabella (ed.), *Asia’s Struggle for Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology*, Orbis, Maryknoll, N. Y., 1980, pp. 96-107; Idem. “Buddhism and Christianity Relativised,” in: *Dialogue* (NS), vol. 9, nos. 1-3, EISD, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 1982, (pp. 43-72),

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ibid. p.42. Also see De Silva, “Buddhism and Christianity Relativised,” in: *Dialogue* (NS), vol. 9, nos. 1-3, EISD, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 1982, (pp. 43-72), here p.64.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. De Silva, “Christian Reflection in a Buddhist Context,” in: V. Fabella (ed.), *Asia’s Struggle for Full Humanity*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY, 1980, (pp. 96-107), here p.99.

basic teaching of either religion; and no effort is made to indulge in easy equation or odious comparisons.”<sup>14</sup>

Rodrigo explains his theological insight on *kenosis* based on the Trinity as source of relationships. He sees this communitarian image of God (*imago Dei*) in human beings. He argued that life in communion is the essential nature of human beings. This implies that the *imago Dei* in human beings is basically the relationship for which they are created with their neighbor before God. Here we observe the dynamism of God’s free self-gift or revelation to humankind and its orientation towards that Transcendent God, to the cosmos and to one another in the human community. However, while the Trinity is the source of our unity in diversity, the *kenosis* of Jesus in birth, life and death is the unmistakable “How” or the “Channel” of our relationship restored and the community recreated. Hence, for Rodrigo as a Catholic Christian, the Trinity of persons is the remote foundation of dialogue in community while the *kenotic* incarnation of Jesus is its proximate foundation.<sup>15</sup> Rodrigo’s insistence on the Holy Trinity, something that is not intelligible to Buddhists and Muslims, should not be a barrier for dialogue. Here, he attempted to explain the relational reality as having a primordial source. Thus the Christians’ self-emptying moral Passover will lead them to appreciate God’s revelation (self-communication) in other religions and

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. A. Pieris, “Prophetic Humour in Buddhism and Christianity,” in: *Dialogue* (NS), EISD, Colombo, vol.31, 2004, (pp. 1-150), here p. 100.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. M. Rodrigo, “A Basis for Dialogue in Community: A Christian Point of View,” in: *Dialogue* (NS), p.18.

their scriptures, in Peoples' Community built on *kenosis* and *anatta*, and in the organic unity of ecology.<sup>16</sup> For instance, *kenosis* will open the eyes of Christians to the Pure Being, the Pure Thought, and the Pure Joy of the Hindu *Saccidananda* (*Sat-cit-ānanda*), to the qualities of Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, to the *avatars*, to the radical oneness of reality.<sup>17</sup> In his own lived experience, Rodrigo finds a common value in the Christian reality of *kenosis* and in Buddha's radical selfless approach to the reality of life while respecting non-negotiable differences between the two traditions. Buddha opted for a life of wise detachment from the lure of land, possessions, in the search of truth. His leaving home and luxury symbolizes a deep self-emptying nature, or more aptly selflessness (*anatta*) of Buddha himself. In his life of radical renunciation of material goods and worldly allurements Buddha found real power, real humanness, and real newness of life. Rodrigo viewed this selflessness of Buddha as his departure into the ranks of the voiceless poor (struggle to be poor) by equalization (*Upekkha*: Equanimity or even mindedness on all beings). It was also seen as a rejection of the power of the sword wielded by the *kshātriya* (warrior) caste of Brahmanism to which Siddhārtha Gautama, who later became Buddha, belonged.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Ibid. p.21.

<sup>17</sup> *Saccidananda* is a compound of three Sanskrit words: 'Sat' (being) 'Cit' (knowledge), and 'ānanda' (the absolute bliss of divine union). It is a Hindu name for the Godhead the Christians have adopted to refer to the Trinity particularly in India.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. M. Rodrigo, "Buddhism and Christianity: Towards the Human Future," p.96.

Aloysius Pieris, a renowned Sri Lankan Buddhist scholar cites Rodrigo as an example of a theologian who, through a dialogue with the peripheral and the powerless people, mainly Buddhists, had been schooled in the art of speaking the language of the poor, that is, the language of liberation.<sup>19</sup> Pieris, by his thesis of twofold Word-Command, makes explicit what is implicit in Rodrigo's perception of Passover as the total vision of the mission of Christ. According to Pieris what makes the paschal event salvific is that Jesus embraced death on a Cross in loving *obedience* to the Father (Phil. 2:8) as required by the First Love-command, and equally out of his abundant *love* for humankind (Eph.5: 2) in conformity with the Second Love-Command.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, for Pieris Jesus' *kenotic* spirituality is well articulated in theistic terms in the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount. Here, Pieris brings out clearly Jesus' voluntary option for the beatitude values which he demands in turn of his disciples through his covenantal partnership. However, Rodrigo prefers to see the content of the Beatitudes not so much as an ideal proposal to Jesus' disciples, but as a tragic human situation crying out for God's justice and mercy.<sup>21</sup> Jesus, as Rodrigo would

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. A. Pieris, "The Revered Father Michael Rodrigo"(editorial), in: *Dialogue* (NS), vol.15, nos. 1-3, EISD, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 1988, (pp.1-6), here p.3.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. A. Pieris, "Christ Beyond Dogma: Doing Christology in the Context of the Religions and the Poor," in: *Louvain Studies*, vol.25, 2000, (pp. 187-231), here p.225.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. M. Rodrigo, "Bible and the Liberation of the Poor," p. 70.

say, will side with, and act in favour of those in that situation. Pieris, complementing Rodrigo's perspective, insisted on the necessity of opting for the Beatitudes as the common spiritual basis to fight the common enemy, mammon, particularly in the context of Sri Lanka.

### **Conclusion**

For Rodrigo, whose theology emerged from among the broken people in the periphery, there is no salvation outside the Poor – *Extra Pauperes Nulla Salus*. The Poor in Rodrigo's *Sitz im Leben*, mainly Buddhist peasants, were the vicar of the Word-Crucified and the 'mediators/agents' of salvation. In the backdrop of the vital importance given to the Poor, for Rodrigo dialogue with the Poor, together with the dialogue with the culture and religion was not simply one activity among others but was the comprehensive *modus operandi* of his entire mission and theology. Rodrigo's symbiotic dialogue of Life in the rural interior clearly showed that dialogue is not primarily an intellectual exercise among experts and religious leaders of various religions, as the term "dialogue" tends to suggest. Finally, as noted in no uncertain terms Rodrigo is the major figure in the post-conciliar liturgical renewal in the Church of Sri Lanka. It is also uncontested that Rodrigo is recognized most of all for his pioneering efforts in opening the Sri Lankan Church to its periphery.

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***“Be dreamers who believe in a new humanity, one that rejects hatred between peoples.” (Pope Francis)***

## **Rev. Fr. Oscar Abayaratne**

### **ONE OF THE MOST ANOINTED PRIESTS OF MODERN TIMES**

**By Fr. Aloysius Pieris, SJ**

Rev. Fr. Oscar Abeyratne, one of the most anointed priests of modern times and founder of the Kithu dana pubuduwa (KDP), passed away around noon on 4 November 2021 after a long illness. Sometime after a bitter experience over a Holy Mass I concelebrated in Negombo Fr. Oscar started visiting me at Tulana periodically for a friendly exchange of ideas accompanied by a scripture based prayer service or even the Eucharist Celebration. This was also the time when I was working on an Asian theology and found the Christian Workers Fellowship (CWF) an ally and a space to share my thoughts at their seminars. Many Sinhala terms I coined there entered the vocabulary of the KDP, a lay-movement mushrooming in various parts of the island across provincial and diocesan boundaries.

### **FIVE THINGS THE SPIRIT SAYS TO KDP TODAY**

- (1) The Pentecost was, among the other things, the Lord's loud and visible protest against linguistic domination. Instead of one human language becoming the dominant means of communication eclipsing the others, the first Pentecost was an experience of each one speaking one's own language and being understood by others in their own mother tongues thanks to the **UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE** of LOVE which was revealed that day as a Divine Person. The temptation for one

language to side-line the other has to be overcome in a movement which claims the Holy Spirit to be the driving force. The two languages of this country must enjoy equal status in prayer and work.

- (2) Splintering is another tendency which the Spirit helps us to overcome with her precious gift of diversity without division. KDP is summoned by the Spirit to witness to a variety of charisms within one united body which is the **CHURCH. UNITY in diversity** is a sign of the Spirit's presence and activity. Here the members of the KDP would do well to confess their failure to maintain greater unity than is observed now. It is what the Spirit requests at this moment and what the Spirit is ready to grant, and which is already dawning on them in response to their collective effort to resist every form of clericalisation of their Charism.
- (3) The lay character of the KDP, therefore, demands that any form of "clerical domination" be shunned as an allurements coming from the Evil Spirit. In prayer sessions of this Spirit-led lay movement many presbyters and even bishops (**Bishop Frank Marcus Fernando deserves to be specially mentioned**) took part but never interfered with the sacerdotal character of the laity: for these holy pastors respected the KDP as a trans-diocesan community of priests. The clerical class, as Pope Francis has lamented, has lost the pristine art of discerning the spirits. The clerical class too must engage in self-criticism and in a profound examination of conscience about any plans to

appropriate movable and immovable property commonly owned by the KDP under a Trust Deed. The dialectics between the Institution and the Charisma must be maintained at any cost.

- (4) Furthermore, the restoration of the Church as the Body of Christ unpolluted by any form of class divisions must remain one of the services which the KDP must render to the wider Church by word and example. It must treat the Poor as the sacred residence of the Son breathing out the Spirit of the Father, **Fr. Oscar Abayaratne**, the founder of the KDP, has gone on record in the annals of ecclesiastical history as the first to start a Charismatic Movement that was equally sensitive to the Church's teachings on social justice. May his charism maintained as a precious inheritance in the KDP.
- (5) Finally the Spirit is asking the members of KDP to humble themselves by acknowledging their sinfulness. The Spirit descended upon Jesus as he humbled himself among sinners. The Dove never alights on the proud. If there has been any form of "abuse" among even a few members of the KDP, all members are summoned to confess these lapses and be re-anointed. One is glad to hear that this process has already begun.

Good bye Fr. Oscar. God has taken you from Prasansaramaya mud hut to the **Kingdom of Heaven**.

## **FR. OSCAR ABAYARATNE**

### **A PROPHETIC PRIEST SEES A 'NEW JERUSALEM THAT WILL NOT PASS AWAY'**

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, he brought tens of thousands of mainly poor Catholic people to a direct and personal relationship with the Risen Lord.

Rev. Fr. Siri Oscar Abayaratne who the Lord chose to launch the Kithu Dana Pubuduwa (KDP) or the Catholic Renewal Movement passed away on November 4, 2021 after a long illness. On Friday, a thanksgiving Mass was held at the KDP's main centre -Sri Prsansaramaya at Walpola in Ragama. The Mass was concelebrated by the Archbishop of Colombo Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith with six other Bishops in the presence of scores of other priests and the leaders of the KDP. In a glowing tribute to Fr. Oscar, the Cardinal highlighted his outstanding service to the Catholic Church and how he had transformed head level Catholics to heart level Catholics who gave an inner response to God by doing His will as Christ Jesus did and as our Blessed Mother did.

Bible scholars and Church analysts have described the KDP which celebrated its golden jubilee this year, as a most powerful charismatic movement. Its vision was to be like Christ Jesus who told the apostles that he did only what the Father wanted him to say, Among the KDP's goals were personal holiness, community life, evangelization, building a church of the poor, creating a just and fair society by getting actively and effectively

involved in issue such as climate change and poverty alleviation. Another important goal was the setting up of an all –religions solidarity alliance especially with the majority Buddhists.

Fr. Oscar had regular meetings with Buddhists prelates to find ways in which Buddhists and Christians along with Hindus and Muslims could work together for the common good of all. Among the main issues were the importance of living according to the teachings of those who began the religions – Gautama the Buddha, Christ Jesus, Prophet Mohammad and Hindu leaders.

Fr. Oscar and the KDP also gave a prominent place to the principles of *Alpechchathaawaya* or a simple and humble lifestyle, He set the example by living in a mud-hut at the Sri Prasansaramaya and for several decades used public transport. While travelling he did not wear his robe because he did not want to get the special preference given to priests. If he had to conduct a seminar at the Prasansa Mandiraya or some other distant place and it was to begin at 8 a.m., he would come there by 8 a.m. not only to set an example of punctuality but also perhaps to wait and pray for the people who were attending.

Fr. Oscar's body was blessed by the Cardinal and the other Bishops before it was buried near the Blessed Sacrament chapel in the Prasansaramaya premises. His life and lives of most KDP members could be summed up in this inspiring hymn: "...go tell everyone the news that the Kingdom of God has come; just as the Father sent me so,

I'm sending you out to be my witnesses throughout the world, the whole of the world; don't carry a load in your pack, you don't need two shirts on your back, a workman can earn his own keep; don't worry what you have to say, don't worry because on that day, God's spirit will speak in your heart."

Some years ago international charismatic movement members came to the Sri Prasansaramaya for a conference and went to the mud-hut to see all ailing Fr. Oscar. When they came back, they told the KDP's lay leaders that a living saint was in their midst. Indeed this living saint by the power of the Holy Spirit spiritually nourished people to be so committed to God's vision that they could sing from the heart.

As Fr. Oscar departed this immortal song may have been sung from his heart: *"Last night I lay a-sleeping, there came a dream so fair; I stood in old Jerusalem, beside the temple there, I heard the children singing, and ever as they sang. Me thought the voice of angels, from Heaven in answer rang, Jerusalem, Jerusalem! Lift up your gates and sing, Hosanna in the highest, Hosanna to your king!; and then me thought my dream was changed, the street no longer rang, hushed were the glad Hosannas, the little children sang, the sun grew dark with mystery, the morn was cold and chill, as the shadow of a cross arose, upon a lonely hill, Jerusalem, Jerusalem!, Hark! How the Angels sing, Hosanna in the highest, Hosanna to your King!; and once again the scene was changed, new earth there seemed to be, I saw the Holy City, beside the tireless*

*sea, the light of God was on its streets, the gates were open wide, and all who would might enter, and no one was denied, no need of moon or stars by night, or sun to shine by day. It was the new Jerusalem that would not pass away, Jerusalem! Jerusalem, sing for the night is o'er, Hosanna in the highest, Hosanna for evermore!"*

**Louis Benedict**

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### **Pope Francis urged the Authorities for truth to be revealed behind Sri Lanka's Easter bombing**

*"Please, out of love for justice, out of love for your people, let it be made clear once and for all who were responsible for these events"* - Pope Francis, addressing some 3500 Sri Lankans in Italy, including some of the victims, prayed that Sri Lanka will be able to ride out of the worst economic crisis in its history.

**Fr. OSCAR,  
the Copernicus of Catholic Charismatic  
Renewal in Sri Lanka**

Today we experience a Renaissance in the charismatic life of the Church in Sri Lanka. Praise and worship sessions are conducted in many parishes of all dioceses in the country. The charismatic preaching has attracted multitudes. Those, who felt ‘asthmatic’ at charismatic prayer at one time, are today ‘charismatic’ prayer leaders. Even the youth are accustomed to pray spontaneously and biblically.

Who is behind this Copernican Revolution? Who triggered this Cultural Revolution in the Sri Lankan Catholic civilization?

It is obviously the Holy Spirit, “the Power from on high” (Luke 24,49), who functioned as the Efficient Cause of this significant metamorphosis of the Sri Lankan Catholic Church.

Whom did the Holy Spirit set apart for this resurgence in ecclesial life? Once upon a time He separated Paul and Barnabas engrossed in prayer and fasting in the Church at Antioch: “While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’” (Acts 13,2). That was at the nascence of the Church in the first century AD.

Then at the genesis of a charismatic Church in the Pearl of the Orient, the Unmoved Mover chose a son of its soil, a radical young priest of that day. That was Rev. Fr. Siri Oscar Abayaratne.

We wish to salute, at his heavenly birth on November 4, 2021, this Abraham, who fathered the Catholic Charismatic Culture in this Land flowing with milk and honey.

Born on May 5, 1932 as the eldest in a family of eight children, Oscar completed secular studies at St. Sebastian's College, Moratuwa and ecclesiastical studies at St. Aloysius' Minor Seminary, Borella and at the National Seminary of Our Lady of Lanka, Ampitiya.

Ordained on February 2, 1957, Fr. Oscar received his first obedience to be in charge of the Youth Movement. He guided and directed the youth of the day to face the day-to-day events of life in a Christian way. This was a time when the whole Sri Lankan society was engulfed in a state of turmoil. The majority of the youth did not have jobs. They grew restless and as a result, a leftist revolutionary group of youth came into existence.

Fr. Oscar was a person who always sympathized with the poor and the oppressed, but he did not like the violent actions of any revolutionary group. During the uprising, the Youth Movement formed by him was reduced to tatters. All his efforts at the Apostolate were crumbling. Broken-hearted, the young pastor experienced a deep sense of vacuity.

It was at this stage that His Eminence Thomas Cardinal Cooray put Fr. Oscar on a spiritual pilgrimage via the Focolare Movement in Rome. During the summer vacation he got an opportunity to visit some of the socialist countries like Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and East Germany. But he hardly saw the so-called 'new society' there.

Rev. Fr. Valerian Gaudet O. M. I. (a French Canadian Oblate missionary in Latin America and a charismatic, who encountered Fr. Oscar in the Oblate General House in Rome), the Spiritual Director of Fr. Oscar, sensing his discomfiture in Rome, got him to continue his spiritual odyssey with a practising Catholic family in England. This visit and the few days he spent with Bob Balkam would become phenomenal in Fr. Oscar's life.

One day Bob invited Fr. Oscar for a prayer meeting and the latter accepted it. As Fr. Oscar recalls, in his own words "It was a strange religious meeting. I had never seen the like of it before. It was a four-hour session of prayer by very ordinary people. It was, besides, a very sober quiet session of singing, praising and worship of the Lord devoid of the formalism that I was accustomed to. Spontaneity was its hall-mark. I saw how they imposed hands and prayed for one another. I made a request for prayer. Three stout gentlemen were around me. It was a long, free spontaneous prayer with their hands on my head and shoulders. They prayed in English. Before long I could hear them mumbling strange sounds (later I learnt that they were praying in tongues). I was asked by one of them 'Fr. Oscar, is there anything special that you want us

to pray for?’ ‘Nothing very special’ I rejoined, ‘except that you call on the Lord to help me to be a good priest, that He makes good use of me for His work.’ They prayed, they did it soulfully and enthusiastically. Now I know that God had touched me in a special way on that day.”

Back in Sri Lanka, Fr. Oscar formed very small groups of the faithful, beginning with youth and later with adults, to read and reflect on the Holy Bible. Gradually a new Apostolate sprang up. These groups became life-sharing groups. The meetings were held either under coconut palms or on sea beaches. These began after dusk. The light to read the Scriptures emanated either from flash light torches or portable Petromax lamps.

Fr. Oscar, supported much by Fr. Joe Fernando, Parish Priest and Dean of Negombo, went from village to village on a Lambretta Scooter with a load of Bibles in Sinhala. He got back home invariably late in the night. His residence, a very old mission house in Colombo, served as the headquarters of the new apostolate. A weekly prayer meeting was held here on Mondays. It was a small group of ten to twelve persons that met. This small group served the purpose of an inspirational team.

At this stage this small group went over to a retreat house in Kandy for a week-end spiritual retreat. It was a great experience and they decided to share their experience with a large gathering. By then they had arrived at an unassailable conclusion that an encounter with the Risen Lord was fundamental for all Christians. They suggested

the themes for an initiation seminar of eight sessions, while waiting for a bus to arrive.

Did Fr. Oscar not encounter obstacles on the way? He did face, but not a few. Nevertheless, he faced all of them with resounding success, since the Catholic Charismatic Culture he was building on the native soil was the work of God.

The words of the much-respected sage of Judaism, Gamaliel the Elder, who flourished in Jerusalem between 25 and 50 AD, come to mind at this point. At the time the much-infuriated Sanhedrinists decided to put the Apostles to death due to their repeated proclamation of the Name of Jesus against their orders, this teacher of the Law stood up to speak with persuasiveness, “So now I tell you, have nothing to do with these men, and let them go. For if this endeavour or this activity is of human origin, it will destroy itself. But if it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them; you may even find yourselves fighting against God” (Acts 5,38-39).

It was and is true, the Catholic Charismatic life in this tiny sea-locked land was willed and built by the Lord Himself through the prophetic and pioneering instrumentality of Fr. Oscar. It came, in a nutshell, from God!

We may conclude with the proverbial words of the Psalmist, “Unless the LORD build the house, they labour in vain who build. Unless the LORD guard the city, in vain does the guard keep watch. It is vain for you to rise early and put off your rest at night, To eat bread earned by

hard toil - all this God gives to his beloved in sleep” (Psalm 127).

It is the Lord, who builds the ‘*bayith*’ (in the Hebrew Text for ‘house’ or ‘family’) and guards the city. It is He, who prospers our destinies.

“The memory of the righteous is a blessing” (Proverbs 10,7) and you are always of blessed memory, dear Fr. Oscar and now, rest in the *shalom* of the Lord.

**Fr. Don Anton Saman Hettiarachchi.**

Anthony’s Church, Mount Lavinia

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**POPE FRANCIS QUOTES**

*“Be both pastors and zealous missionaries who live in constant yearning to go in search of the lost, never settling for simple administration.”* (Pope Francis)

*“The Church needs shepherds of the people living with the smell of the sheep, not clerics of the State. The only thing that counts is ‘unction’, not ‘function’ where bringing God’s healing and comfort to others is a priority.”*(Pope Francis)

*“I see clearly that the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm hearts of the faithful. It needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after battle.”* (Pope Francis)

# **THE SYNODAL WAY OF THE CHURCH**

**Fr. Emmanuel Fernando, OMI**

Within the Church some are ordained as presbyters and bishops to proclaim the Reign of God, to teach, to form Christian communities, to preside during the Eucharistic celebration and to guide the people to experience fuller life. The sacred ordination empowers them to exercise a type of leadership which resembles Jesus' way of being and acting (Mk 10:41-45) and also of St. Peter (1 Pet. 5:3) and of St. Paul (Tit. 1: 7).

The presbyters and the bishops need to remember that they are ordained in the Church to be humble servants of the people and exercise leadership in a shepherdic way and not to be lords.

Unfortunately the history of the Church continues to tell us that the presbyters and the bishops have not manifested the evangelical way of Jesus and of the Apostles. Their dominating and oppressive ways (sexual abuse, money, power and social prestige) have been the cause for many leaving the Catholic Church in many countries, including Sri Lanka.

The present pastoral praxis of the ordained presbyters and bishops often show that they are acting like lords of their territories (parishes / dioceses), with the exclusive ownership of the Kingdom of God.

Pope Francis mourns the dominating and oppressive spirit and behaviour of presbyters and bishops and works tirelessly to create a synodal way of acting within the Church. He had already taken the initiative in 2013 to set up a Committee of eight Cardinals from around the globe to advise him. He is convinced that the entire Church must live in a synodal way.

### **Vision of a Synodal Church**

Pope Francis outlined his vision for a "Synodal Church" on Oct 17, 2015 in an important speech to mark the 50th anniversary of Pope St. Paul VI's official establishment of the Synod of Bishops. In his address, he had said, **"it is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium."** A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing."

The Synod of Bishops discussed in ordinary session in October 2021 the nature of synodality, which is very dear to Pope Francis. **Theme: "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission"**. This issue is key to the 83-year-old Francis' vision for the future of Catholicism.

The term 'Synod' comes from Greek *synodos*, which means **to walk together**. **Applied to the Church, it is an assembly gathered together to pray, discern, deliberate, choose and decide in common.**

The synodal way is a collaborative way. It is a way of being of the ordained ministers who listen to others

respectfully and also pray and discern before acting. Such a pastoral praxis will also promote fuller life for the people.

### **The entire Church must follow a synodal path**

Explaining further, the Jesuit Pope had said, "It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops and the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of truth' (Jn 14:17), in order to know what the Spirit 'says to the Churches.

Listening to the Pope, we can also add what the book of Revelation is also saying: "If anyone has ears to hear, let him listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rev. 3:22).

Pope Francis had said synodality is not limited solely to the institution of the Synod of Bishops, which "is only the most evident manifestation of dynamism of communion which inspires all ecclesial decisions". Rather, he is convinced that the entire Church must live in a synodal way -- whether in the context of diocesan synods (bishops with their priests, the Religious and people) or among bishops themselves in episcopal conferences.

Addressing a delegation of the French Catholic Action movement at the Vatican, on January 13, 2021, Pope Francis had said Synodality is to be adopted in which the main protagonist is the Holy Spirit, who expresses Himself above all in the Word of God, read, meditated upon and shared together. It is not even a search for majority consensus.

Furthermore, Pope Francis says “*neither the Pope nor the Church has the monopoly on the interpretation of social realities or the proposal of solutions to contemporary problems*”. Quoting Pope Paul VI, he says: “*It is up to the Christian communities to analyse with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country*” (EG 184).

### **Need of a Synodal way in the Church**

1. **The election of Matthias:** St. Peter consulted the Christians (Acts 1:15-26).
2. The meeting in Jerusalem: How Peter, James and John met in a spirit of **partnership** to solve problems (Acts 2:1-10)
3. **The Institution of the Seven:** The Twelve Apostles called a full meeting of the disciples. The whole assembly approved the proposal and elected seven men of good reputation, filled with the Spirit and with wisdom.(Acts 6: 1-6).
4. **Controversies regarding circumcision and Resolutions** by the Apostles (Acts 15).
5. **St. Cyprian in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century** declared: “*I have made it a rule, ever since the beginning of my episcopate, to make no decision merely on the strength of my own personal opinion without consulting you (the presbyters and the deacons), and without the approbation of the people.*”

6. **The late Cardinal Avery Dulles** observed that there is a legitimate and ancient theology which defines Magisterium as a teaching ministry which is neither identified with nor limited to the body of bishops or the Church officials in Rome.” (*Survival of Dogma*, Garden City, Double Day, 1970, ch 6)
  
7. **Cardinal Walter Kasper**: In his address to the Cardinals in February 2014, Cardinal Walter Kasper cited Cardinal Newman’s Essay “On consulting the Faithful in matters of Faith”, which argued it was the faithful, not the bishops, who preserved the faith during the controversies of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. This emphasized a teaching that each Catholic has a sense of faith by virtue of their baptism. This sense of faith, the Cardinal argued, must be taken seriously. One area of teaching where many Catholic consciences are at odd with the official teaching is on the Church’s ban on artificial contraception, articulated in the Encyclical “*Humanae Vitae*”. The Cardinal has said that he hope the question would be discussed at the Synod.”
  
8. **Cardinal Walter Kasper** “The laity are not merely recipients but also actors, not only objects but also subjects in the Church. So the doctrine of the **sensus fidei** given by baptism to all is important. It was emphasized] by the Council, but then, unfortunately, suppressed

again. Pope Francis now wishes to give concrete validity. He wants a listening Magisterium that makes its decisions after it has heard what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

9. **Pope Francis:** All the faithful considered as a whole, are infallible in matters of belief, and the people display this infallibility in believing through a supernatural sense of the faith of all the people walking together. This is what I understand today as thinking with the Church...We should not even think therefore that thinking with the Church means only thinking with the hierarchy of the Church.”
  
10. **Vis-à-vis the Women: Pope Francis** in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no 104, says that sacramental power of the priesthood can prove divisive if it is too closely identified with power in general. When we speak of sacramental power, he says, “we are in the realm of function, not that of dignity or holiness”. In the Church, he says, functions “do not favour the superiority of some vis-à-vis the others” and that a woman, Mary, is more important than the bishops. Therefore he presents a great challenge for pastors and theologians to recognize more fully the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church’s life.

## 11. Vis-à-vis the vowed Religious

What **Pope Francis** had told the participants in the International Congress for Bishops and the Religious on October 28, 2016 is certainly applicable to our Sri Lankan situation as well. He told them: **“The value of reciprocity which involves Pastors and consecrated persons is to be deepened. Mutual relationships do not exist where some make demands and others submit out of fear or convenience.”**

## 12. Vis-à-vis the Baptised People of God

(a) The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka needs a Synodal way of ministering because there is an urgent need for mutuality and mature relationships within the hierarchical set-up. For example, in the nomination and the appointment of bishops, are the lay faithful and the Consecrated Religious consulted and listened to?

(b) The appointment of bishops who do not know the languages spoken by the Catholics in the diocese

(c) The appointment of parish priests who do not know the languages of the parishioners.

(d) Non-functioning of diocesan pastoral councils.

(e) Formation, training and ordination of candidates for presbyteral life without sufficient knowledge of the social psychology of the

different social categories in Sri Lanka (cultivators, fisherfolk, estate worker, peasants etc) and of the national languages spoken in the respective dioceses. The European missionaries and the Oratorians from Goa, who came to Sri Lanka, learnt the languages (Sinhala and Tamil) of our people.

Already in 1995 at **the National Pastoral Convention of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka**, the document *“Dawn of Faith”* had stated concerning the Lay faithful: **“Meaningful steps need to be taken to facilitate lay people sharing in decision making process at all levels” (no 38)**. In other words, it had voted for a collaborative and synodal way of being the Church in Sri Lanka. However, through my participatory observation of the way the pastoral leadership is exercised in Sri Lanka, I can say that the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka is highly hierarchically institutionalized and legitimized.

Today’s Catholic Church in Sri Lanka needs a Synodal way of ministering through mutuality and adult relationship within the hierarchical set-up. Mutual communication between the bishops / presbyters and the enlightened lay faithful and the consecrated persons (the Religious) is very much needed. There is a felt-need for proactive listening on the part of bishops and presbyters and also for prayerfully discerning God’s will.

The ordained ministers in the parishes need to trust the lay faithful for the management of the parish finances (with transparency and accountability) and concentrate on preaching, teaching, guiding, visiting the sick and the infirm and on providing the sacraments. Much work is desired in the parishes and in the dioceses in Sri Lanka to achieve synodality.

Perceptions of the hierarchy regarding evangelization, namely the ownership mentality of the diocese and of the parish need paradigm shifts. The presbyters (the diocesan and the Consecrated Religious) are ordained to promote the Kingdom of God, which is people-oriented. Collaborative spirit between the presbyters (diocesan and the Consecrated Religious) is very much needed in the dioceses and in the parishes in Sri Lanka.

**13.** For 300 years, it was the lay faithful who maintained the orthodox doctrine of the divinity of Christ during the Arian heresy of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries and it was the lay faithful who kept the faith for 30 years during the Dutch persecutions in Sri Lanka, till the arrival of St. Joseph Vaz.

**14. Obstacles:**

- (a) Clerical power which downgrades the priesthood of all the baptized.
- (b) Clericalism and the issue of women (it tends towards misogyny).

**CHRISTIAN PERSONALITIES WHO CONTRIBUTED  
TO MEDIA IN THE 12th CENTURY  
IN SRI LANKA**

**By Avishka Mario Senewiratne**

With the exodus of Bishop Christopher Bonjean OMI from Jaffna to Colombo in 1883, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate took over the Vicariate of Colombo from the Benedictine Friars. Three years later, the Hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Ceylon was formed. This created the Archdiocese of Colombo. Even before this time two Catholic newspapers were successfully heralding the good news to the faithful since 1860s. This was the *Gnanartha Pradeepaya* in Sinhala and *The Ceylon Catholic Messenger* in English. It is quite a noteworthy fact that even at such an early time, there existed Catholic newspapers in a Catholic minority country. The early pioneers, mainly local laymen, laid a strong foundation in these newspapers, which were the only form of media during that time. Though the beginning of the twentieth century was not much positive for these papers as there were some careless blunders, with time it expanded to a decent platform for media. The European Oblates must be praised eternally for instilling the standards for newspapers of such caliber to prevail.

Media comes in many forms. Be it in printed, electronic or sound form, it plays a pivotal role in communicating. Hence, it is equally important to appreciate and save the efforts of our local men and women who contributed immensely in this field, to posterity. I will write a series of articles to Footprints, of some well-known and not so well-known or forgotten clergy and lay individuals who served well in writing, broadcasting, filming, composing and in the arts, etc. The first article of this

series will be on a pioneer writer and editor of the early 20th century.

### **Fr. John Pahamunay O.M.I.**

On January 12, 1908, Archbishop Melizan made a surprise move by appointing the first indigenous priest ordained in Ceylon as the first local Editor of the Messenger. This was Fr. John Pahamunay O.M.I. (1863-1918). Born to a Buddhist family in Kandy, young Pahamunay studied in a Pirivena with his elder rother. After showcasing his prowess to study well, his wealthy father decided to enroll him at an English chool. This was HFC, Kurunegala. In time he learnt to speak and write English fluently and discovered his talent for music. With much exposure to Christianity and the close example of his friend Fr. Adrien Duffo OMI (who was known to have converted Saradiel), he decided to be baptized. It did not take much time for young Pahamunay to discern his calling to the Priesthood.

With the help of his mentor Fr. Duffo, he entered the first indigenous Seminary, St. Martin's Seminary in Jaffna. There young Pahamunay would come to learn many more languages which included Tamil, Latin and French. Furthermore, he had the rare privilege of mastering the harmonium in the Jaffna Cathedral. What was most appealing about the Pahamunays was that the elder brother was ordained a Buddhist monk as Ven. Pahamunay Sumangala Thera who later became Chief Prelate of the Malwatte Chapter (1927-1945)! After being ordained a priest in 1889, Fr. Pahamunay served in many parishes such as Chilaw, Madampe, Bolawatte and Waikkal in the Archdiocese of Colombo (after 1940, these Parishes fell under the Diocese of Chilaw). What was special about Fr. Pahamunay's ministry in these Parishes was that he started choirs and groomed them into high levels of singing sacred

hymns. His keen interest that children of all walks of life be educated and that education may be imparted in many facets, clearly distinguished him from others. A couple of decades into his career the hierarchy of the Church decided it was time to give Fr. Pahamunay the good opportunity to showcase his skills. This was a time, when a few hiccups between the Catholics and the Buddhists had occurred due to the negligence of both parties but the example of Fr. Pahamunay was of paramount value to the masses. At one time, Fr. Pahamunay was confined to bed and it was his brother who looked after him. The example of two brothers, being clergy of two different faiths, caring for and loving each other, was a scene which united all faiths.

Therefore, the appointment of Fr. Pahamunay to edit the Messenger, set a positive outlook in almost every possible way. While writing the editorial, he wrote many articles of good standard under the pen-name “Philalethias”. Nearly half a century before Vatican II, his editorials and articles gave the perfect outlook on inter-religious dialogue as he consistently stressed on the need of a new society which would be desperate for unity and acceptance. His exposure of social issues, critical philosophies gave a completely new perspective to the Messenger. The standard of the paper was at its pinnacle when intellectuals like Fr. J.B. Martin OMI and the sub-editor, D.J.B. Kuruppu stole the thunder of all by writing amazing pieces on current affairs. Fully satisfied with the success of the Messenger, Fr. Pahamunay was made the Editor of the Pradeepaya as well in 1912. Its standards increased by leaps and bounds. With the booming popularity of this new stance in the Sinhala paper, it was at one time published three times a week! His stance on socio-political injustices and never compromising the truth gave him much respect in the field of

journalism. This was what made him so loved by the British and locals. His unbiased approach to any matter and sharp courage to criticize was another special feature of this true priest of God. Being an advisor to the highly pastoral Archbishop Melizan, he also assumed duties as the Parish Priest of All Saints Church, Borella. Despite his tight schedule, he founded and edited the highly popular magazine, “Divya Herdayē Duthaya”.

After decades of serving people over himself, he neglected his health and would eventually fall ill at a relatively young age. Though many attempts were made for him to recover, he died peacefully on August 11, 1918, aged 55. Such men of God are rare and they have left a mark which will last for years and years, if not eternity!

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### **CELIBACY**

*“Celibacy is a gift that the Latin Church preserves, yet it is a gift that, to be lived as a means of sanctification, calls for healthy relationships, relationships of true esteem and true goodness that are deeply rooted in Christ. “*

*“I would also add that when priestly fraternity thrives and bonds of true friendship exist, it likewise becomes possible to experience with greater serenity the life of celibacy. Without friends and without prayer, celibacy can become an unbearable burden and counterwitness to the very beauty of the priesthood.”*

- Pope Francis told some 400 Catholic bishops, priests and theologians attending a Conference in Rome on February 17-19, 2022.
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## OBLATE MISSION

(An updated version of a Conference given to the Oblate Scholastics at the Oblate Scholasticate, Ampitiya on June 01, 2022, by **Fr. Emmanuel Fernando, OMI** )

1. In the Preface to the Oblate Constitutions and Rules, our venerated Founder, St. Eugene de Mazenod, gives us our Oblate vision and our Oblate mission. Regarding our vision, he mentions the glory of God in three places and regarding our mission, he wrote the following: a) to rekindle the flame of faith by word and example, b) to love God, c) to teach who Christ is, d) to love the Church, e) to love the poor, d) to educate the ignorant, f) to lead people to act like human beings, first of all, and then like Christians and finally to help the people to become saints.

The Oblate Constitutions (CC 1-9) mention our mission, namely, a) to evangelise the poor, b) to establish Christian communities, c) to become voice of the voiceless in and through the Oblate community and d) to instil genuine devotion to Mary immaculate.

An Oblate gives glory to God (vision) through his loving service to the neighbours in need and pain (mission). Thus he maintains also his purity of intention regarding his mission. Pope Francis says power has ruined the image of the Church. According to the Sacred Scriptures, loving the neighbour as myself is needed for one's salvation because in the mind of Jesus the love of neighbour is just like the love of God (Mt 22: 37-40).

To the lawyer who wanted to know from Jesus how to inherit eternal life, Jesus told him to love the neighbours. The lawyer asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbour?" Jesus related to him the

parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10: 29-39). A priest and a Levite saw the wounded person, fallen on the road. But the two Jews showed no mercy to the fallen man for they were obeying the Law (Lev 19:2) which said, “*Be holy, for I, Yahweh your God, am holy.*” They interpreted holiness as cleanliness and hence they did not want to touch the wound man fallen on the road. But a Samaritan, an outcast, seeing the wounded man, and being moved with compassion, cared for that person. Mark the number of compassionate and merciful actions of the Samaritan in that parable. Having related the story, Jesus told the lawyer, “*Go and do the same yourself*” (Lk10:37).

Eternal life can be obtained by performing acts of love to the neighbours in need and pain. In the Last Judgment (Mt 25:1-41), salvation is offered to people, even to those who have not acknowledged God as their Lord, on the only basis of love expressed through one’s service to the needy human persons (Mt 25: 34-40) because it is selfless love that brings salvation (Aloysius Pieris ,sj, *A Gist of Jesuitness*, p 11). Neighbourly love is a virtue that is practiced in concrete situations as good deeds of caring and serving people in real need and pain. For Jesus, love and service are intrinsically connected. According to Jesus, love that brings salvation is that which makes us lay down our life for others (Jn 15:13). It is sacrificial love.

At the Last Supper, Jesus by washing the feet of his Apostles showed how to serve the people by becoming a feet-washer, doing the work of hired slave. St Paul said Jesus became a slave-God through his becoming a human person like us (Ph 2:7). Therefore we, the Oblates, give glory to God (our Vision) through deeds of loving service – sacrificial compassionate love – to the neighbours in need and pain. Thereby we become holy, saintly Oblates. Regarding the

quality of life of the Missionary Oblates, our Founder, St. Eugene de Mazenod wanted the Oblates to become saints (Preface OMI CC). Sainly persons are virtuous persons. *“Only tragedy at the end of our lives is that we are not saints”* (Leon Bloy). *“The world needs saints who are geniuses just as a plague-driven town needs doctors”* (Simone Weil). Jesus wants us to love others selflessly and obtain salvation. *“This is my commandment: Love one another, as I have loved you”* (Jn 15:12). In the heart of Jesus, neighbourly love includes also enemy love.

Prayer and sacramental liturgies are essential aids for us to become holy missionaries. Jesus emphasized the necessity of prayer to his disciples while they were in mission. The disciples freely brought their desires, troubles and worries to Jesus because they were confident that Jesus is ever ready to help them. We must follow their example since each one of us is called to be with God only to be sent on a mission which determines each one’s final salvation. Let us avoid giving left-over time for prayer.

*“All the saints of the Old Testament as well as Christ’s holy followers mentioned in the New Testament have never been called into an intimacy with God as an end in itself, but always as a prelude to a mission to which they are sent, and accomplishing which they found salvation”* (Aloysius Pieris SJ, *The Genesis of an Asian Theology of Liberation*, p 65). Spiritual writer Henri J.M. Nouwen in his book, *Out of Solitude*, has said that Jesus came out of prayer to care for the people. So our apostolate (Mission) is the overflow of the intimacy with God.

## **Who are the people in need and pain in Sri Lanka?**

### **1. The materially poor**

The farmers, the fishermen, the Plantation workers, Industrial workers, the psychologically disturbed, those socially excluded and marginalized (due to race, caste, occupation etc), the educationally backward persons, the spiritually ignorant, the young people etc.

It is through our mission we give glory to God, without seeking prestige, power and status.

### **2. To become the Voice of the Voiceless**

Oblate Constitution no 9 says, *“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.”*

Today our prophetic ministry in the Church makes us not only to be the voice of the voiceless masses but also to be the voice with the voiceless by identifying with them. Jesus’ death on the Cross was the result of His mission of selfless love for people’s basic human needs and for their liberation from selfishness.

Today Sri Lankans are experiencing untold privations and frustrations due to lack of electricity, gas, fuel, medicine and the skyrocketing of prices of goods and services. Non-availability of electricity affects the education of children and manufacturing of goods. Farmers are crying without fertilizer and fishermen without fuel. Many people are becoming unemployed or underemployed and thereby lack the needed physical strength and stamina for productive physical and intellectual work and earn the needed money to keep their families alive and active. Such a situation which causes undernourishment of the pregnant mothers and of the children in their

wombs and eventually will lead to sicknesses and lack of strength to do physical work and finally to death due to lack of financial resources to seek medical care.

In the above-mentioned oppressive and pathetic situation of the Sri Lankans, the followers of Jesus Christ, the Oblates included, are called not only to be the voice of our oppressed masses but also to be the voice with them, with much compassion. Such a manifestation of assertive action – telling the truth with love- may include anger, but not hatred and / or violence. Compassionate persons can be assertive. Compassion, the root of all Jesus' prophetic actions, is an expression of Jesus' passion for God who demands justice for all His children. Unjust suffering offends God. Moved by the Spirit of God, Jesus raised His voice while others remained silent. God is against oppressive power. He is against oppressive religion. The death of Jesus on the cross will therefore continue to inspire assertive action by the followers of Jesus Christ in order to bring fuller life for our Sri Lankan masses suffering under the weight of their 'crosses' (sufferings) right now.

Fr. Michael Rodrigo pitched his tent among the peasants of Buttala and laid down his life so that they and their natural environment may become alive and flourishing. Fr. Jayantha Pinnawela led a life of struggle to enable the farmers to have a better quality of life and laid down his life while working with them. In the life-style of these two Oblates, their selfless love for the poor led them to lay down their lives. Fr. Henk Schram OMI worked tirelessly, living in a small room in a building opposite Fort Railway Station, with frugal meals from eating houses, and empowering the industrial workers. His dedicated service to the industrial workers especially his art of training

leaders for Trade Unions, made the political Authorities to pave the way for his exit from Sri Lanka. The lives of these Oblates spoke louder.

### **3. To discern the missionary choices**

Change has become permanent today. The needs and pains of people are also changing fast. We are being challenged today by the painful struggles and anxieties of the poor and the vulnerable. Let us think of the recent Galle Face protests. People need new answers. Hence there is need to discern prayerfully the choices we need to make regarding action on behalf of the suffering masses. Therefore we, the Oblates, also need to become prayerful discerners as individuals and as communities. The Spirit of God will guide us (Jn 14:26). “The Holy Spirit inspires us with new understanding of Christ’s mission dictated by the signs of the times” (Aloysius Pieris, SJ, *The Genesis of an Asian Theology of liberation*, p 119).

Therefore let us be open to the active presence of the Holy Spirit. We, as individuals and as communities, need to learn the art of discerning in prayer in order to make the right choices and decisions. Pope Francis speaks of a priestly gaze which has to be learnt from seminary days. He says, *“To see needs and to bring immediate relief and even more to anticipate those needs: this is the mark of a father’s gaze. This priestly gaze - which takes the place of the father in the heart of Mother church – makes us see people with the eyes of mercy. It has to be learnt from seminary on, and it must enrich all our pastoral plans and projects. We desire and we ask the Lord to give us a gaze capable of discerning the signs of the times, to know ‘what works of mercy our people need today’ in order to feel and savour the God of history who walks among them.”*

#### **4. Called to promote fuller life innovatively**

Human life is sacred and inviolable from conception to its natural end. Vast majority of people in the world, Sri Lanka included, are leading lives not worthy of human dignity due to lack of satisfaction of the basic needs. Theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson in her book, *Consider Jesus*, says, “*As for God, who creates and redeems out of love, God is glorified not by the diminishment but by the enhancement and growth of the beloved creature. Thus, the more human we become, the more God is pleased*”. She continues, “*God has so identified with our humanity that each of us as human beings has been lifted to a dignity beyond compare. Thus whatever disfigures or damages a human being is an insult to God’s own self.*” As the second-century bishop St. Irenaeus had exclaimed, “*The glory of God is the human being fully alive.*”

The truth that Jesus had pitched His tent in the world among people makes us, the Oblates, to value all human beings and infra-human beings as gifted with tremendous dignity precisely as God’s own creatures. According to the Second Vatican Council, nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in the hearts of the followers of Christ (*Gaudium et Spes*, no 01). St. Eugene de Mazenod, our Founder, had said that every Oblate must lead people to act like human beings, first of all (*Preface, OMI CC*). A spirituality which embodies the above-mentioned divine and human values, ought to empower us to identify ourselves with the poor who are not leading lives worthy of human dignity and teach them to become agents of their own development. God became human in Jesus to manifest Abba’s love for human beings and to give them abundant life (*Jn 10:10*). Jesus cared for the physiological and human needs of the people. Our vow of celibate chastity should

enable us to be non-biologically generative through our different ministries to the poor and the oppressed. In our commitment to empower the poor, we do not in any way make the poor become over-dependent on us. We do not want to make the poor become beggars. Let us teach the poor to help themselves. A Chinese proverb says, *“You give a poor man a fish and you feed him for a day. You teach him to fish and you give him an occupation that will feed him for a lifetime.”* Such an approach, will often demand the use of certain skills (eg Trade Unions, Co-ops, Adult education etc). Our Founder had said, “Love embraces all; for new needs, it invents new means when necessary.” Therefore we should not be mere improvisers but be innovatively faithful, leaving nothing undared for our mission.

### **5. (a) Inter-Faith Ministry**

Now our new historic consciousness, namely the non-baptised also can obtain eternal life through their selfless love shown through deeds of service to those in need (Matt 25: 31-40), should make us more comfortable to associate with people of other living faiths and participate in common programmes and common projects for the wellbeing of people especially the neglected and the vulnerable. There is great need to transcend selfish goals and move forward enabling everyone to treat each other with brotherly / sisterly feelings. The field of education offers us a good apostolate to try and achieve the above-mentioned goals. Therefore, there is need to train Oblates for such an apostolate. Let us also evaluate our services rendered to the children belonging to other living faiths through the educational Centres. We need to accept the fact that the Catholic colleges, schools and other educational Institutions in Sri Lanka have not produced good leaders who could have

contributed to the common good of our people at the national and local levels. They have concentrated on producing many professionals. Think of the quality of our Catholic parliamentarians. Think of the parishes where the lay faithful are very subservient to the parish priests.

### **(b) Proficiency in national languages**

Language is a tool that enables communication between people. Today, people are learning foreign languages in order to obtain jobs in other countries. Many Oblates are being challenged to learn our national languages (Sinhala and Tamil) also to serve the poor more comfortably. We are being challenged by the people who are engaged in business, proficient in our national languages. Some of them can converse also in English. Study of our national languages also will facilitate our apostolate of reconciliation in Sri Lanka. Complacency is enemy number one.

## **6. Immersion Programmes**

Today Socio-pastoral formation of candidates for Consecrated Religious life and for presbyterial life in the Church demands immersion programmes in various socio-cultural environments. Formation and training need not take place in splendid isolation from the life-situation of our people (their struggles, longings, etc). There is need to understand the social psychology of the different categories of people, for example of the plantation population, the farmers, the fishermen, the industrial workers, the urban population, people living in the slums etc. There are differences in overt and covert behavior patterns of these people. AIT is a strategy that has been adopted in our Oblate Province for the integral formation of the candidates.

## **7. Integrity of Creation**

Creation / nature has become our new neighbour needing the care of the human persons. But people are becoming responsible for the ill-health of the planet earth. They are turning the planet earth – the home of all living beings – into a wasteland, an unsuitable place for life. Through destruction of habitats (natural home of organisms), hundreds of life forms, species which took thousands of years to develop are being rapidly destroyed by human beings. As a result, besides homicide, suicide and genocide, we are witnessing biocide (death of the species – living organisms) geocide (death of the soil) and ecocide (death of the environment). God who created the world wants us to take care of the world. “The earth which sustains humanity must not be injured. It must not be destroyed” (St. Hildegard of Bingen). Scientists and theologians are beginning to speak of the rights of the non-human beings (the infra-human beings).

The importance of the natural environment demands an ecological spirituality and ecological catechesis. We are being tempted by compulsive consumerism. Look at the advertisements in the TV and in dailies. They create new needs. Even the poor are getting addicted to consumerism. The people do not appear to apply the ethic of enough in their lives. Do we, as Consecrated Religious, apply the ethic of enough in our lives? Or are we also becoming compulsive consumers? Someone has said that the Mother earth has enough for everyone’s need but not for everyone’s greed. It is the unbridled passion for money that had ruined natural environments and many societies. Earth care is not only necessary for human existence but also for our sacramental life in the Church. Water, oil and food are necessary for the

sacraments. With earth care, we will also enjoy the beauty of creation. Beauty is that which pleases the eye.

Pope Francis says, “It is my hope that our seminaries and houses of formation will provide an education in responsible simplicity of life, in grateful contemplation of God’s world, and in concern for the needs of the poor and the protection of environment”(Laudato Si, no214).

## **8. Mission in and through the community**

a) Jesus and Paul did not live in a spiritual vacuum. They had to eat, drink, sleep and take care of their health. To continue his ministry in Galilee and in Jerusalem, Jesus had to rely on the charity of converts (Lk 8:3; Jn 12:6), of the hospitality of others like Peter in Capernaum (Mk 1:29; 2:1), of Martha, Mary and Lazarus in Bethany (Jn 11: 5) when he was in Jerusalem area. Paul became a tent maker to give himself missionary mobility. The income from his trade (1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:7-9; 1 Cor 4: 12) was enough as long as there were converts for some time. Then, like Jesus, Paul had to rely on the charity of converts (Phil 4: 16; 2 Cor 11: 8).

What is our situation regarding finances during and after the years of the Oblate formation? How do the candidates in the formation process maintain themselves? Each one needs to ask, “What is my material contribution to my community? “In what ways do I contribute to the upkeep of my community? Am I an example to others? Education, formation, training in apostolic skills, higher studies (locally and outside Sri Lanka), sicknesses, transportation, maintenance of buildings, vehicles, repairs, domestic staff etc demand financial resources both during and after the stages of formation. What contribution can

the candidates in the Oblate Scholastics provide for their maintenance and that of the companions?

**b.** The Spirit of the Lord wants us to show the importance and the urgent need for community witness of life. People are looking for witnesses. What is the quality of life-witness that is being demonstrated at the moment by the Scholasticate ? The quality of a formation- community depends on the quality of the formators and the quality of the candidates in formation.

### **9. Under the maternal love of Mother Mary**

Jesus has given his biological mother, Mary, as our mother. She was one who was very sensitive to the painful cries of the people and was a compassionate comforter of the people in need. Let us continue to learn from her how to be creatively faithful to our mission to the struggling masses in today's world, thereby to give glory to God. Let us continue to remain selflessly committed to give glory to God under the maternal love and care of our Immaculate Mother.



***“Oh, how I wish for a Church that is poor, and for the poor”*** - (Pope Francis)

***“Care of the environment is always a social concern as well. Let us hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor”*** (Pope Francis)

## CATHOLIC NEGOMBO

By S.G.Perera,S.J

(Continued from *The Missionary Oblate, no 61,*  
*pages 72-87)*

The little fort of Negombo was a weak structure which Ribeyro describes as “ a square edifice of stone and clay with two small redoubts and five iron cannons, and a house for provisions and magazine”<sup>19</sup> A manuscript plan in the possession of the Dutch Archives shows one main bastion, Spirito Santo, and two small ones. Nossa Senhora de Vitoria and S. Lourenco, and says it was provided with two pieces of artillery and 4 falcons, and was garrisoned by 16 soldiers and 20 lascarins under the command of a Captain whose jurisdiction extended two leagues around.<sup>20</sup> The Dutchman Coster describing it on the eve of the siege says: “The Portuguese Fort of Negombo is provided with guns and one or two companies of soldiers with some married men and their people, but it is of little importance”.<sup>21</sup> According to Fr. Queyros, its garrison at this time consisted only of 45 invalid under the command of Captain Jorge Fernandez de Abrew who had succeeded Luis Teyxera de Macedo as Senhor of the island which was connected with the fort by a bridge. A Portuguese force was stationed on the other side of the lake, and three companies in the island.

The Dutch batteries opened fire on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January and brought down the parapets, walls, and bastions on the land side, and on the 9<sup>th</sup> the General sent sealed orders to withdraw the garrison and to blow up the fort; but while the orders were being read out to the assembled Captains the Dutch and Sinhalese forces delivered an assault. There was excitement and confusion, and the Dutch entered the fort at the cost of only two men. The Sinhalese fell upon the island and killed and

captured the greater part of the Portuguese forces. By sunset the flag of the Dutch East India Company was hoisted on the fort.<sup>22</sup>

The Dutch began to repair and strengthen the fortifications in defiance of Raja Singha who wished to raze it. This led to friction between the allies and finally the Dutch were allowed to retain Negombo till their expenses were paid. But the Portuguese did not permit them to hold it long. In November of the same year a Portuguese force besieged the fort, and in four days reduced it to such a pass that the garrison of 214 Hollanders surrendered.

But the times were against the Portuguese. Philip II of Spain laid claim to the crown of Portugal and had begun what is called the Six Years Captivity of the Portuguese nation. He subordinated the interests of Portugal to his own ambitions and exposed the Eastern Empire of Portugal to the enemies of Spain. A month after the recapture of Negombo a revolution in Portugal ended by placing a Portuguese Prince on the throne, and the country was too busy settling her own house in order to be able to assist her colonial empire.

Accordingly in 1644 a large naval force of the Dutch Company commanded by a Frenchman, Francois Carron, again came upon Negombo. A Portuguese force was despatched from Colombo, and after a hard-fought battle with heavy casualties on both sides the Dutch once more became masters of Negombo. Several attempts were made to recapture it from them, but were unavailing and the fort passed definitively into Dutch hands, and was strongly fortified in spite of the repeated protests of Raja Singha.<sup>23</sup>

How the Christians fared during this period of warfare is not on record. It is said both by Portuguese and Dutch writers that the people of Negombo sided with the Dutch and Raja Singha.

When the Portuguese recaptured the fort they are said to have rejoined the Portuguese. In the course of a report presented to propaganda it is said that “when the fortress of Negombo fell into the hands of the Hollanders along with part of the Seven Corles which had all virtually submitted to the Faith of Christ, our Fathers (i.e. Jesuits) who were there a short time ago, secretly administered the sacraments of Confession and Baptism, by night and strengthened many in the Faith. But these services rendered to God did not endure for long, for the heretics getting wind of it incontinently drove the Fathers out, and issued stringent regulations against all priests, especially against the Jesuits.”<sup>24</sup>

Though priests were expelled, there is reason to suppose that the Catholics were not otherwise harassed till the Dutch definitely became masters of Ceylon. This took place in 1656 when Colombo surrendered after a most gallant defence. After this the Dutch were in a position to harass the Catholics with impunity and to ignore Raja Singha. That monarch who had to turn to their aid in order to expel the Portuguese, could not expel them without the aid of a naval power. The only naval power that could come to his aid was the Portuguese. Therefore the Dutch decided in cold blood to stamp out from the hearts of the people under their dominion any lingering sympathy with the Portuguese.

Their first measure was against the Portuguese who were in Ceylon. The gallantry with which the Portuguese had defended Colombo was a humiliation to the Dutch. Raja Singha had made secret overtures and actually succeeded in getting some Portuguese into his service. The Dutch therefore heaped every indignity and disability on the Portuguese. Their language was proscribed, they were debarred from office and subjected to most galling restrictions. And no one can fail to admire the constancy with which the Portuguese descendants resisted

every inducement to forswear their No worldly consideration was able to make them even entertain the thought of bartering their souls; and the degradation to which they were thenceforth reduced was the direct outcome of their fidelity to their faith.

Not satisfied with this the Dutch Government for the same purpose endeavoured to uproot the Catholic Faith in Ceylon. In other lands the Dutch did not penalise the Catholic religion with anything like the bitterness they displayed in Ceylon. The fear of Portuguese interference added to religious bigotry made them adopt in Ceylon a policy of cool, calculating, cold-blooded persecution. It was a bloodless persecution for the most part, and consisted principally in sapping and mining the Catholic Faith. They penalised the Catholic religion, seized the Catholic churches and schools, expelled the Catholic priests, made it death to harbour a priest, enforced the attendance of Catholics in their church and proselytising schools under pain of fine and imprisonment, and debarred Catholics from holding office. These measures affected not only the descendants of the Portuguese, but rather, and perhaps more especially the Ceylonese Catholics.

Deprived of churches and priests and cowed by an impudent persecution, the Catholics of Negombo, like their brethren in other Dutch towns, were obliged to submit tamely for 30 years. There was no registration of birth valid in law save baptism in the Dutch church; no marriage was valid at law unless contracted according to the Dutch “Reformed” church. Every child and even grown-ups were compelled under pain of fine and chastisement to attend reformed schools and renounce Catholic dogmas. The Catholics of Negombo therefore presented for baptism children who had already been baptised according to the Catholic rite. These children went to school to avoid fine; but at home they were taught to abominate the “reformed” doctrine. The people were often assembled and

harangued by Dutch ministers, but they never were anything but devout Catholics.

This state of affairs was not unknown to the Dutch Government, but they let things be in the hope of subverting their faith in course of time. Such would perhaps have been the case, humanly speaking, had it not been for the devout labours of the Venerable Father Joseph Vaz.

Alone and single-handed, in the midst of perils and sufferings, Father Vaz traversed the Island bringing the sacraments and the consolations of religion to the Catholics of Ceylon. The difficulties that beset his path did not enable him to visit Negombo often. But after a few years' apostolate he succeeded in persuading some of his religious brethren to labour in Ceylon. In 1696 Father Joseph de Menezes arrived in Ceylon and was appointed to look after the Catholics living in Dutch towns from Puttalam to Galle. A few years later this district was slightly narrowed and Father Manuel de Miranda was stationed at Caymel with the task of ministering to the persecuted Catholics between Caymel and Galle.<sup>25</sup>

The ministrations of these priests brought joy and comfort to the Catholics of Negombo and from that time forth they resisted and outwitted the Dutch with a persistence and fervour of which the Dutch themselves have left written records. In 1661 there were 2000 Christians in Negombo, who are said to have been faithful to the Dutch 'above all other natives' so much so indeed that some of them were able to speak really good Netherlandish.<sup>26</sup> A Dutch church was built 200 yards from the Fort , but in 1681 the congregation consisted of only 20 members. The Catholics on the other hand were wont to go on pilgrimage to a certain Catholic Church in the neighbourhood of Negombo. To put an end to this pilgrimage the Dutch destroyed the church and set up a school on its site.<sup>27</sup>

Schools were the principal means of proselytising. There existed nine<sup>28</sup> such schools in the Negombo District in 1684 and seven<sup>29</sup> in 1689. These schools were under the care of a board called the Scholarchal Commission consisting of the Dissawa and the clergy. This board took cognizance of all matters relating to religion, baptism, marriages etc. Every year two members of this Commission, a clergyman, and a layman called the Scholarch, visited all the schools of the district and submitted a report to Government. Some of those reports have been preserved for us by Valentyn, and an interesting account of the work of the Commission has been compiled from the Dutch records by Revd. Palm, and the letters of the Oratorian priests frequently refer to its activities.

The visit of the clergyman and Scholarch were previously announced by beat of tom-tom, and the Vidane and the school-master had to summon both children and adults. The children were first examined on the catechism; then the adults and the parents of the children. Then the lists were examined and the parents of the children. Then the lists were examined and fines inflicted on all persons neglecting to attend schools on week days. These fines sometimes amounted to as much as 700 Rix Dallers.

In the afternoon divine service was held with Bible reading and psalm singing. The clergyman preached through interpreters, save in the rare and solitary cases when he happened to have some knowledge of the vernacular. Then he administered baptism and solemnised marriages.

The Catholics of Negombo had submitted to these visitations till the arrival of a Catholic priest in their midst. Thenceforth they were refractory. The Scholarch of 1702 reports that “popery had made such progress, especially about Negombo,

that even among school-masters who receive pay and entertainment from the Company there is scarcely one or two to be found who are not papists, and they are altogether ignorant of the reformed religion. Besides there are several churches with ornaments to be found therein.<sup>30</sup>

“This is no wonder” writes the Scholarch “since the Dissawa has allowed the chief of the native Catholics (who is his principal factor) such facilities as he cannot allow without exceeding his powers. And as there might be some conspiracy underneath this the Dissawa has been ordered to assist in person at the next visit of the Pradikant and Scholarch to the church and school to make inquiries as to what should be thought of the Romish brood.”

De Costa and Schot also reported in the following year that large numbers of natives quit the Company’s territory and pass over to the other side of the Caymel river and erect villages with Catholic churches. According to a report of Dissawa Bolscho, “on the other side of the river Caymal there were thatched churches in Tomany, Namile Oedankare, and a stone church in Tambarawila.”<sup>31</sup>

Fr. Manuel de Miranda refers to this visit of Synjeu in 1706, and says that he took note of the fourteen chapels in Negombo and the names of the Catholics in charge of them and also certain reports against Modeliyar Don Alfonso Pereira. This Modeliyar Pereira is the chief of the native Catholics referred to by the Scholarch of 1702. He was the Mudaliyar of Hina and Pitigal Korales, afterwards of Negombo, and President Mor of the church of Negombo “who performs various duties in the church publicly before all the people.” Of his influence and popularity the Dutch records bear ample testimony, and Father Miranda speaks enthusiastically of his fervour and devotion. According to Valentyn the people “refuse to recognise as their

chief save Modeliyar Alfonso Pereira and show little respect to any other person and even none at all to Europeans.”<sup>32</sup> When Captain Lieutenant Bitter Van Rheede ceased to be chief of Negombo in 1697 the authority over the inhabitants of Negombo was transferred to Alfonso Pereira.<sup>33</sup> His wife was a Catheren Bauzem, and his brother Don Lourence Pereira was likewise a fervent Catholic who was accused of recusancy and of having threatened to thrash a Dutch padre for speaking against the Catholic religion.

On receipt of the report of the Scholarch of 1702 the Dissawa of Colombo seems to have taken Modeliyar Pereira to task for his Catholic activities, for Fr. Miranda says: “<sup>34</sup> The Dissawa of Colombo once said to him: “Though this territory belongs to the reformandes, I see that the Catholic religion is growing and increasing more rapidly than the reformed religion, and that the Catholic priests have therein a strong supporter.” He replied that it was not the priests but he who had in spiritual matters he had a great support in the Fathers, just as in temporal matter she had a great protector in the Company: and the Governor who was very much pleased with his work and was a great friend of his remarks that to favour the Catholics so much, and to give shelter to Catholic priests was a very serious matter. He replied that he and all his family were Catholics, and that wherever a priest was to be found they would not hesitate to go to him for their religious duties, but that he did not bring the Fathers nor send them, nor could he in any way prevent the Fathers from entering Negombo, which is continuous to the territories of the King (of Candia) where they went about freely seeing that His Honour (the Governor) himself could not keep them out of Colombo, which is a walled fort with gates and sentinels and watches, for he had seen the Fathers not a few times very near his (the Governor’s) house.

“Yet for all that the Modeliyar would have had trouble were it not that he is very much esteemed by the King (of Candia). Once when his father was at the head of an army division, in the war waged by the Company on the late King, he could have captured the King in one of the encounters, but he let him escape, for which the King recommended his son, the present King, to show him gratitude. Even on this occasion when he went to Puttalam, all the chiefs of the place received orders from Candia to visit him with presents, which they faithfully. This is the great reason why the Hollanders fear to pick a quarrel with the Modeliyar, and it is for this reason that the accusations made against him, the petition of the Christians, the declarations of faith of the people of Negombo, with all the questions and answers, and also my letter were all sent to Batavia.”

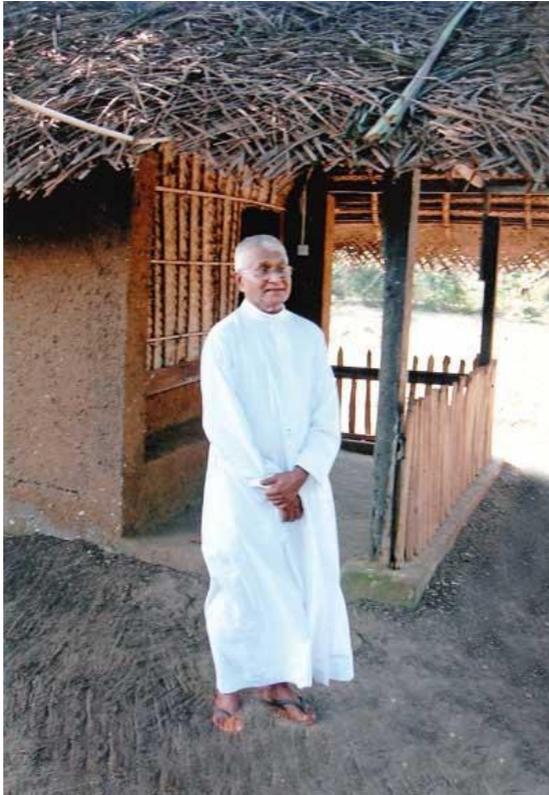
At the time of the visit of the predikant Synjeu, Father Miranda was in Colombo where on the occasion of a fresh Government *plakaat* ordering Catholics to attend the Dutch church and send their children to the Dutch school, he organised the Catholics and urged them to present a petition to the Governor demanding toleration. To prevent the presentation of this petition the Governor ordered a priest hunt in Slave Island, but Father Miranda was safe in the house of a Catholic. The Superior of Ceylon Mission, the Very Rev. Father Joseph Vaz, who was in Kandy, sent a circular letter to all Catholics in Dutch towns asking them to present such petitions. Such a petition was presented in Negombo also. But as the Dutch officers were intimidating the Catholics of Negombo, Mudaliyar Pereira sent a hasty message to Father Miranda who promptly came to Negombo.

## Notes

<sup>19</sup> Captain Joao Ribeyro-Fatalidade historia de Ceylao 32-33 <sup>20</sup> These manuscripts were brought from the Hague by the present Government Archivist Mr.E.Reimers who was kind enough to let me copy them <sup>21</sup>Weekly Literary Register, 11 534 <sup>22</sup> Queyros O. C.678 <sup>23</sup>Weekly Literary Register 11 358 Journal B.A.S XV11 <sup>24</sup> Relation de ce qui est passe dans les Indes Orientales en ses rois Provinces-par P. Jean Maracci, p 60 <sup>25</sup> Viz: Vellevallam ,Bogama,Caymel! Negombo,Vergampatiya, Colombo, Calutur, Galle, Matara, and their substations. Vida do P. Jose Vaz. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition p 111 <sup>26</sup> Valentyn: 166 <sup>27</sup> Journal R.A.S. No 3, p 30 <sup>28</sup> Journal R. A. S. No 3 p.26 <sup>29</sup> Journal R.A.S No 3 p.28 <sup>30</sup> Valentyn 312 <sup>31</sup> Valentyn 387 <sup>32</sup> Valentyn 336 <sup>33</sup> Valentyn 337 <sup>34</sup> Ceylon Antiquary V1 128-2

## IMMORTAL WORDS OF TAGORE

*“He is there where the toiler is tilling the hard ground and where the path maker is breaking stone. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust.....meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow.”* (Gitanjali: Song offerings (translation W. W. Yeats; Delhi. Macmillan India 1997, no X1)



**Fr. Oscar Abayaratne lived in a hut**

