

Oblate Missionaries in Sri Lanka

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Missionaries from Europe

The Oblate presence in the island of Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon) took root in 1847 when St. Eugene de Mazenod, then the bishop of Marseille, sent four European Oblate missionaries to the island. Sri Lanka was the first love of the Founder on the continent of Asia. Now there are two full-fledged Oblate provinces in Sri Lanka: the Province of Colombo and the Province of Jaffna. The Colombo Province is blessed with 159 Oblates, including 33 scholastics. Jaffna has 107 Oblates, including 39 scholastics. Age wise, most of the Oblates are young. That many more young men are aspiring to become Oblates in Sri Lanka is a hopeful sign for the whole Oblate Congregation and the Church. The Oblates are the largest religious Congregation of men in the country. They are actively engaged in a variety of apostolate in almost all of the eleven local dioceses.

The life and ministry of the past zealous Oblates and the rich traditions and heritage left by the European missionaries are still alive in the memories of the people. Their great vision and missionary contributions can be summarized in this way:

A glorious past

- The building up of the local Church and the training of an indigenous clergy.
- The construction of numerous churches and several Catholic institutions.
- Their pioneering missionary activities and their qualitative witness of being very “close to the poor people”.
- There were many outstanding Oblates who have left indelible impact on the lives of the people through their excellence and their creativity, especially in their missionary ventures and in the fields of education and development.
- Sri Lanka has in turn begun to send missionaries abroad as pioneers to establish new missions in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh while many missionaries to other Asia-Oceania and African and even European countries.

Local Oblates

At present in Sri Lanka, there remain only four retired Oblates from Europe. However, their vision and responsibilities are now being faithfully carried on by native Oblates. The Oblate vocation is ever fresh and relevant to the present time, even when times are fast changing and new needs are arising. In a remarkable way, the Oblates carry on by renewing their commitments with zeal and creativity.

Ever ready to change

True to their missionary nature, they constantly experience a transition from traditionally structured ministries to new forms of ministry. In former times, most of the Oblates were parish priests or managers of dioceses. That was the need of that time. Today, they are more open to new forms of serving humanity by engaging themselves in integral forms of evangelization, such as, social rehabilitation and, psychological counseling and spiritual direction, caring for and assisting the displaced, the refugees, orphans, widows, poor children and school dropouts. These are the new poor of the today's Church in Sri Lanka.

Civil war and tsunami

For the past 25 year, Sri Lanka has had to face an ongoing ethnic conflict. It is estimated that over 75,000 people were killed; over six hundred thousand have left the country seeking asylum in foreign countries; more than one million people are internally displaced. The civil war has affected all sectors of society. In addition to this unfortunate situation, on December 26, 2004, tsunami tidal waves hit the shores of the Northeast and the South of Sri Lanka. It is estimated that in these coastal regions, 37,000 people were killed, several thousands were missing and several hundreds were made homeless. Hundreds of children perished in the waters and hundreds were orphaned as many adults were swept away by the waves of the tsunami.

Relief in times of pain

Against the background of these unfortunate situations, the Oblates launched several rehabilitation programs for the people, such as, building temporary sheds, providing food and relief supplies and other emergency services. There were hundreds of Oblate collaborators and donors from all over the world who generously contributed financially to make the Oblate presence effective in these times of great need.

Children's Homes

The Oblates have been managing two big orphanages, one in the South: "St. Vincent Home" at Maggona and the other in the North "Amala Aanai-Children's Home" at Mulankawil. After the tsunami, the Oblates of the Jaffna Province started three more homes for the victimized children. Caring for these underprivileged, poor and orphaned children is a need of the times. It is typical of the Oblates to respond to the urgent needs of the times.

Children's Movement

The 'La-kri-vi' movement (Valiant Children of Action.) was founded by the Oblates and is under their full responsibility. It is a movement for the integral development of Sri Lankan children, irrespective of race, religion or sex. It is open to all children between

the ages of 5 and 15, and it is run by the children themselves under the guidance of volunteers who serve as promoters (animators) of the movement.

The vision of the movement is to create a new world through children. The desire is to cultivate and develop spirituality in children through physical and mental transformation and also develop their personalities and leadership qualities through the movement. Presently it has a membership of over 9000 children in about 400 village level 'cells' in 40 districts under the guidance of about 450 youth volunteers who serve as promoters (animators) of the movement. It is an accepted fact that all cell activities help children to deepen their faith, while the presence and sharing of children of other faiths serve to promote their understanding and respect for others religious convictions and practices, which is very necessary in a multi religious society like Sri Lanka.

A psycho spiritual approach

The Oblates have also been serving in a very specialized area of the apostolate namely, psychological counseling. The five well recognized Centers for Counseling and Spiritual renewal both in the South and in the North are rendering unique services of healing, guidance and helping people to lead life with a sense of meaning and direction. The Oblates who became qualified themselves in Canada and the USA in the fields of counseling and spiritual direction were able to train many more lay people and continue to render services to their clients in their own local languages. The programs have saved many from a life of deep wounds, sadness and destruction.

Oblate parishes

The Oblates have willingly taken charge of parishes situated in the most difficult and missionary areas of the Colombo, Jaffna, Mannar, Trincomalee and Badulla dioceses. The bishops have invited the Oblates to take over certain areas for a long period of time and to invest a lot of hard labor, money and efforts into developing the people's lives. There are nearly ten parishes of this nature in the country. Almost all the Oblate parishes are situated in mission areas, namely, with people who are not Catholics: either Buddhist or Hindu and economically poor. By profession, the people are laborers or plantation workers or poor farmers who suffer social discrimination. In a literal sense, they are the most abandoned. Serving in these parishes is not easy. The missionaries have to travel long distances and the mission houses often do not have basic facilities like electricity or running water, etc. In these parishes, the Oblates run several programs like preschools, programs for the empowerment of women, non-formal educational activities, tuition and other income generating programs and so on in order to enhance the lifestyle of the poor.

Mission preaching band

It is significant that the Oblates are known for their traditional apostolate under the name of Grand Mission Preachers. The community of the preaching band was started in 1948 at "Nazareth House" at Wennappuwa in the diocese of Chilaw. Another preaching

community was started in Jaffna in 1960 and presently is situated at “Amaithi-Aham” in Vavuniya in the diocese of Mannar. It continues this typical Oblate mission which was the first approach which our Founder himself adopted for the Church that had been wounded by the French revolution. These communities have been engaged in the preaching ministry as a specialized apostolate reaching out to people throughout the country. However, with the rapid and profound socio-economic changes taking place in the country, the provinces are rethinking their approach and adopting new pastoral strategies to achieve better results through preaching the Word of God. Among other things, they are adopting the modern means of communication.

The purpose of the mission preaching is to bring about renewal and reconciliation on the personal and community level, forming the laity to show leadership and share in the responsibilities of the Church. It is an opportunity and a moment of grace for the Catholics as well as the non-Catholics, since most of the events are held in the open airs and in the streets, thus making them accessible to all people of all faiths. They emphasize the themes of “Coming back home,” “Return to the Father,” and “Jesus the Good Shepherd.” During the mission they visit families, instruct and conduct workshops and seminar programs for school children, youth and adults and celebrate the Eucharist with the respective groups. They give priority to the remote villages and countryside parishes and missions. Making use of the media, they reach out to Catholics and non-Catholics by staging street plays, conducting the Way of the Cross, the rosary and Blessed Sacrament processions in the public streets and other open-air spaces. The Oblate preachers with their white cassocks and their Oblate Cross are appealing signs and images of God speaking to the people.

Marian devotion

Oblates around the world are promoters of Marian devotion. Sri Lanka is blessed with hundreds of churches dedicated to Our Lady as the result of the Oblate missionary efforts. In Sri Lanka, Oblates administer shrines and renewal centers in order to render spiritual services and bring about spiritual renewal to those under their care.

Teaching ministry

When we count the number of Oblates who are academically qualified, we find that quite a good number are engaged in teaching in schools, universities and the major seminaries, teaching in both government-sponsored and private academic institutions. These are very good opportunities to reach out to the youth who need spiritual inspiration and guidance.

Beyond boundaries to internationality

Among the young Oblates, there is a lot of willingness to serve beyond our geographical boundaries, reaching out to the poor and meeting the most urgent demands of the Church. The Oblates, as religious and seeing internationality as a value, place much importance on community life. In a country where there are violence, divisions and problems of

mistrust, the Oblates, through regular renewal and animation programs, make efforts to revive and strengthen community life that has been affected by the hazards and barriers to travel and communications. They try to establish greater understanding and collaboration with the Oblates of the neighboring provinces and among the other religious congregations as a sign of greater unity and peace. These international, inter-congregational and interfaith experiences give them a greater sense of happiness and at the same time bear witness to true Christianity.

Gifts of vocations

Thanks be to God, vocations in Sri Lanka have remained fairly steady. There are two junior seminaries, one in Colombo and the other in Jaffna, housing more than one hundred juniorists all together. In the pre-novitiate each year, nearly 10-15 candidates are formed. In the cool climate of Bandarawela, the Sacred Heart Novitiate is situated on a hill and accommodates novices, not only from Sri Lanka, but also from other Oblate delegations and missions: Pakistan, Bangladesh, Korea and Indonesia. There are two post-novitiate houses of formation: the Oblate Scholasticate in Kandy, affiliated with the National Seminary of Our Lady of Lanka, and De Mazenod Scholasticate, affiliated to the diocesan major seminary of Jaffna. The Oblates make every effort to foster vocations and to provide the candidates with qualitative formation, enabling them to become committed missionaries in the future. It is an important value to foster multi-cultural and inter-provincial collaborative efforts. It is also a constant challenge to train formators and to maintain more than one member in each formation house. In order to equip and update all members with new insights and skills, the provinces give priority to regular ongoing formation programs.

It is worth mentioning some of the Oblate values that strengthen the Oblates of Sri Lanka:

- The sense of internationality; the support and encouragement given by Oblates in other parts of the world is very strong. The Oblates from developed countries continue to share financially in the life and mission of the Oblates.
- In spite of the many negative effects of the violence and ethnic conflicts, of natural calamities and of war, the Oblates have remained true to their vocation, due to their faith, mutual support, endurance and goodwill.
- In the recent past, the Oblates, through their hard work, have been able to achieve remarkable growth by establishing new Oblate communities, undertaking pioneering, specialized and relevant ministries, and consolidating some of their infrastructures.
- In the field of ongoing formation, the members of both provinces have been given opportunities for continued education and renewal in order to become capable missionaries in a fast changing world with many and new challenges.
- Amidst the dissension and grievances caused by the ethnic conflict in the country, both the Colombo and the Jaffna Provinces have been able to collaborate in the fields of administration, formation and the apostolate while continuing to promote justice and peace.

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