

“I Will not Leave my People”

A tribute to the legacy of Rev. Fr. Mariampillai T. Sarathjeevan

The past few weeks have been catastrophic and have left the Tamil population of the island of Sri Lanka devastated. The lives of the Tamil people are filled with moments of abject suffering and destruction. Every day we have been hearing disturbing accounts of deaths and injuries. Church bells have been tolling incessantly bringing news of the death of beloved ones to the people. On the 18th of May, the bells of Jaffna Cathedral brought the news of the untimely death of the young and dynamic priest, Rev. Fr. Mariampillai T. Sarathjeevan, submerging the people of Jaffna in the sea of sorrow. Is he dead? It is something difficult to believe, but we are forced to believe and accept this irreparable loss of a precious life, dedicated to the diocese of Jaffna. It is not only a great loss to his family, but also a matter of bereavement for the entire diocese of Jaffna. Before proceeding further, I wish to convey our prayerful support to his family, so that they might find the fortitude to face the loss of this sagacious soul.

Fr. Sara, as he has been always called with love and affection by all, was born in Jaffna in a family of five. The family maintained a spiritual atmosphere that made it possible for Fr. Sara to become a diocesan priest in the Jaffna diocese, and his sister to dedicate herself to a religious life in the Holy Cross Congregation. Fr. Sara was an active member in the youth group at Jaffna Cathedral and was very zealous in spiritual activities. At a mature age he decided to dedicate himself to God and joined the seminary as a late vocation. He was ordained by the Bishop of Jaffna, Rt. Rev. Dr. Thomas Savundranayagam on 14th May 2003.

As a formator, I had the privilege of being his moderator for many years during his formation, and memories of him are still fresh in my mind. He was an amicable student in the group, and was very docile towards those in charge of him. He was known for being compassionate towards the poor and needy. As seminarians and priests we were also lucky to experience his compassion and love whenever we went on a day out or for a picnic. Fr. Sara would cook for all of us like a mother cooking for her children. Today, when I hear from his family and priest friends about his last days, my memory is flooded with such instances that bear witness to his generosity.

Fr. Sara was sent to Uruthirapuarma in Kilinochchi as a parish priest and served the people with dedication and commitment. Later, in addition to this, he was also given the responsibility of being the co-coordinator of JRS (Jesuit Rehabilitation Service). He carried out these responsibilities with a real sense of dedication and zeal. Eventually, when the war broke out in the Wannai area, people were displaced in large numbers, and Fr. Sara was there with the people helping them and assisting them in these critical hours. When his people were evicted he too started moving with them, taking inspiration from the example of his Master, the Good Shepherd. During his last days he was with the people in the safety zone, and worked relentlessly with the wounded and dying. If he wanted, he could have made efforts to come out of the war zone, but he was working with the firm conviction that he must not desert his flock in distress. Finally, when the

war ceased he was able to come out of the area with the help of the security forces, but when he came to Kilinochichi, he died of heart failure. He succumbed to the emotional stress of seeing the torment of his people whom he had endeavored to serve with such unflinching and single-minded devotion.

At this juncture, when I think of the life of this young priest I feel proud of him and thank God for anointing him as a good shepherd to his flock. From what he said about his last days, I understand that this life was fully occupied with putting up shelters for people, taking care of the sick and burying the dead. He categorically stated that he would not come out leaving the people like orphans. Following the footsteps of Lord and master, Our Lord Jesus Christ, he said, "I will not leave my people." These words of determination and commitment from a person with six years of priesthood are exemplary; words that would motivate every priest to strive to reach their spiritual goals. What helped him withstand all the tribulations in his life was his constant communion with God. In the final days that led to his demise, he expressed his concern about not being able to celebrate mass as he had to spend a few days in the bunker without food and drink. Ultimately, when he was able to come out of the terrible circumstances, he could not bear to witness the agony of his people and his heart failed.

Fr. Sara has left a strong legacy for us: "I will not leave my people" These words of spiritual acumen will ring eternally in the ears of everyone who knew him. I thank God for this exemplary young priest and pray to God that the Lord may shed his compassion on each one of us so that our country may take a journey towards peace to ensure the safety of every precious human life in the future. Let the sacrifice of Rev. Fr. Mariampillai T. Sarathjeevan go not in vain; he has set an example by valuing human life and serving suffering humanity above everything else. Assuredly, his presence will be perpetual and everlasting in the minds and hearts of his people as "to live in hearts we leave behind is not to die."

"God is love, and whoever remains in love, remains in God and God in Him." 1 John 4:16

- Fr. David Manuepillai