

The Missionary Oblate



THE SYNODAL PATH

No 65

Jan., -June, 2024

The Missionary Oblate

A Journal of Mission Animation

Published by the Oblate Province of Colombo, Sri Lanka

Postal Address: De Mazenod House, 40, Farm Road,
Colombo 15, Sri Lanka.

No 65

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ISSN 2362-096X

Editor Fr. Emmanuel Fernando, OMI

Address: Rajabima Oblate Centre, 519/16, Jayanthi Mawatha,
Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka

Tel: (0094) 025-2222462; 077 235 9203; email:

emma1938omi@gmail.com

Associate Editors: Fr. Anton Shivantha Wass, OMI
and Fr. Surain Danushka Fernando, OMI

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Authors are responsible for the views expressed in their articles.

Editorial

LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE ROMAN SYNODAL ASSEMBLY to put into practice in Sri Lanka

Emmanuel Fernando, OMI

The Synod on Synodality Assembly in Rome, which took place from October 4 – 28, 2023, with 365 voting members, had taken place in a prayerful atmosphere coupled with listening to the Holy Spirit and to each other present at 36 Round Tables, composed of 10-12 members (Pope Francis, Cardinals, Bishops, Presbyters, Consecrated Religious Men and Women and layfaithful), thereby experiencing also the spirit of communion for the mission of evangelization in today's world. According to Fr. Vimal Tirimanna CSsR (appointed by Pope Francis as one of the ten Asian non-Episcopal members with voting rights), the seating arrangement was in contrast to earlier Synods of Bishops in which even the Cardinals and Bishops were seated according to their hierarchical ranking. Instead of the pre-Vatican II hierarchical model of the Church, the participants of this Synod were seated with equal dignity and status as the baptized children of God. (Messenger, November 26, 2023).

Having read the Synthesis Report of the Synod on Synodality published by Vatican, I decided to write concentrating on some issues (taken from the Report) which are more relevant to our Sri Lankan context, demanding action.

1. The Synthesis Report makes mention of the cry of the Poor, not only of the materially impoverished but also of the migrants, victims of violence, sexually abused, racism, people with addictions, minorities, abandoned elderly people, exploited workers, the unborn and their mothers, victims of war, violence and terrorism and climate changes. The Assembly had also condemned the corrupt political and economic systems which cause such strife.
2. There is a call to enter into solidarity with those of other living Faiths and cultures.
3. The assembly had spoken about the wounds caused by the unacceptable authoritarian attitude of the clergy on the Laity and on the Consecrated Religious, and inviting change, yielding place to respect of the People of God.
4. Even if the commission of scripture scholars appointed by Pope Paul VI had concluded that scripturally there is no objection to ordaining women to the presbyterate, I am glad about Pope Francis' reluctance to give into pressure on this matter because unless we first *declericalise the presbyterate* we will only be producing a female version of the same "power minus authority" clericalism.

5. Besides being members of the Priestly, prophetic and royal People of God, the Consecrated Religious are called to be innovatively faithful to the charisms (divine gifts) of their Congregations. There is great need for dialogue between the Bishops and the members of the Conference of the Major Religious Superiors (CMRS) in Sri Lanka regarding, matters relating to evangelization in the dioceses.
6. Candidates preparing for presbyteral leadership in the Church in Sri Lanka need to be exposed to the daily life of the People. They need to listen respectfully to the cries of the People who feel marginalized and excluded also due to their marriage-status and identity.
7. While bearing in mind that the internet can also cause harm and injury such as intimidation and addiction, there is need to consider how the Catholic families can ensure that digital culture is not only safe but also spiritually life-giving.
8. The Church is requested to be committed (a) to the denunciation of the injustices perpetrated by the individuals, governments and Companies and also to be actively engaged in politics, Associations, Trade Unions and Popular Movements and (b) at the same time not to neglect action in the field of education, health and social assistance without any discrimination or exclusion of anyone.

Commitment and care of the Church is required to engage decisively in education, in the culture of dialogue and encounter, combating racism and xenophobia.

9. It is also urgent to identify systems within the Church which create or maintain racial injustice. Though not mentioned in the Report, we, in Sri Lanka, need to resist also casteism.
10. The Synod has called for a regular review of how the ordained ministers (bishops, presbyters and deacons) carry out their ministries in their dioceses, including the style of their authority and the administration of finances.

P.S

Pope Francis, who maintains Magisterial Power, convoked and consulted the ordained ministers, the Consecrated Religious Men and Women, and the Layfaithful, thereby he continues the process of renewal initiated by Pope St, John XXIII and through the Synodal method introduced by Pope St. Paul VI. This Synodal process of Papal consultation of the ordained ministers, the Consecrated Religious and the Laity by Pope Francis will continue in the second session in October 2024 when a meeting of the Synod on Synodality will take place. Thereafter a Papal Document signed by Pope Francis will follow.

DID ANYTHING HAPPEN AT THE RECENT SYNODAL ASSEMBLY IN ROME?

As I returned to Sri Lanka after participating at the recently concluded first Session of the 16th Synodal Assembly of Bishops, one of my close acquaintances was blunt in posing a series of questions one after the other: “Has this Synodal Assembly said anything new after spending some four weeks inside locked doors? Have we got to listen and discern for another year? When will you make some decisions?” He had gone through the English version of the Synthesis Report and was wondering in all sincerity whether this is all that the Assembly could come up with after more than two years of the synodal process of deliberation, listening and discernment at all levels of ecclesial life in the Catholic Church. In a sense, he could not be faulted because the momentum created by the synodal process since October 2021 was such that the expectations of the People of God, especially, those of the lay people were very high. So, did anything really happen at the Synodal Assembly in October 2023?

The ‘seeds’ of Change are Sown

As someone who participated as a non-Episcopal voting member at this Assembly, I for one would surely vouch for it that many things did happen, things that would invariably trigger many more things to happen in the future, especially during the eleven months before the next session of the same Synodal Assembly in October 2024. As our inspiring spiritual guide, Timothy Radcliffe, OP, convincingly pointed out in his last discourse to us as

the Assembly was coming to a close, the coming eleven months “will be probably the most fertile time of the Synod, the time of germination”.

Yes, the seeds are sown. But the question remains as to on what grounds they have fallen. Will they bear hundred-fold, fifty, thirty or nothing? Although the harvest will obviously depend on the type of the soil on which the seeds fall, one can be somewhat optimistic especially in view of some of the concrete proposals that were approved by a two-thirds of those who voted at the Assembly. Of course, those proposals which form the third part of each of the 20 main Sections of the Synthesis Report (SR) are not binding. But one wonders how they could be ignored since they are part of the climax of an intense worldwide synodal process involving millions of believers all over the world for more than two long years. That is to say that the Synthesis Report (being the outcome of the many discussions, consultations and exercises of discernment that formed the long and tedious synodal process since October 2021 involving the whole Church) clearly amounts to a sense of the faith of the People of God (*sensus fidei*). As it has been traditionally held and as explicitly taught by Vatican-II, *sensus fidei* is not only a theological source but is also a reflection of the faith and morals of the People of God at a given time in history. Vatican-II not only highlighted the importance of *sensus fidei* but also pointed out how through it, the Holy Spirit keeps the Church from falling into error with regard to her faith and morals (*Lumen Gentium* 12).

It is worth noting here that the recently concluded Synodal Assembly had no difficulty in accepting that the synodal way is the way ahead for the Church (SR, No: 2 i). However, the ‘soil’ of each local Church (especially on the part of the Church leaders) needs to be prepared to receive the ‘seeds’ by those responsible, as the SR itself said: “The conviction with which the bishop himself adopts a synodal approach and the style by which he exercises authority will influence decisively how priests and deacons, lay men and women, and those in consecrated life participate in the synodal process. The bishop is called to be an example of synodality for all” (SR, No:12 c). In other words, the bishop of a diocese has not only a leading role to play in implementing the synodal way in his diocese but also in living that synodal way through his own life example. In order to make sure that the bishops would implement this wish of the universal Church gathered in a Synodal Assembly, the SR called for an assessment of how these proposals had been put into practice in each local Church (SR, No: 20 j), perhaps, at the next session in October 2024.

As we have been hearing consistently during this Assembly, the most crucial and indispensable issues to attend to are those to do with formation towards a synodal way of life (not only for the clergy and religious but also for the laity) and the revival or creation of adequate ecclesial structures to facilitate a synodal culture. Obviously, these are the two pillars on which the entire synodal way of life would depend, and survive eventually. They would invariably prepare the ‘soil’ to receive the

‘seeds’ of the Synodal Assembly. Hence the SR allocates two full Sections for these two issues entitled “A Synodal Approach to Formation” (SR, Section 14) and “Structures for Participation” (SR, Section 18).

If one were to use the metaphor of ‘seed’ used by Radcliffe, the SR as a whole is a basket of seeds that have the potential to sprout into massive trees that could bear fruit according to the ‘signs of the times’ and the needs of the People of God. Of the twenty sections in the SR, for me, the most daring and innovative were the ones entitled “Women in the Life and Mission of the Church” (SR, Section 9), “Deacons and Priests in a Synodal Church” (SR, Section 11), “The Bishop in Ecclesial Communion” (SR, Section 12), “Ecclesial Discernment and Open Questions” (SR, Section 15) and “Towards a Listening and Accompanying Church” (SR, Section 16).

Vital Indications for Pastoral/Moral Theology

As a moral theologian my most favourite passages are to be found in Sections 15 and 16 (in the SR) which have many pastoral resonances. On the need for any doctrine to be pastorally relevant, the SR boldly and correctly says: “If we use doctrine harshly and with a judgmental attitude, we betray the Gospel; if we practise mercy ‘on the cheap’, we do not convey God’s love. The unity of truth and love implies bearing the difficulties of others, even making them our own, as happens between brothers and sisters. This unity can only be achieved, however, by patiently following the path of accompaniment” (SR, 15 f). After

all, doctrines are for persons and not vice versa, as the Lord himself reminded us (cf., Mk.2:27).

One of the pastorally realistic statements in the SR reads: “Sometimes the anthropological categories we have developed are not able to grasp the complexity of the elements emerging from experience or knowledge in the sciences and require greater precision and further study. It is important to take time required for this reflection and to invest our best energies in it, without giving in to simplistic judgments that hurt individuals and the Body of the Church” (SR, 15 g). One of the most interesting and pastorally viable proposals of the Assembly reads: “We propose that initiatives enabling shared discernment on controversial doctrinal, pastoral and ethical issues should be developed, in the light of the Word of God, Church teaching, theological reflection and an appreciation of the synodal experience. This can be accomplished through in-depth discussions among experts with diverse skills and backgrounds, in an institutional setting that protects confidentiality and promotes frank discussion. When appropriate it should also involve people directly affected by the matters under consideration. Such initiatives should be set in motion before the next Session of the Assembly” (SR, 15 k). One needs to note in this Synodal proposal how those “directly affected” need to get involved in such doctrinal, pastoral and ethical processes of discernment. This, surely is a creative and meaningful approach recommended by the Assembly that will have a solid impact on doing moral theology in the contemporary world.

As is well known, one of the hot-button issues (at least for the media) was to do with the need to reach out to the LGBTQ people. One of the participants, Fr. James Martin, sj, who is directly involved in the pastoral care of such people, was making a valiant attempt to make such people visible to the Assembly. While there were other scattered and sporadic voices within the Assembly Hall in this regard, there were also strong voices that repeated *ad nauseum* the need for the Church to avoid secular ideologies. One would agree that the issues to do with LGBTQ needs the careful and serious pastoral attention of the contemporary Church though theology and sound pastoral practice also need to liberate themselves from any secular ideology. Perhaps, it was for this particular and valid reason that the Report avoided using the term 'LGBTQ'. Thus, in referring to the issue at stake it says: "In different ways, people who feel marginalized or excluded from the Church because of their marriage status, identity or sexuality, also ask to be heard and accompanied. There was a deep sense of love, mercy and compassion felt in the Assembly for those who are or feel hurt or neglected by the Church, who want a place to call 'home' where they can feel safe, be heard and respected, without fear of feeling judged" (SR, 16 h). The Report refers to the LGBTQ again when it uses the phrase "Certain issues, such as those relating to matters of identity and sexuality,..." (SR, 15 g). In both these statements, the reader needs to note the subtle way in which the SR avoided the term LGBTQ (which could have secular ideological resonances) but at the same time clearly referred to those who come under that banner.

Creating Space for the Charisms / Gifts of the Holy Spirit

However, with regard to the ordination of women though the Assembly did not refer to it directly, the Report has been quite forward-looking in speaking about the possibility of the diaconate for women when it says: “Theological and pastoral research on the access of women to the diaconate should be continued, benefitting from consideration of the results of the commissions specially established by the Holy Father, and from the theological, historical and exegetical research already undertaken. If possible, the results of this research should be presented to the next Session of the Assembly” (SR, 9 n). Moreover, the Assembly also exhorted the uninhibited exercise of the charisms/gifts which the Holy Spirit bestows on the baptized within a given community, especially with regard to lay ministries. As we know, the local Church communities have the right and duty to use those gifts of the Spirit in building up the local communities even through the liturgical celebrations which at the moment are often dominated only by the ordained clerics. In this regard, the SR (8 o) says: “Local Churches are invited to consider appropriate means and moments of acknowledgment by the community of lay charisms and ministries. This could happen on occasion of a liturgical celebration in which the pastoral mandate is bestowed”. It also called for “more creativity” when it said: “We need more creativity in establishing ministries according to the needs of local churches, with the particular involvement of the young. One can think of

further expanding responsibilities assigned to the existing ministry of lector, responsibilities that are already broader than those performed in liturgy. This could become a fuller ministry of the Word of God, which in appropriate contexts, could also include preaching” (SR, 8 n). The Assembly also said: “Pastoral structures need to be re-organized so that they can readily recognize, call forth, and animate lay charisms and ministries, inserting them into the missionary dynamism of the Synodal Church” (SR, 8 l). Such statements need to be perceived as clear and courageous efforts to open the doors to matters that had been taboo in the Catholic Church till now.

A passing remark (linked to what was said above) with regard to the contemporary context of our Sri Lankan Church is in place. Today, there are so many visible and invisible efforts made by the ordained ministers (both bishops and priests) in Sri Lanka to tame or to domesticate each and every lay movement, often even suppressing the Spirit-given charisms. Most of these movements can be run through lay leaders according to the charisms they receive directly from the Holy Spirit, and surely, they do not need the approval or the interference of the ordained ministry. A case in point is the unwarranted efforts made by certain Sri Lankan dioceses and their clerical agents to suffocate the Holy Spirit by trying to domesticate the Kithu Dhana Pubuduwa (the Charismatic Renewal Movement). When all the official Church teachings (including the SR of the recent Synodal Assembly) encourage lay leadership, some of those entrusted with pastoral care in the Church in Sri Lanka seem to be

extending the clerical tentacles even to get such exclusively lay movements absorbed into the institutional and hierarchical structures of the Church. Such efforts are clearly against the spirit of the recent Synodal Assembly. In fact, the SR clearly states the importance of recognizing non-clerical charisms within the Church thanks to the gifts of the Holy Spirit on the believing communities when it says: “There is a need to develop a more profound understanding of how consecrated life, as well as lay associations, ecclesiastical movements, and new communities, place their charisms at the service of communion and mission in local Churches, augmenting existing paths towards holiness with a presence that is prophetic” (SR 10 f).

The Prophetic Role of the Religious in Promoting the Synodal Way

In this regard, the Assembly also wished to acknowledge the indispensable prophetic role which the religious congregations had been playing through their respective particular charisms all throughout the history of the Church when it said: “Those in consecrated life have often been the first to sense important historical changes and to heed the promptings of the Spirit. Today, too, the Church needs their prophetic voice and action. The Christian community also recognises and wishes to be attentive to the practices of synodal life and discernment that have been tried and tested in communities of consecrated life, maturing over the centuries. We know that we can learn from them wisdom in how to walk the synodal path” (SR 10 b). At a time when the vital role played by religious

(both men and women) is ignored by a Church dominated by clerics, the Synod thus wished to register its appreciation of what they have been doing and continuing to do for the People of God. The Assembly not only called for a revision of the 1978 document *Mutuae Relationes* regarding the relationship between bishops and religious in the Church (SR 10 g), but also said: “it is necessary to put in place, in a synodal spirit, means and instruments for promoting encounters and forms of collaboration between Episcopal Conferences and the Conference of Superiors and Major Superiors” (SR 10 h). Again, the relevance of this within the Church in Sri Lanka cannot be denied because as things stand, the religious and their silent service through life and witnessing (especially those of religious women) in Sri Lanka have been taken for granted, and at times, even deliberately over-looked. No one cannot erase the crucial historical role played by religious in Sri Lanka, right from the time of the Oratorians of Goa led by St. Joseph Vaz and Giacomo Gonsalvez till the present day. It is in this sense that we hope the Sri Lankan hierarchical leaders (the Episcopate) will do their best to get the religious (both men and women) involved in promoting the synodal way of life. After all, not only do most of the religious congregations have immense and innate experience in the synodal ways of doing things but they also are capable of innovative ways of implementing the ‘seeds’ of the recent Synodal Assembly in the Sri Lankan soil. Of course, whether the Sri Lankan hierarchy provides them the necessary space to play such a prophetic role or not, the religious themselves (by definition) have the bounden duty to

promote the synodal way in the Local Church. Or else, they will be like salt that has lost its saltiness!

Clericalism: A Formidable Obstacle to Synodality

I was indeed privileged to have taken part actively in all the main stages of the current synodal process since it was inaugurated in October 2021: first, as a member of the Theological Commission for synodality; then, as member of the Group of Experts to read, reflect and discern the responses to the worldwide questionnaire in Frascati in September 2022; finally, also as a member of the Asian Continental Assembly held in Bangkok, Thailand, in February 2023. Last but not least, I was one of those chosen by the Holy Father himself to be among the ten Asian non-Episcopal members of the Synodal Assembly. One obstacle to the synodal way of life that was experienced directly by me at all these stages of consultation of the People of God (and even at the Synodal Assembly proper) was the ubiquitous ecclesial phenomenon of clericalism. In fact, in one of the few interventions of Pope Francis during this Assembly (after having heard some of the interventions in the Synodal Hall) he highlighted the lingering issue of clericalism: "When ministers overstep in their service and mistreat the people of God, they disfigure the face of the church with machismo and dictatorial attitudes". In referring to clericalism, the SR itself bluntly says: "One obstacle to ministry and mission is clericalism" (SR, 11 c). If the 'seeds' sown by the recent Synodal Assembly (that are concretely expressed in the SR) are to germinate and sprout, all local Church communities (both in the dioceses

and parishes) ought to do everything possible to overcome the menace of clericalism though it would surely be an uphill task, particularly in a country like Sri Lanka. Or else, those synodal ‘seeds’ would be suffocated and killed by those imbibed in clericalism.

At the Eucharistic celebration which marked the solemn closing ceremony of the first Session of the 16th Synodal Assembly, held at St.Peter’s Basilica on 29th October 2023, Pope Francis who presided said in his homily: “Today, we do not see the full fruit of this process, but with farsightedness, we look to the horizon opening up before us”. The ‘seeds’ of hope are already sown which hopefully will germinate and grow during the coming eleven months so that when the second Session takes place next October, it may produce at least some plants which eventually will bear lasting fruit in the years to come. In other words, a dynamic process has been set in motion which is bound to pave the way for many more things to happen in our Church. That is to say that something historical and crucial did really happen at the recent Synodal Assembly.

Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR

SYNODALITY FOR THE RENEWAL OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Emmanuel Fernando, OMI

Introduction

First let us try to understand the meaning of Synodality. It comes from the Greek **synodos** meaning **to walk together**, to journey together, and to be pilgrims together. **Applied to the Church, it is an assembly gathered together to pray, discern, listen, deliberate, choose and decide in common.** Synodality embodies a way of being, living and acting as Christians in the world of today.

Synod and synodality is not a novelty of Pope Francis. Pope St. John XXIII echoed the contents of these words with his 2 very familiar words: **Aggiornamento (Renewal) and Koinonia (Fellowship/ communion).**

Renewalist Popes

Pope St. John XXIII became a ‘renewalist Pope’. On becoming Pope on October 28, 1958, he emphasized the need for renewal (**aggiornamento**) and fellowship /communion (**koinonia**) in the Church. Having conducted a **Diocesan Synod** in Rome on January 25, 1959 (within 3 months of his election as Pope), he opened an **Ecumenical Council**, known as the 2nd Vatican Council. He wanted a ‘listening Church’, to the Holy Spirit and to the baptized. He injected that spirit to the Second Vatican Council. His words and actions pointed to the Spirit of

God whom Jesus Christ had given to the Church as the internal guide.

Pope St. Paul VI, realizing that synodality had disappeared in the Western Church, had set up the **Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops** in 1965, at the end of the Second Vatican Council, as a way to advise the Pope in his governance of the Church, thus participating in the solicitude for the whole Church, to make the gospel message visible and livable today. Pope Paul VI made it clear from the outset that the Synod like every human institution can be further perfected with the passage of time. At present the Synod of Bishops is a process, an ongoing event, the ongoing renewal of the Church.

Pope Francis whose personal Jesuit spirituality also emphasizes very much the spirit of prayerful discernment has revived the spirit of synodality for the renewal in the Catholic Church. **Pope Francis outlined his vision for a Synodal Church on October 17, 2015 in a landmark speech to mark the 50th anniversary of Pope St. Paul'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 3rd millennium and called for the greater involvement of the layfaithful in decision-making. A synodal Church is a Church which **listens**, which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing. It is a **mutual listening** in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful, 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.” (Emphasis added).

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 has emphasized two critical points about the synod. The first is that the synodal process is needed more than ever at a time when there is “much talk and little listening” and when a “culture of exclusion” leaves so many untouched. With its focus on listening and giving a voice to everyone, Pope Francis insists that the synod offers a model for renewal of life of the Catholic Church. Second, the synod is deeply rooted in the Church’s tradition of communal discernment practised by the first Christians (Christopher Lamb, *Tablet*, 2 Sept. 2023, p 26).

Synod: Going back to the Sources

Renewal embodies newness. Such a newness demands going back to the sources namely to the Word of God, to Jesus Christ and to the Sacred Tradition and to the practice of the early Church to obtain inspiration and spiritual energy in order to read the signs of the times.

Fr. Aloysius Pieris, SJ says, ***“the way the 12 Apostles made decision to dispense the gentle neo-converts with the divinely revealed and divinely imposed law regarding the law of circumcision (Acts Chapter 15:28) should guide us. Jesus did not leave a book of instruction or a Codex Juris Canonici to guide the Church. Instead God breathed into us his own Holy Spirit as the internal***

teacher, personal guide and Church's "mission-companion." Quoting also Fr. Yves Congar, OP, he says "the Holy Spirit and the Church were co-sent by Christ as collaborators of Jesus' mission". In their decision about the law of circumcision, the Apostles and the Holy Spirit were responding together to the signs of the times. They arrived at a new mission theology, i.e a new interpretation of the Word of God in the context of the Asian reality. The history of Israel was given as a sample of how God works through any people's history so that we (the Church) can learn to hear, recognize and obey the same voice in contemporary events. As the nascent Church did at the council of Jerusalem, we who are heirs to that same tradition should listen to what the same Lord speaks in today's context and respond to her summons. ***The Spirit inspires us with a new understanding of Christ's mission mandate as dictated by the signs of the times***" (Aloysius Pieris, SJ, *The Genesis of an Asian Theology of Liberation*, p 119-120) (Emphasis added). .

Listening to the Holy Spirit before acting

Synodal way is a way of being that involves not only hearing but listening, prayerfully discerning what the Spirit of God is revealing, before acting. For example, **Samuel**, not only heard the voice of God but he had to listen to God (1 Sam 3: 1-17). **Mary, the Mother of Jesus** also heard the voice of God and she had to listen to the Word of God uttered through the angel (Lk 1:26-38). **St. Paul** heard the voice of the Risen Lord Jesus and then listened to the voice of Jesus (Acts 9:1-19; Gal 1: 12-17). The examples of Samuel, Blessed Mother of Jesus, of St.

Paul and also of **the Founders of the Consecrated Religious Congregations** inspire us to follow their example. They shared with others what God had communicated to them. There is therefore the importance of listening to the Spirit of God in prayer and sharing with others what the Spirit communicates for the renewal of today's Catholic Church, the Religious Congregations within the Church and the mandated Associations of the layfaithful.

The final document of the Synod of Bishops on young people **in 2018**, stated that the Church must get better at listening to young people, taking their questions seriously, recognizing them as full members of the Church, patiently walking with them and offering them guidance as they discern the best way". Pope Francis said, *"Listening is an encounter in freedom, which requires humility, patience, willingness to understand and a commitment to working out responses in a new way"*. Listening also embodies the spirit of being loved.

Speaking on **August 26, 2023**, Pope Francis said, *"We have opened our doors, we have offered everyone the opportunity to participate, we have taken into account everyone's needs and suggestions. We want to contribute together to build the Church where everyone feels at home, where no one is excluded and underlined that the Church needs to listen and discuss in a mature way. We are trying to learn a new way of living relationships, listening to one another to hear and follow the voice of the Spirit"*. Therefore Synodality is very much concerned also about the personal renewal of the members of Church

rather than the reform of the Church which concentrates of the structures of the Church governance. Depending on the type of renewal, external structures (reform) will take place. Applied to today's Church in which everyone has something to learn from the collaborative way. **The faithful, 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) and the internal teacher in order to know what the Spirit is saying today.** In this process of listening to the Word of God, Pope Francis places much emphasis on prayerful discerning of the signs of the times. Synodal way embodies everyone's joys and sorrows.

Pope Francis: A Pope of collegiality and synodality

Fr. Aloysius Pieris, SJ says Pope Francis is the first Pope to re-introduce these two dimensions of Conciliar Ecclesiology- **collegiality and synodality** – as his governmental and pastoral policy. He says all the Post-Conciliar popes before Francis treated the synods as mere consultative bodies. Pope Francis is the first Bishop of Rome to practice both the collegial and the synodal mode of Church-governance. The renewal process as dictated by the “signs of the times” will continue in and through *collegial* and *synodal* way of consultation and deliberation. People of God with their *sensus fidelium* (the indefectible faith of all believers) are called to think with the Church and to think as the Church. According to Pope Francis' governmental policy, God's people are not merely consulted as advisers but are also co-opted as collaborators in the ongoing renewal of the Catholic

Church (Aloysius Pieris,SJ, *Helping Francis renew the Church, p 38 ff*).

“Synodality removes bifurcation of the Church into *Ecclesia docens* (the teaching Church) and *Ecclesia discens* (the listening Church) into the *sensus fidei* of the people of God. *Sensus fidei* prevents a rigid separation between an *Ecclesia docens* and an *Ecclesia discens* since the People of God has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing. The Church is primarily the People of God. It replaces the pyramidal model of the Church that has existed and ensures a fuller and active participation of the whole People of God” (Editorial, *Pope Francis, Synodality and Synod 2023*, Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection, Vol 85, no 9, Sept. 2021).

Synodality, not a denial of Magisterium

Practice of Sodality is not a denial of Magisterium. Pope Francis is not abdicating his position as Supreme Leader of the Catholic Church. Synod is only a tool for consultation of the People of God by Pope in order to provide meaningful responses to the rapidly emerging new issues in the world and in the Church. Church historians say that Pope Francis is only continuing the conciliar renewal which ceased with Pope Paul’s death.

To reinforce the dynamics of synodality, there is naturally the need to reflect on the constitutive relationship between common priesthood of all the baptized and the ministerial priesthood and also on the

relationship between the prophetic function of the People of God and the discernment function of the ordained ministers.

Synodality: Journeying as virtuous persons

Synodality aims at spiritual and socio-pastoral renewal in the Church. Spiritual renewal demands journeying as virtuous Christians. Values alone will not suffice. Knowledge alone is not enough for fruitful, good moral living because of our fallen nature. There is weakness in our faculties of freedom, caused by original sin (Rom 7:14-15; 18:-19, 24).

Virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do the good (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 1803). Virtue is an acquired good disposition to do good with ease, promptitude and joy. Virtue is a good habitual disposition. Without virtues, our spiritual and moral life will collapse under the pressure of worldliness.

Spiritual renewal whilst being supported by prayer-life is not enough. It needs to be manifested through deeds of love (which is our mission) because love of neighbour is the sign by which people will know we are Christians.

Synodality must be practised

It is not enough to know theoretically what is synodality but it must be practiced. Personal and community renewal will take place when it is genuinely practiced because the process had been conducted under the inspiration of the Spirit of God whom Abba, our maternal Father, has

generously given to us. Knowledge alone will not produce desired goal(s) but prayer life with the love of God and neighbourly love will engender the desired ecclesial renewal for the glory of God.

Synodal life is also a mission in today's world. The Holy Spirit anoints and consecrates every Christian for a specific mission at his/her baptism. Consecrated life, willed by Jesus for his Church, is charismatic and is an intimate part of Church's life and mission. They are a species of Christians who defy definition and yet demand recognition. Impossible to bring about a more synodal Church unless all its leaders, layfaithful, the consecrated charismatics and the ordained are formed in discernment, spiritual listening and collaborative decision-making.

A CHURCH OF POVERTY

“Confronted by the under-developed countries, the Church presents herself as she is and wants to be: the Church of all men and women, and in particular the Church of the poor.”

- St. Pope John XXIII, *Message to the world at the opening of the Second Vatican Council*, September 11, 1962.
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“The Eucharist cannot be meaningfully celebrated by persons who spend lavishly on themselves.

- Tissa Balasuriya, OMI

Genesis 22, 1-19

The Test of Abraham

Prof. Dr. Shirley L. Wijesinghe

Abraham figures prominent in post-exilic Israel.¹ The Babylonian exile of 587 BEC marked the end of Israelite monarchy. In this context, the figure of Abraham may have been important to shape the identity of the people. An Abraham leaving Ur of the Chaldeans to come to the land of promise and a forefather ready to sacrifice his ‘only’ son, heir to the promise in an extreme act of obedience to his God could have been told in order to inspire the exiles to return to their ravaged lands in Palestine in obedience to God.

Human sacrifice was forbidden in Israel: “Any man of the people of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn in Israel, who gives any of his children to Molech shall be put to death” (Lev 20,2); “There shall not be found among you any one who burns his son or his daughter as an offering ...” (Deut 18,10). In that context, it is difficult to understand how God demands Abraham to sacrifice his son. It is important to know that most Biblical stories

¹ Originally published in *Journal of Religious Reflection*, NS 6/2 (2012) 35-40.

highlight or underline one value - in this case the absolute obedience to God - and the example drawn to impress upon the hearer/reader may compromise other important or more important values. The ancients were not scandalized by it because they were children of story-telling cultures. This is also true of much of ancient literature where a positive value is highlighted at the expense of other positive values. Even modern media including highly developed cinematography employ this same ancient art of story-telling.

In that sense, Genesis 22 is artistry. “The story is a masterpiece presenting God as the Lord whose demands are absolute, whose will is inscrutable, and whose final word is grace. Abraham shows the moral grandeur of the founder of Israel, facing God, willing to obey God’s word in all its mysterious harshness. Absent here are Abraham’s voluble evasions ... he is silently trusting and obedient” (Clifford – Murphy, 1991: 25).

Jean-Louis Ska has isolated a concentric structure combined with six scenes (Ska, 1988: 329):

A. Introduction (v.1a): silent narration

B. Scene 1 (vv.1b-2): God speaks

C. Scene 2 (v.3): silent narration

D. Scene 3 (vv.4-6): dialogue
(Abraham and his servants)

D'. Scene 4 (vv.7-8): dialogue
(Abraham and Isaac)

C'. Scene 5 (vv.9-10): silent narration

B'. Scene 6 (vv.11-14.15-18): the angel of YHWH
speaks

A'. Epilogue (v.19): silent narration

The place of sacrifice rings in the ear of the reader as a refrain (vv. 2.3.4.5.9.14). The place is mentioned when God gives the order (vv. 1b-2), when Abraham departs (v. 3), when the place is seen from far (vv. 4-6), when Abraham ultimately sets himself into the action of sacrificing his son (vv. 9-10), when the angel of YHWH intervenes (vv. 11.15-18) and when Abraham gives a name to the place (The Lord will provide) (v. 14). Except in scene 4 in which Isaac questions his father and Abraham answers his son in an indirect manner, the place is mentioned in all other five scenes.

The levels of knowledge are also important in this episode. The narrator communicates to the reader that it is a ‘test’. God tested Abraham. Abraham does not know that it is a test but the reader knows. So, the reader is in a privileged position. Secondly, Abraham is not able to communicate to Isaac or to his servants the reason for the journey. While Abraham knows why he is going to the land of Moriah, Isaac and the servants of Abraham do not know about it. This creates a dramatic tension in the narrative.

Scene 1 (vv. 1b-2): The word order in v. 2 of the canonical text is – (1) your son, (2) your only son, (3) whom you love, (4) Isaac. Rabbinic literature fills in the gaps in this narration: “Thy son”. Abraham said to God “I have two sons”. He answered him “Thine only son”. Abraham said “This one is the only son of his mother and the other is the only son of his mother”. God then said, “the one whom thou lovest”. Abraham replied “I love both of them.” Whereupon God said, “Even Isaac”. The gradual precision culminates in the name “Isaac” (Rashi, p. 93). God’s order specifies the action: (1) ‘take’, (2) ‘go’, and (3) ‘sacrifice’. The three verbs summarise the plot, the reader expects it to unfold in this order.

Scene 2 (v. 3): Abraham *takes* and *goes*. After having saddled his ass, and taken two of his young men as well as Isaac, he cuts the wood for the burnt offering. The

cutting of wood which reminds him of the impossible mission is mentioned as the last item. The sequence indicates that Abraham is intentionally delaying the journey and mirrors what goes on in the mind of the silent patriarch. Furthermore, cutting the wood is indicative of the *sacrifice*. (The verb sacrifice is not mentioned here directly) (Ska, 1988: 330-331).

Scene 3 (vv. 4-6): The dramatic tension rises with the place of sacrifice in view. The reader sees the place of sacrifice rising on the horizon on the third day with Abraham. At last Abraham reveals the intention of the journey to his servants: “Stay here with the ass; I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you” (v. 5). Abraham tells the truth without knowing it. The verbs *take* and *go* are present (v. 6) and the verb *to sacrifice* is missing. Two new objects hitherto unspoken, namely fire and the knife are mentioned (Ska, 1988: 331-333).

Scene 4 (vv. 7-8): In the entire episode, Isaac speaks only in this scene. (In fact, in the entire Abraham cycle, this is the only instance, the reader hears the voice of Isaac). The levels of knowledge of the reader, of Abraham and Isaac are different and this is very clear in this scene. From v. 1 onwards, the reader knows that it is a test, and this fact is not known to Abraham. Both reader and Abraham know that God has asked Abraham to sacrifice

his son Isaac, but this is not known to Isaac. Abraham speaks and this is the last time that we hear him speaking. From here onwards, the patriarch will remain silent till the end of the episode. The answer to the question of Isaac “Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering” is vague: “God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” Once again as in scene 3, Abraham tells the truth without knowing it (Ska, 1988: 333-335).

Scene 5: (vv. 9-10): Only actions are mentioned. Not a word and no reaction. Neither does Abraham speak nor does Isaac react. In this episode the dramatic tension rises to the maximum. The preparations for the sacrifice slow down the narration (Ska, 1988: 335).

Scene 6: (vv. 11-14. 15-18): It is with Abraham that the reader sees the ram caught in a thicket by his horns. This is similar to seeing the place of sacrifice in v. 4: “Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place far off” (v. 4). The same expression “lifted up his eyes” is mentioned in v. 13: “And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram ...” All three verbs ‘take’, ‘go’, ‘sacrifice’ which appeared in v. 2, reappear in v. 13: “Abraham *went* and *took* the ram, and *offered* it up as a burnt offering ...” In the scenes in between all three verbs did not occur. Abraham continues to remain silent. After a long silence the voice from heaven addresses Abraham.

God spoke to Abraham in vv.1b-2, now the angel of the Lord speaks to him (vv. 11-12). The words of God and of the angel contain all that the reader needs to know about Abraham, namely his love for his son and the fact that he feared God. The reader understands now, after the event has taken place that Abraham remained silent because he feared God. The love towards his son has been silenced by his fear of God. The reader could guess the same. But it is the angel of God who could affirm it with authority. The voice from heaven praises Abraham and opens a new future to the son who was not withheld (vv. 15-18). The obedience of the patriarch gives a future to all his descendants. The sad mood prevalent at the end of previous scenes has been transformed into a joyous conclusion in this final scene (Ska, 1988: 336-338).

It is a gross misunderstanding if Gen 22,1-19 is interpreted as a divine command to kill Isaac, the son of Abraham. At the beginning of the episode, it is clearly said that it is a 'test' and that should clear all such misinterpretations. As seen above the text communicates to the reader, the grandeur of the forefather of Israel, who is able to take up even the most extreme form of sacrifice in obedience to his God, thus prompting that his descendants could do the same. The text was probably meant to teach Israel how to interpret and overcome the trials faced by them in the course of their history, especially in moments of dire experiences when they felt

that God had abandoned them completely and annulled their future. It is also possible that the story may have been an appeal to the prosperous exiles living in the rich Euphrates-Tigris valley civilization to take up the extreme sacrifice of returning to the Promised Land which was in ruins.

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Beatitudes of the Politician

In his message for the World Day of Peace in 2019, Pope Francis recalled the “Beatitudes of the Politician”, proposed by Vietnamese Cardinal Francis – Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan who died in 2002:

Blessed be the politician with a lofty sense and deep understanding of his role.

Blessed be the politician who personally exemplifies credibility.

Blessed be the politician who works for the common good and not for his or her own interest.

Blessed be the politician who remains consistent.

Blessed be the politician who works for unity.

Blessed be the politician who works to accomplish radical change.

Blessed be the politician who is capable of listening.

Blessed be the politician who is without fear.

THE PAINFUL CRIES OF THE PLANTATION TAMIL COMMUNITY

1. The Social Reality of the Plantation Tamil community

As reported in the *Daily Mirror* on August 11, 2023, a) according to **Mr. Balachanran Gowthaman, an Attorney-at-law and a social activist**, there are a large number of Malaiyaha /upcountry youth who want to leave the plantations right now because they are saturated in very low-paying jobs. They don't have a proper pathway or solid technical training and due to financial constraints, members of this Tamil community aren't able to afford such courses.

b) According to **Mr. Michael Joachim, Executive Director, Plantation Rural Education Development Organisation**, getting the estate management to allow a preschool to be run on the plantation was a problem. For a child to enjoy the right to education, he or she has to obtain permission from the manager. Even at present you have to fight and then only win that right.

c) According to **Mr. Nadeshan Suresh, Representative, a representative from Uva Shakthi Foundation**, since the people in the plantation sector aren't permanent residents, local government officials are not reaching the plantation community.

Mr. Shirley Candappa writing in the *Daily Mirror* of August 4, 2023, under the caption, "*Two hundred years of humiliation and exploitation*" had mentioned about the

subhuman living conditions of the plantation / upcountry Tamil workers who receive less than Rs 1000/= per day.

2. Reflection on the Social reality of the Plantation /upcountry Tamil workers

Practically all the native Sri Lankans profess their beliefs / faith according to the teachings of their Founders. If they, the Founders, were to appear in human form in the present social context of Sri Lanka, what would they say regarding the way, we, their followers / believers, treat the plantation Tamil population? According to my Catholic faith, Jesus, by becoming human, has raised human dignity to a level beyond compare. Therefore whatever action that disfigures or injures the universal, inalienable and inviolable dignity of a human being is sinful / evil. Hence the Catholic Church, through its educational Centres (Schools, Colleges and Institutes of Higher Education), Hospitals and Homes for Elders and for Orphans, is committed to the promotion of human dignity and social esteem. More efforts need to be paid for the upliftment of the Plantation Tamil population. The Upcountry Plantation Tamil workers are human persons who deserve human respect and care.

We, the native Sri Lankans, should not forget that the Plantation Tamil workers are contributing to the GNP (Gross National Product) of Sri Lanka, like our Sri Lankan expatriate workers (mothers and sisters).

3. Social Concern of the Catholic Bishops

At a conference held at the National Social and Economic Development Centre (SEDEC) / Caritas at Borella, in July 2023, the Catholic Bishops spoke against the pitiful conditions of the plantation workers. They pointed out that 200 years have passed since the arrival of the Tamil workers from South India - brought by the British colonisers - to work as cheap labour on plantations. The bishops had pointed out the many problems the plantation Tamil workers still face in education, health care, land and housing.

The Bishops have requested the Government of Sri Lanka to take steps to guarantee the human dignity they deserve and not to keep them in a situation of slavery. They have said that the Government authorities should understand the plight of the plantation workers who have lead their lives with meagre salaries.

Bishop Harold Anthony Perera, the President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL), had said, ***“We demand that the authorities take steps to ensure that the plantation workers live as citizens of Sri Lanka, with the respect they deserve.”***

Already in 2021, Bishop Raymond Wickramasinghe, the Catholic Bishop of Galle, as a religious leader, quoting the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church, had voiced his concern over the prevailing social issues of the plantation community and called upon the decision makers to listen

to the just demands of the plantation workers for the long awaited wage increase and other social needs.

4. Desirability of Hostels for Plantation Tamil workers

Aren't many Tamil young men and Tamil young women from the upcountry plantation sectors flocking to Colombo in search of jobs to improve their living conditions and lead lives worthy of human dignity? Aren't those who are employed in the cities as drivers, house-maids, gardeners and sweepers looking for better human treatment?

Therefore may I kindly suggest to the Director of National SEDEC /Caritas and to the CBCSL to consider the desirability, the viability and the feasibility of hostels for men and women who come to Colombo from the Plantation Tamil community to improve the quality of their lives. ***“Even the Good Samaritan, for example, needed to have a nearby inn that could provide the help that he was personally unable to offer”*** (Fratelli Tutti, 165). May I request to consider also setting up a permanent Desk for the plantation workers at the national SEDEC/ CARITAS. Let our Catholic action have demonstrative effects in Sri Lankan society.

Fr. Emmanuel Fernando OMI

The Letter of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Sri Lanka

On the socio-economic and political situation of Sri Lanka and its impact upon the day-to-day lives of the ordinary masses

“The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Sri Lanka gathered in Plenary Session in August wishes to express its deep concern about the socio-economic and political situation of Sri Lanka and its impact upon the day-to-day lives of the ordinary masses, for, there is the ever increasing and unbearable cost of living affecting them.

Many parents find it difficult to provide their children with their daily food. Many families with difficulty have only one meal a day. Many hospitals are not in a position to care for people’s health needs and there is a severe shortage of medicines. We are seriously concerned about the increasing number of qualified medical personnel who are leaving the country and many people, particularly the poor, who cannot attend to their medical needs, as often, government hospitals are inadequately supplied with medicines and other medical equipment.

Education, too, appears to be in jeopardy. Children attend schools without proper nourishment, clothing and the stationery they require. Parents are not in a position to attend to these basic needs.

There is a serious break-down of law and order. Increasing violence seems to be prevailing in the country. Murders are taking place almost on a daily basis and the number of fatal accidents on the roads due to drunken and reckless driving are on the increase.

Besides, there seems to be no clear vision to resolve the immediate basic needs of the people. There is no control of prices of essential items. Many people are on the brink of starvation. The immediate need should be to promote agriculture and other local production to sustain the people. It is shocking to hear that still many food items are being imported, including rice, eggs, palm oil. etc., which can be produced locally, if incentives are given to local farmers.

In this dire situation, we, the members of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka, earnestly appeal to those in authority to consider the plight of the people seriously before their rhetoric and enacting political dramas, so that the poor and the marginalized could at least sustain their lives with their basic needs.

Sri Lanka is a blessed country and its citizenry talented, and its youth, educated and keen to be participants in its progress. Therefore, we need to create a society where each one's dignity is valued and appreciated, and peace, harmony and the true manifestation of democracy such as the independence of the Judiciary and the participation of people in the political life of the nation is safeguarded through the holding of free and fair elections. We appeal to our political leadership to be the instruments of such a

political and social renewal and the safeguarding of the dignity and rights of all components of our society.

We call upon all our Catholic faithful to pray and work actively for a social transformation of our society in this manner”.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Harold Anthony Perera,
President of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Sri Lanka

Rt. Rev. Dr. J.D. Anthony Jayakody,
Secretary, Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Sri Lanka

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St. Pope John Paul 11 on the Poor

Because of our “love of preference for the poor”, we “cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future. It is impossible not to take account of the existence of these realities. To ignore them would mean becoming like the ‘rich man’ who pretended not to know the beggar Lazarus lying at his gate (Lk 16: 19-31) - St. Pope John Paul 11

“Love for others and in the first place love for the poor, in whom the Church sees Christ himself, is made concrete in the promotion of justice.” *Centesimus Annus* (1991)

SANCTIFICATION OF PRIESTS

(The Homily delivered by **Bishop Jude Nishantha Silva**, the Bishop of Badulla during the Eucharistic concelebration on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of the Sacred Heart Novitiate, Sidupiyani, Bandarawela, on June 16, 2023)

“Jaffna had the happy privilege of nurturing the first Oblate Novitiate in Sri Lanka. On May 19, 1857, Fr. Christopher Bonjean was the first Oblate novice who received the habit and began his novitiate. It was not the custom among the Religious Orders at that time to have a separate house as "novitiate" isolated from the mission. The novice had spent the period of his novitiate in active pastoral ministry during which time the qualities of the novice could be more visible and more observable.

Thus, during the period of his novitiate, Fr. Bonjean was in charge of the vast Vanni Mission, which extended from the coastal areas of Jaffna to Mannar. He even accompanied Bishop Stephen Semeria OMI in preaching Parish missions. It was at Trincomalee, at the conclusion of a "parish mission" that Fr. Bonjean completed the period of the novitiate and made his profession of vows as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate. Later the Novitiate was shifted to a section of St. Martin's Seminary, Jaffna.

With the creation of the Vicariate of Colombo, another Novitiate was opened at Kotahena, Colombo in 1883. The Novitiate was shifted from place to place. In 1892 it was shifted to Borella, then to Maggona in 1902 and then to Mattakkuliya in 1903. In 1905 it was decided to

amalgamate the novitiate at Jaffna and Colombo and have only one novitiate in Colombo. Towards the end of 1908, the novitiate was moved to Slave Island.

On 01st October 1911 a ten- acre property at Bambalapitiya was acquired to establish the Oblate Novitiate and on 03rd December 1911 it was formally opened, dedicated to St. Francis Xavier. The house served as the novitiate till 1949. Fr. I. Coquil OMI was installed as Novice Master on 03rd December 1912. Since the population at Bambalapitiya was growing and becoming noisy, the novitiate was shifted to Mont Eden, Kalutara on July 5, 1949 where it served till 1973 when it was again shifted to Sidupiyani, Ellathota, Bandarawela.

The Catholic Church is celebrating World Day of Prayer for the Sanctification of Priests today on the feast day of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. Established by Saint John Paul II in 2002, this celebration occurs annually on the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. On this day, the Church encourages priests to prayerfully reflect upon the gift of their vocation. The faithful are also invited to mark this celebration by praying for all priests that they may live lives of holiness and fidelity to Christ and his Church.

The Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is an opportunity to reflect together on the gift of our priestly ministry, sharing our pastoral concern for all believers and for all humanity and in particular, for the portion of the People of God entrusted to us in our respective places.

In today's Gospel (Mt 11: 25-30), we see God intervening in our lives. He did not leave us to ourselves. Those who are humbly seeking help from God will find it through Jesus. Jesus will come alongside us and help us with our burden.

Let us see what Jesus is saying to us in today's gospel passage. We are going to discover three aspects of God the Father and of Jesus the Son. In seeing these three aspects, we are also going to learn something of our salvation in Jesus Christ.

Let us see first **the pleasure of the Father** (v 25 -26). In Matthew's record of these events, Jesus moves immediately from the condemnation of the towns which did not believe to a moment of prayer, spent speaking to the father. Look at verses 25 and 26. Jesus said, **"I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, because this was your good pleasure."** Jesus is praising the Father. He is praising Him for something specific. Jesus is praising the Father for hiding the deep truths of the faith from the wise and intelligent of the world. Jesus is praising the Father for revealing the deep truths of the faith to infants.

First of all, this is not to say that if you are a follower of Jesus you are not wise and intelligent. Actually, it is quite the opposite. To be a follower of Jesus is to be truly wise and intelligent. There is a self-proclaimed worldly wisdom and intelligence which can lead to arrogance,

self-dependence and false confidence. This type of wisdom and intelligence can lead people to think that they don't need God. It can lead them to believe that the things of Jesus are foolish and it can lead them straight to hell. For those who may not know what I am saying, this basically means that they are people who think they are smart, but they are not really smart in God's eyes.

Jesus then speaks of *infants*, or *little children*. When Jesus speaks of infants. He speaks of those who are helpless on their own and are dependent on someone else. Jesus speaks here of **little** children, those who are utterly dependent upon someone else.

In contrast to the "wise and intelligent" of the world, who think they have it all figured out and don't need God, Jesus says that the Father has revealed the truths of the Kingdom of God to those who are like little children, who are like infants, who know that they need someone to help them.

Are we like the wise and the intelligent, or are we like the lowly infants? Do you think you have things figured out? Do you think that you are good? Or, do you know that you need Jesus and His grace? Do you know that you are only good through the blessings of Jesus?

Finally in verse 26, Jesus says to God, "***This was your good pleasure to do it this way.***" Listen, my dear friends the pleasure of the Father is that you would come to Him and say, "I need you!" When you do so, He will reveal the

Kingdom of God to you. That is the good pleasure of the Father.

Second, we see the **knowledge of the Father and of the Son** (v 27). Do you want to know God? Look at verse 27. Listen to the words of Jesus: “All things have been entrusted to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son desires to reveal him.” Jesus is saying, “I hold the power and authority of the Kingdom of God.” This verse is very much like John 14:6 where Jesus says, **“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”** He further says no one truly knows me except the Father. You see the Father and the Son have a unique relationship and know each other in a way that we could never know either of them. They are bound together in their deity (their Godness) and in their nature.

Jesus goes on to say, no one truly knows the Father except the Son. However, He doesn't stop there. This is the beautiful part of the Gospel: that we might know God. Jesus says, ***“No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son desires to reveal him.”*** When Jesus reveals Himself and the Father to us, it changes our lives. We no longer have to carry the burden of sin and this world on our own.

This brings us to our final point...

Third, **The yoke of the Son (v 28-30)**. First of all, what is a yoke? The kind of yoke that Jesus was referring to was

a wooden device used to link two oxen together to help them pull a load or a burden. Here's what that device looked like. You see, by using a yoke and linking the oxen together, the two were much stronger than the one. Pulling a heavy load was much easier with help. Listen to what Jesus says in verses 28 -30. *"Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."* *"Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."* *"For my yoke is easy and my burden light"* First of all, Jesus is asking us to come to him and He will give us rest.

How many of you need rest from the troubles of the world and the curse of sin in your life? I know I do! I need the gift of rest from Jesus since He has said, "Come to me..... and I will give your rest."

Jesus says in one of the passages that there is **condemnation** for those who do not repent, but He says in this passage that there is rest for those who come to Him. There is hope for all of us who are weary and overburdened. Jesus then says, **"Take up my yoke and learn from me."** Jesus is essentially saying, "Join yourself to me. Let me carry some of the burden of life for you. Let me teach you the ways of God." Jesus says He will help us, He will give us rest, and He will help us with the burden of living this life.

Remember, Jesus said only He can show us the Father. Well, Jesus says in verse 29, **"Learn from me."** He wants to teach us about Himself and the Father. We must come to Him and learn from Him. Jesus says He is lowly and

humble. Even though He could, He did not come proclaiming Himself to be wise and special. He came humbly and lowly. He came as a servant. He came offering blessing to others rather than asking to be served and to have others bless Him. Come to Jesus because He is lowly and humble. He wants to give to you; He wants to bless you. In Jesus, we will find rest for our souls.

We need rest from the curse of sin. We need rest from trying to be moral enough to be accepted by God. We need rest from falsehoods of this world. We need rest from trying to impress other people. We need rest from the bitterness in our hearts. We need rest from the abuse from which we have suffered. We need rest from hurt we have suffered from others. We need rest from the hurt we have dealt to others. We need rest from broken homes, broken churches, broken hearts, broken governments, broken relationships, broken minds and broken lives. We need rest for our souls.

Why will we find rest for our souls? Because Jesus' yoke is easy and His burden is light. It is not to say that a life as a Christian is simple or easy, but it is to say that when you have Jesus, everything else doesn't seem as heavy or burdensome in your life.

The blessings of being yoked to Jesus create a new reality in us which changes everything about us. We finally see true wisdom; we finally understand God the Father; We finally receive the rest we so desperately need and we finally realize that the troubles of this world are light and easy compared to the glories of Jesus.

The Sacred Heart of Jesus is therefore a powerful reminder of the love of Christ poured out for us. It is at once a representation of His divine love and His human love. In the Sacred Heart we see the love of God which created the heavens and the earth; a love which created humankind and then redeemed us from our fallen nature. But the Sacred Heart is also one of fully human love; one which expressed itself in the love of Jesus for His Mother; the love of Jesus for His disciples and the love which He showed for all He preached to and cared for. It was a love that was able to forgive those who nailed Him to a cross.

We often reject this love of God and have done so throughout our human history. But the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus does not cease upon rejection; it loves all the more. When the soldier pierced Christ's side, His heart did not close itself but instead opened and outflowed the blood and water of our redemption. It is the great mystery of this total and reckless love of Christ for us and the invitation to share in it and love in return, which marks devotion to the Sacred Heart.

My dear friends, since God has loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and His love is perfected in us."

.....

THE EVANGELIZED BECOMES THE EVANGELIZER

(The Homily delivered by **Fr. Emile Moraes OMI** at the Eucharistic celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Ordination to the Priesthood of Fr. Angelo Martyn OMI, on May 20, 2023, at St. Mary's Church, Bambalapitiya)

It is my great privilege and great honor to deliver this homily at the auspicious event of a great Oblate missionary. Today's liturgical readings highlight the command given by Jesus to his disciples before He ascended to heaven, and which is commonly termed as the preaching of the Good News to all men and women, and in the language of the Church termed as the ministry of Evangelization. The word "evangelization" is a catch word and has become a household word in the Church. Much had been spoken and written. Personally, of all the academic explanations given regarding evangelisation, the only definition that satisfied me is the saying of the great, Pope St. John XXIII who said jokingly in humorous terms: "Evangelization is, one beggar telling another beggar, where he can find food." Late Fr. Michael Rodrigo OMI, one-time Professor of Liturgy in the National Seminary, developing this anecdote said "Circle of evangelization is complete only when the beggar, in turn shares his / her food with other beggars and that the cycle of evangelization continues only when the evangelized becomes an evangelizer". We, Christians, cannot keep buried the valuable treasure that we have discovered in Jesus. We cannot sweep under the carpet the pearl of the great price, Jesus. We must share the joy of

the presence of the bridegroom with others in the world around. He said that mission of evangelization need not be carried out only by preaching and teaching, but by sharing with others the wealth of knowledge and spiritual experiences of life which we have received from others..

Jesus was the First Evangelizer. He evangelized the disciples and sent them out to evangelize the people. The disciples went everywhere and began the mission of evangelizing.

In this respect, we, Sri Lankans, are very much privileged people. Thousands of missionaries have come into the country to evangelize the people. The Oblate Missionaries who came to Sri Lanka had also sown the seeds of evangelization in our country. The many schools, such as St. Joseph's College, St. Peter's College in Colombo and St. Patrick's College, St. Henry's College in Jaffna are living memories of the missionary actions of those pioneer Oblates. These schools have also become good means of evangelization. The Sri Lankan Oblate missionaries in turn have also gone abroad to evangelize the people. One of the shining examples is our Jubilarian, Fr. Angelo Martyn OMI, who had gone to a foreign country- Bangladesh - at a time when that country was reduced to ruins, after the long waged liberation war with Pakistan and a country plagued by deadly deceases, natural calamities and internal political conflicts.

In my life-journey I had come across many missionaries. But, rarely did I meet a very dedicated missionary. Such a dedicated missionary I had met is none other than Fr.

Angelo Martyn OMI about whom I have a chance to speak a few words today.

Fr. Angelo had become an evangelizer during his 40 years of stay in Bangladesh. He, not only told the people where they could find the treasure, but he even shared with them that great treasure, the pearl of great price. I can bear testimony to it, since I had lived with him in Bangladesh for 40 years. Whatever he had received, whatever he had gained, he had shared with others. Thus he proved that an Evangelized person can become an evangelizer, in many ways, besides preaching. He was able to share his wealth of knowledge and wisdom with others; he was able to share his spiritual experience with those who did not have such an experience.

Fr. Angelo had received much from his family. His loving mother had been a source of spiritual inspiration to him. Being a pious and devoted lady, she had imparted to him the values of spiritual life. The gentlemanly qualities and polished good manners, discipline and musical talents which his father possessed had been a powerful influence in his life. His loving and caring brothers and sisters were strong support for him in his life. All these noble qualities Fr. Angelo had inherited from his family, were shared by Fr. Angelo with the younger seminarians in Bangladesh.

The first and the greatest contribution Fr. Angelo had made to the Oblate Delegation in Bangladesh is the unforgettable fact of his being the initiator of the Oblate Formation programmes and the foundation of the Oblate Scholasticate as a permanent institution. For this purpose,

he had worked hard to find a plot of land on which he could build a permanent Scholasticate. He went from door to door begging for a piece of land in the outskirts of the Dhaka City. Finally, he found a very good Muslim family who sold to him a plot of land at a moderate price, which today had turned out to be a gold mine, a property in the heart of the diplomatic enclave, having the American Embassy and the British High Commission as the neighbours.

Along with the Oblate Scholasticate Fr. Angelo started caring for the migrant Catholics who lived in the neighborhood. Beginning with Sunday Masses offered under a mango tree, and then in the verandah of the Oblate residence, he ended up by putting up a small tin-shed. Today it had turned into a magnificent church- building catering to the diplomats and expatriates, especially the Sri Lankans.

Becoming aware of the need for an Oblate Minor Seminary where the young seminarians could receive a good formation and training, Fr. Angelo went on another land hunting mission, begging from a good Religious Congregation, known as the RNDM Sisters. He literally went on his knees to get a plot of land which the Sisters were holding on as an excess property. The Sisters sold at a very reasonable price, a piece of land which in turn had become a treasure situated in the vicinity of the Parliament of Bangladesh.

His many years of Philosophical and Theological studies at the Gregorian University in Rome had also become a

stepping stone for his later contribution at the Philosophate in Sri Lanka and later in the National Seminary of Bangladesh. His spiritual and academic qualities became good means to do spiritual counselling and conduct Retreats to many communities of Women Religious in Bangladesh. The Women Religious literally “adored” him as a spiritual shepherd.

During the long periods of holidays from academic programmes in the Major Seminary and the Oblate Scholasticate, Fr. Angelo would spend time in the mission - stations at Sylhet and Chittagong where the Oblates had set foot and established themselves to evangelize the indigenous people and the tea estate workers. Though the languages and dialects of those people were strange to him, Fr. Angelo was fully alive and active with his voice and with his guitar and also with his self-taught magic displays. He used his musical talents and magical skills to evangelize the indigenous people.

Fr. Angelo had also extended his ministry of evangelization into the international field. Because of his fluency in Italian and French languages, the Oblate Congregation entrusted him with the task of animating the Oblate Renewal programme in De Mazenod Center at Aix in Provence, France. For many years Fr. Angelo had served also as a secretary to the Apostolic Nuncio in Bangladesh.

For a few years, Fr. Angelo was pastor in a parish in Chittagong (a port city) where he became a friend of the Sri Lankan expatriates who had come in big numbers to

Chittagong as students of medical college, as businessmen in the garment factories and as sailors. He took care of the sailors as their chaplain. I also remember the Christmas celebration he organized in Chittagong with carol singing by a choir composed of Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. Employing such opportunities and using innovative means, Fr. Angelo did evangelize.

In the final stage of his missionary life and ministry in Bangladesh was the creation of a new Diocese of Sylhet, which became the joyful and crowing moment of his ministry. As Superior of Oblate Delegation of Bangladesh, Fr. Angelo fought tooth and nail with Church Authorities, demanding recognition for an identity of the indigenous people and of the people in the tea estates. Later, during my administration as the Delegation Superior, Fr. Angelo worked tirelessly with me to make a separated Ecclesiastical unit in the district of Sylhet. In the year 2011 history was made when Sylhet was declared a Diocese in Bangladesh. To his credit, his student, Fr. Bejoy De Cruze OMI became the first Bishop of the new Diocese of Sylhet and later the Archbishop of Dhaka.

Fr. Angelo left Bangladesh with great joy and satisfaction that a new Diocese had been created and that 35 of his students have become local Oblate Priests ministering in Bangladesh. What better treasure could he leave behind as a living memory of his missionary presence in Bangladesh for 40 years.

If this glorious celebration has to benefit Fr. Angelo and all of us participating, we must pay attention to the

message which Fr. Angelo's life gives us. Therefore, it is my earnest request that we accept the challenge to become evangelizers, pointing to Jesus who alone can give us the life-giving bread. We must also in turn become evangelizers to be able to share with others what we have received from others, thus proving that the evangelized in turn can become an evangelizer.

Last, but not the least, I want to conclude with a sentimental tribute to Fr. Angelo. "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breast that fed you". You have lived true to the name your mother gave you. Fr. Angelo you are an Angel. You had been an Angel to the Oblates during your stay in Bangladesh for 40 years. Now, your mother and the Angels are waiting to enlist you in their holy company when the time comes. May God bless you abundantly.

OUR SPIRITUALITY

Pope Francis continues: "It is my hope that our seminaries and our Houses of formation will provide an education in responsible simplicity of life in grateful contemplation of God's world and in concern for their needs of the poor and the protection of the environment" (LSi 214).

Let us say 'no' to Compulsive consumerism (LSi 203), to unbridled consumerism (EG 60) and to inordinate consumption (EG 60).

**A RENEWAL AND RECONCILIATION PROGRAM
FOR THE OBLATE DELEGATION OF BANGLADESH**

January 15 – February 8, 2023

Fr. Chrishantha Jayalath, OMI

In view of the Golden Jubilee of the Oblate Presence and Mission in Bangladesh in July 2023, at the invitation of Very Rev. Fr. Ajit Costa OMI, the Superior of the Oblate Delegation of Bangladesh, his Council and Jubilee Steering Committee and recommended by the Very Rev. Fr. Roshan Silva OMI, the Provincial Superior of the Province of Colombo, to conduct a preparatory programme, I arrived in Dhaka on January 16, 2023.

According to the schedule, before conducting the two day program of Renewal and Reconciliation for the Oblates, I visited and met all the Oblates in their communities in their mission stations. I began visiting Lokhipur first by public transport.

I was very much inspired by the apostolates carried out by the Oblates in their mission posts, in the parishes with indigenous communities, in the Oblate Houses of Formation, in the Major Seminary, the commitment to the mission of justice, the exposure programmes of the Oblate Juniorists in the Oblate mission-stations and the Oblate ministry in the schools. I was also impressed by the collaborative apostolic spirit of the Religious Sisters with the Oblates. Another visible sign of the continuing dynamic Oblate missionary spirit in Bangladesh has been the episcopal ordination of Fr. Bejoy D'Cruze OMI who is now the Archbishop of Dacca. I was happy to meet

Fr. Monohor Anthony Corraya, the retired senior Oblate resting at Oblate Delegation House. I appreciate very much the dedication and commitment of the Oblates continuing also the apostolates begun by pioneer Oblates among the indigenous communities.

During my visits, I was able to listen to all the Oblates ministering very zealously and then share also my reflections with them, sometimes offering them some strategies. I was also able to share some matters of importance in my two-day presentation on the theme **Renewal and Reconciliation**. I spoke emphasizing on mental healing, guiding them to be conscious of their own beliefs, philosophies, principles, attitudes and experiences and renew themselves with apt changes while developing flexibility. Secondly, I spoke on the importance of cultivating deep union with God through personal prayer and meditation. Personal mental healing plus union with God will empower mutual relationships and reconciliation within the Oblate communities and facilitate new apostolic initiatives in the future in a spirit of solidarity.

I very much appreciate the dedication and commitment maintained by the members within the Oblate Delegation of Bangladesh and the missionary contribution of the Sri Lankan Oblates Philip Dissanayake, Emil Moraes, Angelo Martyn and Rex Kulas for the development of the Oblate Delegation in Bangladesh. As a Delegation, the Oblates can think of the areas which might demand special attention especially concerning future vocations and financial investments.

While appreciating the contribution rendered by the Mother Province of Sri Lanka and by the Oblates from other Oblate Provinces in the past, several Oblates are expecting the presence of the some Oblates from the “Mother Province of Sri Lanka”.

I express my sincere gratitude to very Rev. Fr. Ajit Costa OMI, the delegation Superior, his Councillors, Fr. Pius, and all the Oblates of the Oblate Delegation of Bangladesh for the warm welcome and reception during my stay there. I would like to thank also Very Rev. Fr. Roshan Silva OMI, the Provincial Superior and his Councillors for the opportunity given and Fr. Anton Grecian OMI, the Provincial Treasurer and Fr. Assisi Fernando OMI, the Provincial’s Secretary for the assistance given to me for my mission.

Pope Francis condemned burning of Quran

Pope Francis condemned the burning of the Muslim holy book in Sweden when Muslims were celebrating Eid al-Adha, in July 2023 saying, **“I feel disturbed, sad and disgusted at these actions.”** He had said no holy book should be desecrated and rejected the idea that offensive protests should be allowed in the name of free speech.

**POPE FRANCIS
ON PASTORAL TRAINING**

“Ordained ministers often lack the training needed to deal with the complex problems currently facing families.”(*Amoris Laetitia*, no 202)

“Seminarians should receive a more extensive interdisciplinary, and not merely doctrinal formation in the areas of engagement and marriage.....It is important for families to be part of the seminary process and priestly life.....” “It is helpful for seminarians to combine time in the seminary with time spent in parishes.....The presence of lay people, families and especially the presence of women in priestly formation, promotes an appreciation of the diversity and complementarity of the different vocations in the Church.” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no 203)

“Professionals, especially those with practical experience, help keep pastoral initiatives grounded in the real situations and concrete concerns of families”. All this in no way diminishes, rather complements, the fundamental value of spiritual direction, the rich spiritual treasures of the Church, and the sacrament of Reconciliation.”(*Amoris Laetitia*, no 204).



FR. LEON BABAPULLE OMI

Panegyric delivered
by **Fr. Irwin Morais OMI**
during the Funeral Mass at St.
Mary's Church, Grand Street,
Negombo, on March 7, 2023

Dear Bishops, Rev. Fathers,
Rev. Brothers, Rev. Sisters
and dear friends,

We are gathered in this church to participate in the Eucharistic celebration and to thank God for the gift of life granted to late Fr. Leon Babapulle OMI and to ask God to forgive the sins he had committed through human frailty. We thank God for giving Fr. Leon sixty years of human existence and for the many blessings God had given to many people through his dedicated services.

Fr. Leon Babapulle was born on March 9, 1957 at Wattala in a pious Catholic family. He had his early education at St. Anthony's College, Wattala. In 1972, with the intention of becoming an Oblate priest, he joined the Oblate Juniorate at Kohuwela, Nugegoda.

It was at the Oblate Juniorate, I met Leon for the first time. Since that first meeting, we became very close friends till the end of his life. We went through the Oblate formation together at the Oblate Juniorate and at the Oblate Scholasticate at Ampitiya, Kandy. Even after our ordination though we served in different mission stations, we used to

meet and talked about many things. We also conversed over the phone. We enjoyed laughter together; we teased each other and together we enjoyed our trips together. From the above-mentioned close association with Fr. Leon what I felt very clearly was his very simple and unsophisticated lifestyle. He was one who accepted sickness and other human pains very lightly and taught others not to worry too much about human problems.

Once when the transfers of priests were taking place, the Archbishop had a difficulty in assigning an apostolate to Fr. Leon. Since I was acting as the Oblate Provincial Superior at that time, the Archbishop telephoned me and told me that it was time to transfer Fr. Leon Babapulle from the parish where he was serving the people as an assistant parish priest and appoint him as a parish priest but Fr. Leon Babapulle did not want to serve the people as a parish priest. Secondly the Archbishop told me that he could not appoint him as an assistant parish priest since majority of the parish priests were younger to him by age and that they were ordained many years after Fr. Leon's ordination. As a result, they were not happy to have him as their assistant parish priest. Then I told the Archbishop, "Your Eminence, without appointing him as a parish priest you may appoint him for any other apostolate because I am sure he will accept such a decision of yours." So the Archbishop decided to appoint Fr. Leon Babapulle as a resident priest at the parish of Grand Street, Negombo. When I informed Fr. Leon that the Archbishop had decided to appoint him as a resident priest, he was very happy.

Fr. Leon Babapulle who came to the parish of Grand Street, Negombo, began to serve the people of God very zealously

and generously. He became very popular among the people of Negombo. His services were not limited to the parish of Grand Street; he began to help the neighbouring parishes as well. I am sure Fr. Nishantha Rodrigo, the parish priest of Grand Street will agree with what I have said regarding Fr. Leon and his apostolic services to the people in Negombo.

Fr. Leon lived his priestly commitment faithfully. With much dedication he fulfilled all the obligations of priestly vocation. His sermons were either two or three minutes long. Though his sermons were short, he had taken much pain to prepare them from Monday of the week. He had read the relevant Scripture passages, and some commentaries, reflected on them and written the sermons. By Saturday evening, he was ready to deliver the sermon. People liked his sermons because they contained very valuable messages for their lives.

Fr. Leon Babapulle took a keen interest to give Holy Communion to the sick. He visited the sick, prayed over them and anoint them. Whenever he came to know of sick persons in the hospital who needed his presence and pastoral care, he readily visited them and thereby he had brought much consolation to the sick. Fr. Leon was also very much committed to minister the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession). Often he was seen seated in the verandah of the Mission house at Grand Street, Negombo. He used to tell me that he went to other parishes and to schools to hear the confessions of Catholics. Every Friday morning he was at St. Peter's Church, Negombo hearing confessions of the faithful who participated in the Eucharistic celebration. He had made himself available to the people of God to be reconciled with God.

Fr. Leon was an Oblate who was satisfied with a simple life-style. He did not go after higher social and ecclesiastical positions. He wanted only to be close to the people in order to serve them.

He was a person of joy and made others also joyful with his sense of humour and jokes. Often he had nick names for people. Through such a behavior, he showed his concern and closeness to people.

Fr. Leon Babapulle OMI had fulfilled his priestly mission as a faithful servant of God and of people. We wish him a joyful journey back to God. May he rest in peace. Amen.

**A TRIBUTE TO A HERALD OF SOCIAL JUSTICE
WHO ENRICHED THE PROUD SRI LANKAN
OBLATE LEGACY**



**By Fr. Assisi Devasiri, OMI
Secretary to the Provincial,
Oblate Province of Colombo.**

*Inspired by the discoveries of the
Oblate Archives and the article,
“A Journey beyond the Rapids of
Kalu Ganga” by Prof. Shirley Lal
Wijesinghe in LOGOS 43, and
Dynamics of Mission: Essays in
honour of Oswald N. Firth OMI
edited by Prof. Shirley Lal*

Wijesinghe and Rev Fr. Rohan Sailva OMI

A great social justice advocate for whom the Sri Lankan Oblate family is eternally grateful and proud, **Reverend Father Oswald Bernard Firth OMI**, a former Assistant General, was summoned to everlasting rest on 19 June 2023. Oswald Bernard Firth was born on 13 September 1942 in Nugegoda, Sri Lanka. He is the eldest of seven children, three boys and four girls. His father Claude Reginald Firth and mother Hyacinth Mabel Wille were devout Roman Catholics who fostered the vocation of young Oswald to religious life and priesthood.

He studied at St. Sebastian's College, Moratuwa and joined the Oblate Juniorate in Kohuwala in 1958 at the age of 16, aspiring to be a priest in the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. After his preparation at the Juniorate, he was sent to the Oblate Novitiate in Kalutara, where he made his first profession on 31 May 1961 and made his perpetual oblation on 31 May 1964. Having completed his philosophical studies at the National Seminary (1961-64), he was sent to the International Oblate Scholasticate in Rome for higher studies. There he pursued theological studies at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome (Angelicum) obtaining a Licentiate in Theology in 1967. He was ordained a priest in Rome by Archbishop Joseph Patrick Fitzgerald, OMI on 20 December 1967.

On his return to Sri Lanka, Fr. Firth was assigned to the Oblate Scholasticate, Ampitiya, and taught philosophy at the National Seminary of Our Lady of Lanka, Ampitiya (1967-68). He was then assigned as the assistant parish priest of Wennappuwa. After his tenure as an assistant parish priest (1968-71), he was sent for doctoral studies in Philosophy to the State University of Strasbourg, France (1971-74) where he wrote his PhD thesis entitled *Raison et révélation: Controverse de pensée dans la période de la lumière*. On his return after his doctoral studies, Fr. Firth was assigned as the Director of the newly founded Oblate College of Philosophy, Colombo in 1974. The

purpose of this institution was not to set up a house of formation parallel to the National Seminary in Kandy, but to evolve a formation in accordance with the hope and aspirations of Vatican II. Students would not only learn the different approaches to Philosophy but also study philosophy in dialogue with the realities of the world. In 1980-81, he studied at the University of London, and on his return he was assigned to the Oblate Scholasticate in Ampitiya as a formator, and at the same time as a lecturer in philosophy at the National Seminary of Our Lady of Lanka. After a brief spell at the Oblate Scholasticate, Ampitiya (1982- 83), he was assigned as the assistant parish priest of the Ampitiya Parish (1983-85), and continued to teach philosophy at the National Seminary.

While at Ampitiya Parish, Fr. Firth was invited by Rt. Rev. Dr. Vianney Fernando, then Bishop of Kandy to be the director of The Social Economic and Technical Institute of Kandy (SETIK). Under Fr. Firth's directorship, SETIK initiated development projects for the remote villages situated at the periphery of the diocese. The best example of this would be the villages around Hasalaka. In 1990 Fr. Firth left SETIK to be the Director of the Social and Economic Development Centre in Colombo. During his tenure of office as director of SEDEC, the social arm of the Sri Lanka Bishops' Conference, he took the bold step of officially establishing independent social and economic centres in

each diocese. This localisation of social entities paved the way for each diocese to appoint well trained and experienced social activists who were aware of the ground realities of their respective dioceses. After his tenure at SEDEC, Fr. Firth followed a Diploma Course in Rural Development and Project Planning, at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague in 1996. On his return from the Netherlands, he was invited to be the director of the Centre for Society and Religion. Among the far-reaching achievements accomplished by Fr. Firth at CSR were the organic paddy farming project at Dehiattakandiya, peace initiatives involving Sinhalese and Tamils and the seven country peace research on “Response of Grassroots Christians in Situations of Violent Conflict” conducted by the Centre for Mission Research and Study at Maryknoll, New York.

In 2002 he was elected to be the Provincial Superior of the Oblate Province of Colombo (2002-2004). Apart from the usual provincial routines, Fr. Firth supported Fr. Clement Waidyasekera OMI, then Superior of the Oblate Scholasticate in Ampitiya to found the Asian Institute of Theology (AIT) to provide a contextual formation to the Oblate scholastics in order to better equip them for the future mission. The experiences recorded by the scholastics show that the programme is spiritually nourishing, pastorally enriching and academically sound.

At the General Chapter of the Oblates in 2004, Fr. Firth was elected Assistant General for Missions (2004-2010). His tasks included animating the missions, taking mission to the people and most of all creating a spirit of solidarity among those working in difficult mission territories. After six years of intense laborious work at the General Administration, Fr. Firth has been involved in the Oblate Province of Australia (2011-2020). He worked as co-pastor in the parishes of Mulgrave and Sunshine (in Victoria), and in the parish of Dernancourt (in Adelaide, South Australia). He was superior of the Oblate Scholasticate (Melbourne), and lectured in philosophy for one year at the Catholic Theological College functioning under the University of Melbourne. All the parishes he served in were multi-cultural with migrant families from Vietnam, Ireland, India, Poland and Sri Lanka.

He is also the Founder-Director of The Oblate Institute of Higher Learning (OIHL) which is an attempt to respond to a crucial need to promote justice, peace and reconciliation in a country wounded by a long civil war. Oblate Institute of Higher Learning (OIHL) was established on 21st May 2016 during the Bi-centenary Jubilee Celebration of the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the Academic Year 2016-17 was inaugurated on the 1st of October 2016.

Fr. Oswald Firth, OMI is gratefully remembered by the hearing impaired children, their parents and teachers at

CEHIC (Centre for education of Hearing Impaired Children, Dalugama, Kelaniya) for having turned Sister Greta's vision into a project which he presented to MISEREOR, the German Bishops' Charity department and arranged for the erection of the present building complex with many facilities for education of hearing impaired children. All at CEHIC led by Sr. Greta Nalawatta, PHS wish Fr. Firth eternal rest in the Lord and thank the Oblate Fathers for the gift of this extraordinary Man of God.

He began enjoying his retirement in 2020 at De Mazenod House in Mattakkuliya before moving on to Marian Grove in Kohuwala, where he breathed his last. Fr. Firth's significant contributions to the Church and the world as an Oblate, Priest, Formator, Academic, Administrator, and Peacebuilder will be remembered forever. His dedication has given many people a future, particularly victims and the poor. We bid you farewell, Dear Rev. Father Firth. May you rest in peace.

CATHOLIC NEGOMBO

By S.G.Perera, SJ

(Continued from the *“The Missionary Oblate, no 63,
pages 75 -84)*

“But the Government was unable to check the progress of the Catholic faith in Negombo. The Catholics were better instructed and better organised, the priests were more numerous and more active. One remarkable fact about the Dutch persecutions is that it had not the sympathy even of the Dutch people. It was a Government policy fanned to flame by the Dutch clergymen who found that they could not put down “popery” save by stringent legislation; an eloquent confession of their own incapacity or that of their religion! The Dutch residents of Ceylon seldom stirred a finger to help the persecution. On the contrary many Dutchmen had embraced the Catholic Faith and others sympathised with the Catholics. It is therefore no wonder that the Catholics became gradually bolder.

In 1750 matters came to a head in Negombo.³⁸ “The Roman Catholics in the Negombo District addressed a memorial in Tamil to Governor, which was referred to the Consistory for consideration. It contained the following complaints: That as the petitioners adhered to the Roman Catholic faith which had been taught two hundred years ago to their forefathers, they did not wish their children to learn in the Government schools tenets which were contrary to their belief, and which it grieved them to hear rehearsed by their children on their return from school. That to escape the Government penalty or fine they had their children baptised in the Reformed Church and let them attend school, but that they were nevertheless in the practice of

secretly baptising the same children into the Romish Church. That although they had been taught in the schools to deny it, yet that they still believed and practised what Romanists teach on the following tenets, viz:-The Seven Sacraments, transubstantiation, good works, the Virgin Mary, the crucifix and images. That this contradiction in their secret belief and outward confession made them doubt the salvation of their souls, and, therefore, they prayed that they might be allowed the free exercise of their religion, declaring that, notwithstanding the Protestant instruction, they would not forsake their religion.

The recommendations of the clergy on this memorial were as follows:- (1). That the Government regulations should be strictly enforced and the fines on non- attendance at school renewed. (2) That Ramish baptisms and marriages should not be acknowledged nor sanctioned. (3) That none but Protestant headmen should be employed by Government in the districts.

The Politic Council on the receipt of these recommendations came to the following decision: (1) that it was not the province of the Consistory to trouble themselves about penalties or matters which belong to the civil administration. (2)| That the subject of Roman Catholic baptisms and marriages was under the serious consideration of the Batavian Government. (3) That Government would regret being obliged to admit no headmen into their employ but such as profess Protestantism, as the scarcity of this class would subject them to much inconvenience. They concluded with advising the clergy, as the best means of promoting the good cause, to acquire a thorough and familiar knowledge of the native languages, and thus to instruct the people more effectually, and reclaim them from Popery. The clergy agreed in 1753 for this purpose to hold weekly meetings and catechisings at private dwellings, in the

Malabar language. The Roman Catholics erected places of worship at Kalutara, and began public exhibitions and processions. Their principal leader herein was apprehended, brought to Colombo, and banished by Government to Tuticorin. At Negombo the Romanists persecuted the Protestants, reviled them, spoke disrespectfully of their clergy, and nearly killed a Protestant.

Seven years afterwards³⁹ a disturbance was raised in the Alutkuru Korale in the Negombo District by Roman Catholics, which had to be put down by a military detachment. The Scholarchal Commision had reported to the Government that this province was a stronghold of Popery. Government ordered certain persons who had erected Roman Catholic chapels, under penalty of hard labour in chains, to break them down. Upon which two were destroyed, but when they proceeded to a third they were violently opposed by a crowd of women. Upon which the Dissawa of Negombo send off some Mohandiramms and Lascoreens to enforce the orders, but these were attacked on their way near Toppu by about 1000 men, principally fishermen, who rushed out of the jungle, wounded several, and obstructed their return, as also any communication of the intelligence to Negombo. This circumstance obliged the Governor to send thither a detachment of forty eight Europeans and ninety six native soldiers with their officers, and a number of armed Lascoreens with their chiefs, instructing the Lieutenant, Dissawa, and the chief of the Mahabadde to bring the insurgents to their duty.

Their orders were to proceed with circumspection, lest the natives should fall upon them from their hiding places along the road, and not adopt severe measures until milder efforts proved ineffectual. On their arrival their first measure was to seize fifty three dhonies of the fishermen lying on the beach,

which contained provisions and confirmed the suspicion that was the intention of the insurgents, in case they should be pressed hard, to take refuge in their boats. With the help of the Korala of the Alutkuru Korale they apprehended several of the ring-leaders, who were sent upto Colombo. On their arrival at Toppu and Pallansena they found all the native dwellings deserted, and the people collected in an island on the confines of the Company's territories. Several messages went backwards and forwards between the insurgents and the military detachment of the Dutch, but the natives would not return peaceably; as, however, they made no opposition, the expedition returned to destroying all the Roman Catholic places of worship. The Government schoolmaster of Pallansena was discovered to have been an abettor in the late affray, for in his house were found the very weapons, spotted with blood, employed in the attack on the Muhandirams and Lascoreens sent from Negombo.

In answer to this agitation the Dutch Press issued in 1754 a pamphlet entitled "The Triumph of Truth". This pamphlet was answered in Tamil by Father Gabriel Pacheco in his *Satya virotha-sankam*.⁴⁰ The Oratorians had begun to create a Sinhalese Catholic literature of manuscript writings. Already in 1707 Father Jacome Goncalves had come to Caymel and engaging 12 Sinhalese clerks he was busy revising and copying his Catholic compositions.⁴¹ The Catholics had no press but manuscript copies of Father Gonsalves' writings were circulated all over the country. In the last days of his life Father Gonsalves settled down at Bolawatta and so great was the reputation he had won by his writings that his funeral services were protracted for three days owing to the immense crowds that thronged to venerate the remains of that holy and scholarly priest.⁴² He was buried in the church of Bolawatta on 19 July 1742. Father Antonio de Andrade who preached on the

occasion affirmed that Father Gonsalves' writings had converted over ten thousand persons from paganism and heresy during the lifetime of the author.

Under the circumstances the legislative measures of the Dutch Government became more and more inefficacious and the Directors of the Dutch East India Company felt constrained to urge strenuous action. "With regard to the subject of religion "they wrote ⁴³ in 1763 "we have learnt with regret of the increase of the number of Roman Catholics, and it has given us pleasure to find that Governor Van Ech has taken measures, so far as the present state of affairs permitted, to effectually prevent this; and we recommend the civil authorities and all others to whom the supervision of this exalted service is entrusted to oppose to the best of their ability the further encroachments of the Roman Sect."

But the attempt proved unavailing, and the Dutch Governors were finally compelled to let the Oratorians work unmolested in Dutch territory. However they demanded a declaration of loyalty from the |Priests; and such declarations of loyalty freely made by the Oratorian Fathers in |Portuguese and Tamil can still be seen in the Dutch Archives of Colombo.

The Government did not however remove all restrictions, for soon it became necessary to take measures against |Protestants going over to the Catholic religion. In July 1771 a resolution forbade proclamation of "Banns of Marriage without our special consent in cases where the one party is of, or is known to have professed the Protestant Faith a year and six months before giving in his name and the other is of the Roman Catholic persuasion."⁴⁴

But finally tables were completely turned, after the end of the Dutch domination, for in 1798 the Consistory of Colombo

earnestly besought the Governor to take effectual measures to secure the congregations from the influence of the Roman Catholics and proponents were appointed and paid by the newly established British Government to officiate in Calpenty, Chilaw and Negombo. For in the meantime an era of liberty had dawned in Negombo., In February 1796 a British force consisting of three British Regiments and five native corps under Colonel Stewart landed in Negombo. “Our flotilla being drawn up in order a landing was effected and we found the works abandoned without resistance,” and the British flag was hoisted over the fort of Negombo.

Ten years later the British Governor of Ceylon abolished all the legal disabilities of the Catholics of Ceylon.

Such, Ladies and Gentlemen, is the eventful history of the Catholic Church in Negombo under the Portuguese and the Dutch. I have placed before you all the available information about the introduction and progress of Catholicism in this town. And I have shown you how the Catholics of Negombo suffered and struggled to keep the Faith in defiance of a most rigorous persecution with the courage and manliness of which you have good reason to be proud. It is a grand and noble heritage, and I have no doubt that you, in your turn, will guard it jealously and hand it down unsullied to your children and your children’s children.”

NOTES

111 ³⁷ Sennent- Christianity in Ceylon, p58 ³⁸ This summary of the petition is given by John R.A.S. S. p 60 ³⁸ This summary of the petition is given by John R.A.S. S. p 62 ⁴⁰ As pointed out by Fr.Gnana Prakasar in the Jaffna Guardian ⁴¹ Ceylon Antiquary V1, 180. ⁴² Vida do P. Jose Vaz p 219 ⁴³ Dutch Records by R.G.Anthonisz p 78. ⁴⁴ Weekly LiteraryRegister, 11 498

The Missionary Oblate

A Journal of Mission Animation



No 65

Jan. -June, 2024

