

The Contribution of the Oblates to the Development of the Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu

Rev. Prof. Gnanamuthu Pilendran
PhD (Jaffna)
Emeritus Professor

Introduction

Throughout the history of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, many religious congregations have made invaluable contributions to the establishment, growth, and spread of the Catholic faith. Among these, the **Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI)**, founded by **St. Eugene de Mazenod**, are regarded as one of the most significant.¹ According to the Sri Lankan Church historian Rev. Fr. W. L. A. Don Peter, the Oblates have played a particularly outstanding role in the history of the Church in Sri Lanka. The Oblates commenced their ministry in the Northern Vicariate, later the Diocese of Jaffna, in February 1848, and have continued their apostolic mission with distinction to the present day. This article focuses specifically on the contribution of the Oblates to the development of the Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu.

The small village of **Maruthamadhu (Madhu)**, situated in the Vanni region near the ancient territory of **Maathoddam** within the present Diocese of Mannar, has become one of Sri Lanka's foremost Catholic pilgrimage centres. The principal reason for its prominence is the miraculous statue of **Our Lady of Madhu**, which is enshrined there. Church historians in Sri Lanka generally agree that this sacred image was originally venerated by the Catholic faithful of Mantai during the Portuguese period. This view continues to be widely accepted today.² (AJB, p. ii)

The early establishment and growth of Catholicism in the Vanni, Maathoddam region and Mannar island were shaped by the ministry of several missionary groups, including the **Franciscans**,

especially **Fr. Pedro de Betancor**, the **Goa Oratorian missionaries**, particularly **St. Joseph Vaz**, and later the **Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate**. Together with the Catholic faithful of Vanni and Maathoddam, they occupy an important place in the ecclesiastical history of the region.

This brief historical study seeks to present, on the basis of available historical sources, a concise account of the ministry carried out by the bishops and priests of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate at the Madhu Shrine from 1848 to 2006. During this period they served the Church in various capacities - as Vicars Apostolic, bishops, parish priests, and administrators rendering distinguished service to the shrine and its pilgrims. Historical records indicate that between 1848 and 2006, seven Oblate bishops and more than twenty-seven Oblate priests served as administrators at the Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu.

The work undertaken by these missionaries at Madhu was multifaceted. Their foremost objective was to foster devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. They envisioned Madhu as the principal Marian pilgrimage centre of Sri Lanka, where pilgrims could renew their spiritual lives through prayer and deepen their devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary. At the same time, they gradually developed the infrastructure of the shrine to meet the growing needs of pilgrims, transforming it into a well-organized and flourishing pilgrimage centre. Every Oblate missionary who served at Madhu contributed according to his abilities and talents toward the development of the shrine. Among them were both European missionaries and indigenous Sri Lankan religious, all of whom dedicated themselves generously to the advancement of this sacred place.

Rev. Fr. Joseph Ciamin, OMI - The First Oblate to Serve at Madhu

During the administration of **Bishop Orazio Bettachini (1849–1857)**, the first Apostolic Vicar of the Northern Vicariate of Sri Lanka, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) began their missionary work in the Northern part of Sri Lanka. Responding

to Bishop Bettachini's request, the founder of the Oblates, **St. Eugene de Mazenod**, sent four missionaries under the leadership of **Fr. Semeria, OMI**, to serve in the Northern Vicariate. They arrived in Mannar on 4 February 1848.

At that time, the Shrine of Madhu, then only a small shed chapel was passing through one of the most difficult periods in its history because of the conflict created by the **Goan Schismatics**. Only four days after their arrival, on **8 February 1848**, **Rev. Fr. Joseph Ciamin, OMI**, assumed responsibility for the Madhu Church. During this turbulent period, he faced severe opposition from the schismatic priest Rev. Miguel Philip and his followers. Despite numerous challenges, Fr. Ciamin struggled courageously to safeguard the shrine from falling under the control of the schismatics. He is remembered as the first Oblate priest to serve at Madhu Church.

In his efforts to protect the shrine, Fr. Ciamin sought legal intervention through the Mannar Court. However, the court ruled against him, causing him great disappointment. Against this background, he endured extremely difficult living conditions, with inadequate food, lack of basic facilities, deprivation of food and rest, and constant psychological pressure. These hardships seriously affected his health. While suffering from severe illness he was taken to Jaffna for medical treatment. Nevertheless, he passed away on 10 November 1853 at the young age of 33, sacrificing his life in the service of the Church.

Following Fr. Ciamin's death, **Rev. Fr. Vivier, OMI**, first served as Assistant Parish Priest of the Madhu–Maathoddam mission and later as Parish Priest from 1853 to 1855. Like his predecessor, he also encountered persistent opposition from the schismatics. Despite these difficulties, he gradually succeeded in reconciling and winning back many who had supported the schismatic movement.

Bishop Stephen Semeria, OMI (1857–1868)

Bishop Stephen Semeria, OMI, succeeded Bishop Bettachchani as the second Apostolic Vicar of Jaffna on 6 June 1856.

At that time, Fr. Vivier, OMI, was serving as the administrator of Madhu.

He was succeeded by **Rev. Fr. J. B. E. Flurin, OMI**, who was solely responsible for the extensive Madhu–Maathoddam mission. As the territory under his care was too vast, he was unable to visit Madhu frequently or remain there for more than two or three days in an year. Subsequently, he entrusted reliable laypersons with the responsibility of maintaining the church and receiving the offerings from pilgrims. These offerings were then used for the maintenance and repair of the church (AJB,p.134).

However, complaints were occasionally received that some of those entrusted with the offerings were misusing the funds. During Bishop Semeria's pastoral visitation to the Maathoddam missions in 1859, he was accompanied by **Fr. Chonavel, OMI**, and **Fr. Bonjean, OMI**. Bishop Semeria instructed Fr. Bonjean to conduct an investigation, which revealed that several individuals had indeed misappropriated the offertory collections of the shrine.

Despite these difficult circumstances, Bishop Semeria and the Oblate missionaries remained determined to establish proper order and administration at the shrine. Even amidst these challenges, large numbers of pilgrims continued to visit Madhu.

This enduring devotion can be attributed to the deep faith of the people in Our Lady of Madhu and to the many favours believed to have been received through her intercession.

In 1858, the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary was celebrated with great solemnity at the shrine. Sadly, Fr. **Flurin** contracted tuberculosis and died in Jaffna on 12 July 1861, at only 31 years of age.

Thereafter, **Rev. Fr. R. M. Couret, OMI**, served as Assistant Parish Priest (1857–1858) and later as Parish Priest (1878–1886) of Madhu. Following Bishop Semeria's pastoral visitation to Maathoddam, the bishop sent a trusted layman named Vaithiyampillai

from Sillalai to Fr. Couret with a letter. In it, Bishop Semeria instructed that a suitable residence be built for priests serving at Madhu, whenever they visit the place. He authorized that the expenses be met from the offertory of the shrine funds and emphasized that the work should be completed without delay. Until then, priests visiting Madhu had been forced to stay in a small, cramped shelter behind the sanctuary of the simple chapel.

In 1860, **Rev. Fr. A. J. St. Geneys, OMI**, was assigned to assist Fr. Couret OMI and served at the Madhu–Maathoddam mission until 1862. During his tenure, he carried out several repairs to the church and constructed the northern verandah. He also supervised the making of 30,000 bricks, which were later used by Rev. Fr. Gourdon, OMI, for further construction work. In 1862, **Rev. Fr. A.J.M.L. Pussaq, OMI**, assumed responsibility for Madhu mission, continuing the steady development of the shrine and its pastoral ministry.

The Govan schism and the challenges encountered by the Oblates

Rev. Fr. Pussaq, OMI, served alone in the Madhu–Maathoddam mission from 1864 to 1868. During his tenure, the western verandah of the church was constructed (A.J.B.,p. 155). In 1866, **Rev. Fr. Pouzin, OMI**, was appointed to assist him. In a letter written to Bishop Semeria in the same year, Fr. Pouzin requested permission of the Bishop to celebrate the annual feast of the Shrine of Madhu on 2 July.

From 1866 onwards, the annual feast probably had been celebrated on 2 July. Prior to this change, however, the feast appears to have been observed on 7 October, the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, since the sacred Statue has traditionally been known as **Our Lady of the Holy Rosary of Madhu**. Nevertheless, the celebration on 2 July gradually became established as the principal annual feast, and the number of pilgrims attending increased steadily year after year.

Fr. J.J.M. Pouzin OMI, took responsibility for all the preparations connected with the feast and personally supervised every aspect of its organization. He erected a large cross in front of the church, cleared the surrounding forest, and built new shelters for pilgrims. He purchased cooking utensils and other essential equipment to provide better facilities for the growing number of pilgrims. He also carefully safeguarded the church property through trusted assistants, while keeping the most valuable items in his own custody.

In addition to these organizational efforts, Fr. Pouzin undertook several improvements to the church itself. He repaired the building, installed a roof, raised the walls, provided temporary accommodation for priests and church workers, and dug a well to meet the needs of both the clergy and the pilgrims.

In a letter written to Bishop Semeria in 1868, Fr. Pouzin recorded that, as early as 1859, the administration of the Shrine of Madhu had spent **100 pounds** on roofing tiles and bricks for the church. This suggests that by 1859 there must have been a chapel enlarged into a more substantial structure built of stone and roofed with tiles, marking an important stage in the physical development of the shrine.

Bishop Christopher Bonjean, OMI (1868–1883)

According to the ecclesiastical census conducted in the Diocese of Jaffna in 1871, only nine permanent residents were officially registered as belonging to the Madhu Shrine (AJB, p. 159). Bishop **Christophe Bonjean, OMI**, however, noted an important distinction regarding the religious life of the Maathoddam region. He observed that each village had its own church for the local Catholic community. In addition, the communities belonging to larger caste groups often had separate churches where they gathered annually to celebrate their patronal feasts. In contrast, **the Shrine of Madhu was unique**, serving as a common sanctuary and pilgrimage centre for **all Catholics in Sri Lanka**, irrespective of their village or social

background. He further recorded that the shrine was maintained through the voluntary offerings and generous contributions of the faithful. (AJB, p.159).

On 4 November 1869, **Rev. Fr. Gourdon, OMI**, was appointed as Assistant Parish Priest to assist **Fr. Pouzin, OMI**. When Fr. Gourdon was transferred in 1871, **Rev. Fr. Guillou, OMI**, was appointed by Bishop Bonjean to succeed him.

Foundation for the present church and opposition from a group

When Bishop Bonjean visited Madhu for the first time in 1872, he was deeply saddened by the poor condition of the existing chapel. Reflecting on his visit, he wrote:

“When I saw the condition of the church, I was overwhelmed with sorrow. I did not wish to bear the reproach that a son of Mary, who had become a bishop, had left her shrine in such a pitiable state. Therefore, we resolved to build a beautiful and worthy church for Our Lady in this forest.” (AJB,p. 160-61).

The bishop described the existing chapel as a simple thatched structure approximately **eight feet high**, with three sides in the shape of a horseshoe. At its centre stood a simple wooden structure served as altar. The building had no enclosed walls, leaving it open on every side. Since there was no residence for priests, those who came to celebrate the liturgy had to stay in a small shelter behind the altar. Likewise, pilgrims had no proper accommodation and were forced to sleep beneath trees in the open forest, exposed to malaria-carrying mosquitoes and the dangers of wild animals (AJB,p. 160-61).

When Bishop Bonjean arrived at Madhu on 6 August 1872 to lay the foundation stone for a new church, he was presented with a petition by members of a particular caste community. The petition contained demands seeking exclusive privileges for their caste, which the bishop considered unjust and harmful to the future welfare and unity of the shrine. He therefore rejected the petition outright (AJB,p. 160-61).

Despite this opposition, the foundation stone of the **present church** was solemnly laid on **8 August 1872** in the presence of approximately one thousand faithful. The ceremony was attended by Rev. Fr. L. C. H. Mauroit, OMI, Rev. Fr. J. J. M. Pouzin, OMI, and Rev. Fr. F. M. J. J. Guillou, OMI, who participated in the historic occasion. (AJB,p. 162-63)

Subsequently, on **13 October 1872**, Bishop Bonjean addressed a **44-page pastoral circular** to **Fr. Pouzin**, the Superior of the Oblates in the Mannar–Maathoddam mission. The bishop requested that its contents be carefully explained to the faithful. The circular served as a comprehensive and well-structured response to the opposition that had arisen during the foundation ceremony, clarifying the Church's position regarding the administration and ownership of the Shrine of Madhu(AJB,p. 169)

To ensure proper administration and to safeguard the rights of the shrine during this difficult period, **Fr. Pouzin** was appointed, with effect from 7 August 1872, as the priest solely responsible for the Shrine. This marked an important step in establishing a more stable and dedicated administration for Sri Lanka's principal Marian pilgrimage centre.

The Court case: Mannar District Court

Realizing that Bishop Christopher Bonjean, OMI, would not accept their demands, the opposing group initiated legal proceedings by filing a case before the Mannar District Court on 15 August 1873. On 20 August 1874, the District Court delivered its judgment against the bishop. Refusing to accept the decision, Bishop Bonjean appealed to the Supreme Court of Colombo on 28 August 1874. On 24 June 1875, the Supreme Court overturned the lower court's decision and ruled in favour of the bishop.

Bishop Bonjean accepted the favourable judgment with remarkable humility. Rather than encouraging public celebrations or triumphal demonstrations following the legal victory, he instructed the faithful to refrain from any extravagant festivities and urged them

instead to treat those who had lost the case with dignity, charity, and Christian respect.

The Acquisition of Land for the Shrine of Madhu

On 17 September 1872, the first steps were taken to secure a larger tract of land for the Shrine of Madhu. This initiative clearly demonstrates the foresight and long-term vision of the Oblate missionaries in planning for the future development of the shrine.

Although the Government Agent of Jaffna declined the Church's request for a free grant of Crown land, the Church proceeded to purchase **30 acres of government land** on 8 December 1876 for Rs. 300.44, together with additional expenses amounting to Rs. 112.02. Furthermore, **one acre** was donated to the shrine as a gift. Together with the **existing 31 perches and one rood** already belonging to the church, and **one additional acre** reserved for the cemetery, the shrine eventually possessed a total of **32 acres and one rood** of land.

This acquisition laid the foundation for the future expansion of the pilgrimage centre and enabled the systematic development of its facilities.

Other Physical Developments at the Shrine

During 1876–1877, **Rev. Fr. Boisseau, OMI**, was appointed to take charge of the Shrine of Madhu. Under his leadership, preparations were made to construct a **new presbytery** and a **kitchen**. To facilitate the transportation of building materials, he laid out a new cart road from the village of Palampiddy, enabling bricks manufactured there and stones collected from the surrounding forests to be brought to Madhu for construction work. (AJB,p. 128).

Recognizing the financial demands of these projects, an appeal for public contributions was issued on 18 January 1877, inviting the faithful to assist in the development of the shrine.

From 1877 to 1886, **Rev. Fr. Couret, OMI**, served as the priest in charge of the **Madhu–Maathoddam mission**. During his tenure, an important improvement to the infrastructure of the shrine was made with the digging of a second well in 1881, providing an increased and more reliable water supply for both the clergy and the growing number of pilgrims.

Bishop Andrew Melizan, OMI (1883–1893)

Bishop Andrew Melizan, OMI, was consecrated as Coadjutor Bishop on 24 January 1880 at his parish church in Marseilles, France, and later succeeded Bishop Bonjean. He was appointed Apostolic Vicar of Jaffna on 20 April 1883 and, when the Diocese of Jaffna was formally erected, became its first bishop on 1 September 1886.

During his episcopate, the Shrine experienced remarkable growth. Under his direction, **Rev. Fr. Couret, OMI**, laid the foundation stone for the present church in 1884 (AJB,p. 204). Bishop Melizan took a personal interest in the development of the shrine and authorized financial assistance of **Rs. 1,000** from the diocesan funds of Jaffna together with a further **Rs. 1,000** from the Mannar mission to support the church building project. (AJB,p. 205)

When Fr. Couret applied to the Government Agent for additional land, **six acres** were granted on an annual lease at a nominal rent of **25 cents** per year. The bishop continued to encourage the expansion of the shrine as the number of pilgrims increased each year. Additional lands, including **Lot No. 5019**, were acquired. During the July feast, 23,000 pilgrims gathered at Madhu.

Subsequently, **Rev. Fr. Massiét, OMI**, continued this farsighted policy by purchasing **Lots Nos. 6064 and 2122** for the shrine. His dedicated service during a cholera epidemic earned official appreciation from the Government Medical Department. Historical records also indicate that Bishop Melizan visited the Madhu Shrine on numerous occasions. In 1891, Bishop Melizan celebrated Holy Mass at the newly completed sanctuary constructed by Fr. Massiét.

Before the July Feast of 1893, the six principal wooden pillars of the central nave were erected, marking another significant milestone in the construction of the present church. During the same year, for the first time the 15 March feast was celebrated.

Bishop Henry Joulain, OMI (1893–1919)

While Bishop Melizan and **Rev. Fr. Henry Joulain, OMI**, were in Europe attending the General Chapter of the Oblates in 1893, Bishop Bonjean died in Colombo. Following this, Bishop Melizan was appointed Archbishop of Colombo, and **Fr. Henry Joulain** was appointed Bishop of Jaffna on 20 July 1893. He was consecrated by Bishop Melizan in Europe on 24 August 1893. Under Bishop Joulain's administration, both the Diocese of Jaffna and the Madhu Shrine experienced significant progress in pastoral ministry, infrastructure, and pilgrimage development.

From **1886 to 1894**, **Rev. Fr. Charles Massiet, OMI**, served as Administrator of Madhu Shrine and initiated numerous important developments. His greatest historical contribution was the commencement, in **1886**, of the "*Codex Historicus*" of Madhu Church. This remains a continuous historical record an invaluable source for the history of Madhu.

According to his records:

- 15,000 pilgrims and 10 priests attended the July Feast in 1886.
- In 1887, 23,000 pilgrims gathered, while 16 priests administered the Sacrament of reconciliation.
- Under Bishop Joulain's direction, another 33-feet-deep well was dug at a cost of Rs. 548.87.
- In 1888, approximately 25,000 pilgrims attended the feast.
- During that same year, the Government, for the first time, appointed a medical officer to serve during the pilgrimage.
- Because cholera had affected the Mannar–Maathoddam region, the Government declared parts of the area unsuitable for public gatherings.

In 1889, work commenced on constructing the **sanctuary** and foundations were laid for the northern verandah and the reception hall.

After Fr. Massiét, **Rev. Fr. J. B. P. Meary, OMI**, administered the shrine for one year, completing the sanctuary with minor modifications. He was succeeded by **Rev. Fr. H. A. Dinaux, OMI**, who purchased materials for roofing the church and laid the foundations for constructing the church façade.

Madhu Shrine was designed in **Oratorian architectural style**, characterized by abundant natural light, good ventilation, spacious interiors, and economical construction. The distinctive wooden pillars supporting the high roof was specially selected from different locations. In November 1896, cement flooring was laid in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel, the Sacristy, and the Administrator's room, while the church's interior painting was carried out under contract.

In March 1897, a new well costing Rs. 300 was dug in memory of Fr. Pouzin OMI.

During the July Feast of 1898, more than 17,000 pilgrims attended, arriving in 418 double-bullock carts and 85 single bullock carts. Valuable descriptions of this pilgrimage were recorded in the shrine chronicle by Very Rev. Jules Colin, OMI.

Further improvements under later Administrators

In 1898, **Rev. Fr. Francis** repaired the dam of the Madhu tank at a cost of Rs. 350.

From **1898 to 1902**, **Rev. Fr. Wheeler, OMI**, served as Administrator of the shrine. During his tenure:

- Improved facilities were provided for pilgrims to receive the Sacrament of reconciliation.
- Bricks were purchased for completing the church façade.

- Considerable effort was devoted to cleaning the shrine and preparing it for the annual feasts.
- Government officials were regularly invited to the festive celebrations, strengthening cooperation between Church and State.

Water scarcity remained one of the greatest challenges during pilgrimage seasons. Consequently, additional wells were dug and the Madhu tank was periodically deepened to improve the water supply.

Construction of the church façade, which had previously been interrupted, resumed after 1888, with many pilgrims voluntarily contributing their labour.

Beginning in 1900, a sermon in Sinhala was preached after the principal Mass during the July feast, a practice warmly appreciated by Sinhala-speaking pilgrims.

That year:

- 28,000 pilgrims attended.
- Approximately 830 bullock carts arrived.
- A temporary post office operated for the first time during the feast.

The Oblate missionaries also encouraged and celebrated both the major and minor annual feasts throughout the year.

Pilgrims from Puttalam and Negombo travelled by sea to Vankalai and continued their journey to Madhu by bullock cart. The longstanding tradition of providing a free communal meal (*Vīruinthu*) for pilgrims on the feast day also continued.

Fr. Wheeler expressed concern for environmental preservation. He actively promoted the planting of trees around the shrine to improve its surroundings. When Fr. Wheeler left for Australia in 1902, **Rev. Fr. Jendel, OMI**, succeeded him. During this

year for the July Feast, Bishop Joulain and eight priests participated in the celebrations—a tradition that continues even today, with numerous priests assisting during the annual pilgrimages.

In 1903, **Rev. Fr. Norbert Perera, OMI**, became Administrator of Madhu.

During his administration:

- The 15 March Feast was celebrated with great solemnity.
- More than 700 pilgrims from Southern Sri Lanka attended.
- For the first time, a fireworks display marked the conclusion of the March feast.
- In the July feast 27,000 pilgrims attended.
- Permission was granted for the first time to sell beef during the pilgrimage.
- After discussions with the Assistant Government Agent of Mannar, separate bathing facilities for men and women were constructed to discourage bathing in the shrine tank.
- Plans were made for a designated area to prepare and distribute the traditional pilgrims' meal (*Virinthu*), and a washing facility was built for cooking utensils.

This *agape* meal (*Virinthu*) for a long time been organized by the faithful of St. James' Church, Jaffna, and remained an important expression of Christian fellowship meal.

Following a brief period of service by Rev. Fr. Desloge, OMI, **Rev. Fr. Olive, OMI**, became Administrator of Madhu in 1904, serving until 1924. During the July Feast of 1904 nearly 39,000 pilgrims attended arriving by 940 bullock carts. Fr. Olive constructed 20 additional permanent shops, increasing their total number to 40, with rental charges ranging from Rs. 10 to Rs. 20.

Two feasts were celebrated during March that year. **As the pedestal of the statue was broken no procession was conducted.**

Following the bishop's instructions, the statue was taken to Jaffna for repair, perhaps in 1905 (AJB, p. 239).³

Fr. Olive the administrator deepened the Madhu tank, laid cement flooring in the church, repaired the pillars of the verandah and organized 11 priests to hear confessions during the July feast.

To enrich the spiritual preparation for the annual feast, Bishop Joulain assigned each of the first nine days of the novena to different groups of pilgrims. Even after the feast concluded, many pilgrims continued to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation from both the bishop and Fr. Olive.

Despite severe drought in 1906, the administration managed the situation effectively. Before the August feast that year, Fr. Olive diverted a nearby stream so that water would flow into the Madhu tank.

The 1907 July Feast was celebrated successfully, after which Bishop Joulain reorganized the allocation of feast days, giving greater prominence to pilgrims from Southern Sri Lanka.

Before the 1908 July Feast, cementing of bathing tanks were completed, with separate arrangements allowing women to bathe in the mornings and men in the evenings.

During the 1909 July Feast Bishop Joulain, 17 priests, and 35,000 pilgrims participated in the celebrations. Privacy screens were erected for women at the bathing area. Vespers were celebrated for the first time beneath the newly completed portico.

In May 1910, a newspaper incorrectly reported that Madhu was suffering from severe drought and lacked water for pilgrims. Fr. Olive promptly corrected the misinformation, reporting that the tank still contained 4 feet 6 inches of water, while each of the four wells held an average depth of 17 feet of water (AJB, .244).

Although water shortages continued, large crowds attended the 1910 July Feast. By then, the completed church façade had become

an impressive landmark. Requests were submitted to the Government to construct a metaled road connecting Madhu Road to the shrine, and a favourable response was received. At the same time, a suitable location for a railway station at Madhu Road was identified.

In 1911, Mr. Louis of Negombo donated an electrical lighting system to the shrine. His mother generously contributed Rs. 1,000 for the construction of the Our Lady of Lourdes Grotto, which was blessed in 1913 by Rev. Fr. Matthews, OMI, who also celebrated the inaugural Mass for the intentions of the donor.

By the 1920 annual feast, approximately 50,000 pilgrims were attending Madhu. During this period, Fr. Olive spent Rs. 7,000 on major improvements to the Madhu tank, ensuring an improved water supply for the ever-growing numbers of pilgrims and further strengthening the shrine's infrastructure for future generations.

Dialogue Sermons and Catechetical Instruction

Two important pastoral initiatives introduced during the episcopate of Bishop Henry Joulain, **OMI**, deserve special mention. The first was the **Dialogue Sermon**, and the second was the systematic **catechetical instruction** provided to those preparing for Baptism.

The renowned Tamil Catholic scholar Rev. Fr. S. Gnanapragasar OMI, describes the Dialogue Sermon as an effective means of preparing non-Christians for Baptism while simultaneously proclaiming the Gospel and teaching the Catholic faith. It proved to be an appealing and highly successful method of evangelization.

During these sessions, which were conducted under a big tree, one participant assumed the role of an inquirer and respectfully posed questions to the priest. The priest then answers through logical argument, using simple explanations, practical examples, and apt illustrations to clarify the teachings of the Catholic faith. Musical interludes, accompanied by instrumental music and appropriate hymns, were included between the presentations, making the programme both educational and attractive to the audience.

These dialogue sermons became a regular feature of the pilgrimage at Madhu. Among the priests who actively participated were Rev. Fr. S. Gnanapragasar, OMI, Rev. Fr. Marcelin Jayakody, OMI, and Rev. Fr. William OMI. Recognizing the pastoral value of this ministry, Bishop Joulain instructed the Administrator of the shrine to construct large temporary shelters made of cadjan, specifically for these programmes. Previously, such gatherings had been conducted beneath the shade of large trees.

Another significant pastoral initiative at Madhu was the systematic instruction in the Catholic faith offered to both Catholics and those of other religions. This ministry greatly assisted many pilgrims in gaining a deeper understanding of Christian teaching.

Rev. Fr. Maingot, OMI, and Rev. Fr. Delpeech, OMI, visited the temporary shelters and camps of pilgrims, providing catechetical instruction directly to them. Since many pilgrims came to Madhu with deep religious devotion and open hearts, they were particularly receptive to learning about the Catholic faith, and the programme bore abundant spiritual fruit.

A few years later, under the direction of Bishop Joulain, Rev. Fr. S. Gnanapragasar assumed responsibility for this apostolate. Printed catechetical leaflets were distributed to assist those receiving instruction. Fr. Gnanapragasar worked with the support of two catechists, together with several others.

Many converts received the Sacrament of Baptism at the Shrine of Madhu itself. Special care was taken in selecting suitable sponsors (godparents), choosing individuals whose lives reflected exemplary Christian witness. Following each baptism, a report was sent to the parish priest of the newly baptized person to ensure proper pastoral follow-up.

During the **twenty-five years** of episcopal ministry of Bishop Joulain, the Shrine of Madhu underwent remarkable progress in both its physical infrastructure and its liturgical and pastoral life.

The shrine became increasingly renowned throughout Sri Lanka, attracting ever-growing numbers of pilgrims to both its major and minor feast celebrations. Likewise, the number of priests serving during these pilgrimages increased steadily, while the administration and organization of the shrine developed into a more structured and orderly system.

Following the death of Bishop Henry Joulain OMI on 7 February 1919, Rev. Fr. Jules André Brault, OMI, was appointed Bishop of Jaffna on 5 August 1919, ushering in a new chapter in the continuing development of the Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu.

Bishop Jules Andrew Brault, OMI (1919–1923)

When Bishop Jules André Brault, OMI, was appointed Bishop of Jaffna in **1919**, **Rev. Fr. Bizien, OMI**, was serving as the temporary Administrator of the Shrine of Madhu. During his administration, Fr. Bizien constructed the extended altar rail of the church. The annual feast of 1921 witnessed an unprecedented gathering of approximately 70,000 pilgrims, reflecting the steadily increasing popularity of the shrine.

During his stay at Madhu on 23 and 24 August, Bishop Brault took the statue of Our Lady of Madhu to Jaffna to have its crown restored and embellished. He also arranged for the construction of additional accommodation for the increasing number of priests who travelled to Madhu each year to assist during the annual pilgrimage.

One of the greatest aspirations of Bishop Brault was to obtain the **canonical approval for the coronation** of the miraculous statue of **Our Lady of Madhu**. He carefully planned the event and undertook extensive preparations for the historic celebration. According to his plan, the coronation was to take place on **2 July 1922**.

However, a series of unforeseen disasters delayed the project. On **12 February 1922**, severe storms and torrential rains caused extensive flooding throughout the shrine. The overflowing **Madhu**

tank breached its embankment, releasing its waters and leaving the tank Empty and the church and surrounding grounds submerged. As a result, the coronation ceremony had to be postponed.

Before the necessary repairs could be completed, another calamity struck. On **19 November 1922**, a violent storm accompanied by heavy rain and strong winds caused the entire **church façade** to collapse, reducing it to a heap of bricks. Bishop Brault immediately appealed to the faithful for financial assistance to rebuild the damaged structure, and the response from the Catholic community was both generous and encouraging.

As plans were once again being finalized to complete the reconstruction and celebrate the long-awaited coronation with due solemnity and devotion, tragedy intervened. On **20 January 1923**, Bishop Brault died unexpectedly.

His successor, **Bishop Alfred Guyomar, OMI**, made the coronation of the miraculous statue his first major pastoral undertaking after assuming office. Accordingly, on 2 July 1924, the Canonical Coronation of Our Lady of Madhu was celebrated with great splendor and solemnity.

Bishop Alfred John Guyomar, OMI (1924–1950)

When **Bishop Alfred John Guyomar, OMI**, assumed leadership of the Diocese of Jaffna, Rev. Fr. Olive, OMI, was still serving as Administrator of the Madhu Shrine. The long-cherished dream of Bishop Henry Joulain OMI, and the carefully prepared plans of **Bishop Brault** were finally fulfilled during the episcopate of Bishop Guyomar with the solemn **Canonical Coronation of the Miraculous Statue of Our Lady of Madhu** on **2 July 1924**.

The celebration was one of the most significant events in the history of the shrine. Approximately 100,000 pilgrims participated, together with a large number of priests. The ceremony was attended by the Archbishop of Colombo, the bishops of Jaffna, Kandy, Trincomalee, and Tuticorin (South India), making it an occasion of both national and international ecclesiastical importance.

Rev. Fr. Olive, OMI succeeded **Rev. Fr. Alfred Huction, OMI**, as administrator, who simultaneously served as the missionary in charge of the Anuradhapura Mission.

During the 1925 annual pilgrimage, 30 priests came to assist at the shrine. Of these, 21 priests were specifically assigned to hear confessions, while the others undertook responsibilities connected with the accommodation of clergy, preparation and distribution of food, provision of cooking, management of the sacristy, celebration of the liturgy, and the organization of catechetical instruction for pilgrims.

This careful distribution of pastoral responsibilities illustrates the increasingly well-organized administration of the Shrine and reflects the commitment of the Oblates to meet the growing spiritual and practical needs of the thousands of pilgrims who gathered there each year. Owing to advancing age and ill health, Rev. Fr. Olive, OMI, returned to Europe.

Introduction of Electricity for Annual Feast

During this period, electric lighting was provided for the annual feast for the second time, greatly enhancing the solemnity and beauty of the celebrations. Encouraged by its success, serious consideration was given to providing a permanent electricity supply to the Shrine. Many benefactors came forward to contribute financially towards this important project.

As the number of pilgrims continued to increase, greater attention was also devoted to improve the infrastructure of the shrine. A mechanical water pump was purchased to ensure an adequate supply of drinking water for pilgrims. Bishop Alfred Guyomar, OMI, was determined that those who journeyed to Madhu should be provided with the best possible facilities.

On 27 June 1927, Brothers Moreau, OMI, and Le Coutour, OMI, were ordained to the priesthood at the Shrine of Madhu, adding further significance to the life of the pilgrimage centre.

Until this period, pilgrims generally erected temporary shelters beneath the trees, using branches and palm leaves for protection. Recognizing the growing needs of pilgrims, Bishop Guyomar granted permission for the construction of permanent private lodging, subject to certain regulations. This decision was officially announced during the feast of 15 August 1927.

To facilitate the administration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, **Fr. Huctin, OMI**, constructed a large shelter measuring 120 feet in length and 36 feet in width. On **6 May 1927**, the **Governor of Ceylon, Sir Hugh Clifford**, who was a Catholic, visited the Shrine of Madhu. Later that year, on 26 July, Rev. Bro. Manga, OMI, was ordained to the priesthood at the shrine. The traditional procession of the miraculous statue was also held following the principal feast Mass in 1927.

The Ceylon Government Railway Department frequently assisted pilgrims travelling to Madhu, although the expected level of cooperation was not always forthcoming.

Among pilgrims there existed a widespread belief in the healing properties of the **soil of Madhu**. Consequently, many pilgrims carried home small quantities of the earth from the shrine, believing that it could be used with faith during illness, snakebite, and other times of need. This devotional practice continues even today and was encouraged by successive administrators of the shrine.

Although the world economic depression of 1931, together with rumour of outbreaks of cholera and dysentery, caused considerable anxiety among the public, substantial numbers of pilgrims continued to visit Madhu.

For a brief period, Rev. Fr. Le Coutour, OMI, served as Administrator of the shrine. Owing to recurring illness, however, **Rev. Fr. Huctin, OMI**, was reappointed to the position. Before this, both Fr. Le Coutour and Fr. Hucton had introduced several improvements to the Our Lady of Lourdes Grotto at Madhu.

Whenever obstacles prevented pilgrims from reaching the shrine, the Oblate missionaries acted promptly to assist pilgrims. They maintained close communication with government authorities to remove such difficulties and ensure that pilgrims could travel safely and without unnecessary interruption.

The First Eucharistic Procession at Madhu

Following the annual July Feast, the **Feast of the Blessed Sacrament** was celebrated for the first time at Madhu on 3 July.

The large shelter ordinarily used for the **Sacrament of Reconciliation** was beautifully decorated by the Catholics of Colombo for the occasion. From morning until 4.30 p.m., different groups of pilgrims conducted **Holy hour of Eucharistic Adoration**, each group taking responsibility for one hour of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

At 4.30 p.m., the first Eucharistic Procession in the history of the Shrine of Madhu commenced. After proceeding prayerfully for approximately one hour, the procession returned to its starting point. This marked the first observance of the Feast of the Blessed Sacrament and the first Eucharistic Procession ever held at Madhu, becoming an important milestone in the shrine's liturgical history.

To further improve the facilities available to pilgrims, an additional water-pumping machine was installed during this period.

During one of Bishop Guyomar's visits to Rome, Pope Pius XI presented him with a **Rosary measuring twenty feet in length**. The Rosary was brought to Madhu on 29 June, carried in solemn procession on 1 July, and permanently installed in the arch before the sanctuary pillar, where it became a visible symbol of the shrine's special Marian devotion and its communion with the Universal Church.

The Rosarian Monks at Madhu

With the aim of fostering a deeper spiritual atmosphere at Madhu Shrine, Bishop Guyomar took the necessary steps to establish a community of the **Rosarian Brothers** at the shrine. Their monastery at Madhu was officially inaugurated on 20 February 1935. On that day, the founder, **Fr. P. A. Thomas, OMI**, together with ten Rosarian Brothers and their spiritual director, Fr. S. S. Wilvarasingham, OMI, arrived at Madhu. That very evening, they began praying the Rosary before the Blessed Sacrament.

The Brothers themselves cleared sections of the surrounding forest by cutting trees and fencing off land between the Madhu tank and the Madhu road to cultivate vegetable gardens. However, their mission proved short-lived. Owing to the widespread outbreak of malaria, which affected many of the Brothers, and the reluctance of priests to remain at Madhu to guide the community under such difficult conditions, Bishop Guyomar decided to send the Brothers back to their mother house at Tholagattai. Thus, the Rosarian Brothers' mission at Madhu came to an end.

Visit of the Superior General of the Oblates

On 6 May 1937, the Superior General of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the Very Rev. **Fr. Théodore Labouré, OMI**, accompanied by his Secretary, Fr. **Trebaol OMI**, visited the Shrine of Madhu. In his observations recorded in the shrine chronicle, Fr. Treabool expressed profound admiration for the shrine, describing the events he witnessed and the deep impressions the pilgrimage left upon him. He wrote that the devotion of the pilgrims deeply touched his heart. He also paid tribute to the dedicated service of the former bishops, administrators and, in particular, to the remarkable service of the administrator, **Fr. Alfred Huctin, OMI**. He described the Shrine of Madhu as “an oasis in the midst of a dense forest during ordinary days.” Following the recommendation of the Superior General, meditation sessions and retreats were introduced in both Tamil and Sinhala during the annual feast, marking a significant spiritual development at the shrine (AJB, pp. 291–292).

Approximately 15,000 pilgrims attended the August Feast in 1938. For the first time, government officials visited Madhu to supervise the festival. Among them were the Assistant Government Agent, the Medical Officer, and twelve police officers. With the approval of both the Government and the diocesan authorities, **Fr. Huctin, OMI**, undertook the deepening and widening of the “*Sonakar Kulam*,” financing the work through the offerings made by the faithful.

In 1939, **Fr. A. R. Brown, OMI**, conducted the first spiritual retreat in English at Madhu. During the same year, recognizing the needs of the poor at the Shrine, cooked meals were served twice daily. Following the transfer of Fr. Huctin OMI, **Fr. Julian Brohan, OMI**, was appointed administrator of the shrine.

The feast celebrated annually by the faithful of Pamunugama on 15 March, first introduced in 1890, marked its Golden Jubilee in 1940. Twenty-six priests assisted during the July Feast, while approximately 10,000 pilgrims participated in the August Feast. On the 11th and 12th of August, a Holy Hour was conducted each afternoon at 3.00 p.m. in the chapel. In addition, Eucharistic adoration was held at night from 9.00 p.m. until midnight in Tamil, Sinhala, and English, attracting large numbers of pilgrims (Madhu Codex, I, p. 289).

During this period, the existing main altar was replaced with a marble altar. Until then, the storage place for the sacred soil of Madhu had been located in front of the altar. To prevent dust from falling onto the altar when pilgrims collected the soil, the storage area was subsequently relocated behind the church (Codex II, p. 09).

On 25 June 1944, the Church of Our Lady of Madhu was solemnly consecrated and permanently dedicated to **Our Lady of the Rosary of Madhu**. This significant event took place during the years of the Second World War, adding special historical significance to the dedication ceremony.⁴

The Difficulties created by the assistant Government Agent

Bishop Guyomar recorded the following incident as noted in *Madhu Codex*. “Quite unexpectedly, we encountered a serious difficulty arising from the Assistant Government Agent of Mannar. Although food rationing had already been introduced, it had not previously been enforced with such severity. However, the Assistant Government Agent established inspection checkpoints at the junctions leading to Madhu and outside the shrine premises. Even pilgrims carrying small quantities of rice had their provisions confiscated on the spot and were fined Rs. 100, Rs. 200, or even Rs. 400. The regulations were enforced with exceptional strictness. As a result, many poor pilgrims were reduced to utter destitution. Through the arbitrary actions of a single official, the devotees of the Blessed Virgin Mary were subjected to great hardship. Although the matter was eventually resolved, the pilgrims took a long time to overcome the painful memories and bitter experiences caused by these measures.” (*Madhu Codex*, II, p.16)

Prior to the 1947 annual feast, the sanctuary of the church was paved with marble (*Madhu Codex* II, p.30). During the same year, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, celebrated on 8 December, was observed at Madhu for the first time.

Centenary of the Arrival of the Oblates to Jaffna

To commemorate the centenary of the arrival of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in the Diocese of Jaffna, the **miraculous statue of Our Lady of Madhu** was taken on pilgrimage to every parish in the diocese.

In 1948, the Superior General of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the Very Rev. Fr. J. Bouquet-Bouger, OMI, visited Sri Lanka on an official canonical visitation of the Oblate communities. During his visit, he participated in several receptions held for the statue in various parishes and celebrated Holy Mass at the Shrine of Madhu on **Sunday, 6 June 1948**. He also recorded his impressions on these events in the shrine *codex* (*Madhu Codex* II, pp. 33–34).

Following the recommendation of the Assistant Superior General, and in view of Bishop Guyomar's advancing age and frequent ill health, **Fr. J. Emilianuspillai, OMI**, was appointed **Coadjutor Bishop** on **11 March 1949**. He was consecrated bishop on 22 May 1949 in the then unfinished Cathedral of St. Mary, Jaffna.

The Silver Jubilee of the Coronation (1924–1949)

On 2 July 1949, the Silver Jubilee of the Canonical Coronation of the miraculous statue of **Our Lady of the Rosary of Madhu** was celebrated with great solemnity. As anticipated, an immense gathering of pilgrims assembled at the shrine. Contemporary newspaper reports estimated the attendance at approximately 125,000, while police and Government Agent records placed the figure closer to 150,000.

All the bishops of Sri Lanka, with the exception of the Bishop of Trincomalee–Batticaloa, together with a large number of priests, participated in the celebration. To meet the growing needs of the pilgrims, an additional well was dug to improve the supply of drinking water.

Beginning in 1950, the annual Holy Week (Paschal) liturgical celebrations were introduced at the Shrine. During the pilgrimage of the shrine administrator, **Fr. Brohan, OMI**, to Rome, **Fr. V. S. Soosainathan, OMI**, served as Acting Administrator. Approximately 50,000 pilgrims attended the July Feast of 1950.

By this time, Bishop Guyomar had decided to retire because of his advanced age and recurring illness. He presided over the August Feast of 1950, which became his final official celebration at Madhu. On 25 August 1950, during the lunch held at the Bishop's House following the annual retreat for the clergy, he formally announced his retirement and declared that **Bishop Emilianuspillai, OMI**, would succeed him as Bishop of Jaffna.

That same evening, Bishop Emilianuspillai, accompanied by **Fr. L. A. Singarayer, OMI**, escorted Bishop Guyomar to St. Henry's College, Ilavalai. After spending a few days there, he chose

to live his remaining years in a small room behind St. Anne's Church, Valithundal, leading a remarkably simple and humble life. His retirement was devoted to teaching catechism to children, instructing adults in the faith, celebrating Holy Mass daily, and faithfully preaching both weekday and Sunday homilies.

Bishop Guyomar lived a life of profound holiness and died with the reputation of a saintly bishop. He was a man distinguished by **purity, refinement, simplicity, scholarship, and sanctity**. He attached exceptional importance to the Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu and was instrumental in promoting devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary throughout the Diocese of Jaffna.

During his episcopate, the practice of praying the **Holy Rosary** became firmly established both at the Shrine of Madhu and across the diocese. In his pastoral letters, Bishop Guyomar repeatedly emphasized the spiritual significance of the Rosary. The Oblates of Mary Immaculate likewise made a lasting contribution to fostering Marian devotion and establishing the Rosary as an integral part of the spiritual life of the Diocese of Jaffna.

Bishop Emilianuspillai OMI (1950–1972)

On 25 August 1949, Bishop **Emilianuspillai OMI** (1949–1972) assumed responsibility as the Bishop of the Diocese of Jaffna. At that time, Rev. Fr. Julian Brohan OMI was serving as the Administrator of Madhu Shrine. The Administrator provided great assistance in implementing the plans and initiatives of the Bishop.

In order to enable pilgrims to experience a deeper spiritual atmosphere, all shops except those selling food were relocated from the shrine premises to Madhu Road. Greater attention was given to improve the water supply and electricity facilities. In 1950, two high-powered generators were purchased to ensure a regular electricity supply during the feast celebrations.

Through his great efforts, Fr. Brohan brought two statues of **Our Lady of Madhu**, carved from white marble in Europe. The

larger statue was installed in the Portio, while the smaller statue was placed at the entrance located at the Madhu Road junction on the Mannar–Medawachchiya Road.

When Fr. Brohan completed his service on 12 September 1956, Rev. Fr. **Christy Selvaratnam OMI** assumed responsibility as the Administrator. Appreciating the work of Fr. Brohan, he recorded the following in *Madhu Codex*:

“Fr. Brohan, as a faithful servant of the Blessed Virgin Mary, carried out many remarkable works with dedication and sacrifice during his 17 years of service. During his period of administration, electricity was provided throughout the entire Madhu Shrine area, a public address system was installed, the roof of the church was constructed, and the altar was built with marble stones. Many houses were constructed, roads were developed, and the Madhu Shrine was surveyed and a map was prepared. Above all, a deep devotion towards Our Lady of Madhu was created in the hearts of the people of Sri Lanka.”(*Madhu Codex II*)

On 8 September 1956, Rev. Fr. **Joseph Christy Selvaratnam OMI** was appointed as the Administrator. During his administration, he organized both major and minor feast celebrations and made arrangements for pilgrims to participate in spiritual retreats in small groups.

He acted with patience, impartiality, and wisdom in preserving the sanctity of the shrine and maintaining proper discipline. He systematically recorded events in *Madhu Codex*. He paid special attention to preserving holiness and discipline within the shrine premises.

On 24 December 1957, a severe flood occurred at Madhu Shrine. Acting with great courage and dedication, the Administrator encouraged the people through his presence among them and, despite many dangers, prevented loss of life and property.

When tensions arose among the Tamil and Sinhala communities who had been settled at Pandivirchchan a village closer to Madhu by Bishop Emilianuspillai, the Administrator contacted government authorities and with their assistance, brought the situation under control. However, the Sinhala youth later returned to the Southern part of the country. As a result this year, the July Feast was cancelled.

The government provided assistance by supplying two large generators and two water-pumping machines at a cost of three hundred thousand rupees.

Through the initiative of the Bishop and the Administrator, the Franciscan Sisters of Mary took up their ministry at Madhu on 15 March 1959.

After the feast Mass, the Bishop and the people opened and blessed the convent. The main responsibilities of the Sisters were to take care of the church activities and administer the hospital. A vehicle was also provided for them so that they could visit neighboring villages and provide medical assistance to the people. Many other services were also expected from the Sisters.

The construction work of the Madhu Hospital was completed on 26 May, and after providing electricity and water facilities, it was handed over for service.

During that year, a beautifully decorated vehicle was used for the Blessed Sacrament Procession and the statue procession.

The Administrator maintained strict regulations regarding the dress and behavior of women at the shrine. He also warned those who spent time unnecessarily chatting and engaging in idle activities on the church verandas. In general, the Administrator paid great attention to maintaining order, discipline, and holiness both inside the church and throughout the shrine surroundings. Furthermore, for the first time, Italian terrazzo marble flooring was installed in the church.

Fr. Selvaratnam served as the Administrator until 8 September 1961. Following him, Rev. Fr. **Alfred Mouille OMI** served as the Administrator from 1961 to 1973. During his administration, all activities were carried out smoothly and systematically. He arranged various facilities for the welfare and convenience of pilgrims.

In July 1963, the “Ceylon Bakery” was purchased by the Madhu Shrine from Mr. Nildriya. Furthermore, regulations were introduced to prevent undesirable activities within the shrine, such as the consumption of alcohol and hunting.

The **Franciscan Sisters** who had been serving at Madhu completed their mission after some years and left the shrine. The Franciscan Sisters had carried out many remarkable services at Madhu. In this situation, responding to the request of the Administrator, Fr. Mouille OMI, and accepting the invitation of Bishop Emilianuspillai, a group of Sisters from the **Jaffna Province, Holy Family Congregation** sisters came to Madhu on 25 March 1969 to continue their service.

During the **twenty-three years of administration of Bishop Emilianuspillai**, the Madhu Shrine experienced development in many dimensions. The Bishop gradually introduced into Madhu the liturgical recommendations of the Second Vatican Council. The **Eucharistic devotion held on the evening before the feast day**, the **Eucharistic procession**, and the **statue procession and blessing after the feast Mass** were introduced during his episcopate.

He created an environment where pilgrims visiting the shrine could experience peace of mind and spiritual renewal and ensured that the necessary facilities were provided. He encouraged invited both Tamil and Sinhala priests to provide the **Sacrament of Reconciliation** for pilgrims.

He encouraged the Administrators to improve electricity supply, water facilities, repair existing houses, and construct new accommodation facilities. He acted firmly in matters concerning the

preservation of the holiness of the shrine and took strict measures against activities such as dancing, singing, hunting, and alcohol consumption. He paid great attention to maintaining discipline and order within the shrine.

One of the greatest challenges faced by Bishop Emilianuspillai and Administrator Fr. Mouille OMI was the devastating cyclone that struck the **Gulf of Mannar on 22 December 1964**.

The cyclone caused extensive destruction to the church, surrounding buildings, large trees, electrical connections, and the sound system facilities. After the cyclone, the Bishop faced great challenges in restoring normal conditions at Madhu. It took several months to bring the shrine back to normal functioning.

Bishop Emilianuspillai was the **last OMI Bishop who administered the Shrine of Madhu**. During his final years, he depended greatly on medicines due to his declining health. Unexpectedly he passed away on **17 July 1972**.

Bishop B. Deogupillai: Bishop of Jaffna (1973 – 1981)

Bishop B. **Deogupillai** was appointed as the Bishop of Jaffna on **23 December 1972** and assumed responsibility on **9 January 1973**. Among the Bishops who administered the Madhu Shrine, Bishop Deogupillai was the **first diocesan Bishop**.

At that time, Rev. Fr. **Mouille OMI** continued to serve as the Administrator of Madhu⁵. However, Administrator Rev. Fr. E. **Bastiampillai** his successor briefly recorded the services of Fr. Mouille OMI at Madhu.

Rev. Fr. Mouille OMI carried out many excellent works during his twelve years of service. During these twelve years, he travelled to France only once for a short period in **1966** for his personal rest.

According to the record made by Rev. Fr. Bastiampillai in Madhu codex regarding the ministry of Fr. Mouille OMI:

“Rev. Fr. Mouille OMI had to face many challenges during his period as Administrator. The greatest challenge was the massive cyclone that occurred on 22 December 1964 and the enormous destruction caused by it. The shrine suffered extensive damage due to the impact of the storm. The electrical connections and sound system were completely destroyed. The roof of the main church and the roof of the Sacred Heart chapel were completely blown away by the cyclone. Likewise, the houses used for pilgrims and their roofs were completely damaged.

The storm, which blew at a speed of 120 miles per hour, uprooted large shade trees such as magosa, tamarind, and other trees. As a result, it took several months to clean the Shrine premises.

To restore the electricity supply and sound system facilities of the shrine, the ‘Morris Roche Company’ from Colombo was brought in. The temporary wooden poles used for electricity connections were removed and replaced with concrete poles. Mercury electric lamps were installed at the sanctuary and its surroundings.

During the administration of Fr. Mouille OMI electricity was extended up to the Pandivirichchan Road area. During his period, efforts were made by the village council, with the assistance of the Mannar Government Agent Mr. I. O. K. Fernando, to move back the shops that had previously been relocated to Madhu Road into the Madhu Shrine premises.

Bishop Emilianuspillai strongly opposed this attempt because the village council sought to increase its revenue through this arrangement. With the aim of protecting the sanctity of the Shrine, the Bishop himself had to bear the expenses related to construction and development.

At the same time, because of the 1964 cyclone, all feasts, including the August Feast, were cancelled.” In October 1969, mud was removed from the Madhu tank, the bund was repaired, and the tank was deepened under the supervision of the Navaloka Company.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, Fr. Mouille OMI arranged for the middle section of the tank to be deepened and also ensured that the canal supplying water to the small tank was improved.

Through his great efforts to improve sanitation facilities at Madhu Shrine, many covered pit latrines were constructed. This helped control the spread of flies and improved hygienic conditions at the shrine.

On 10 April, all the employees of Madhu Shrine gathered in front of the reception room for priests to bid farewell to Fr. Mouille OMI. They expressed their gratitude for all the assistance and support he had given them.

The experience of the staff was recorded as follows: “Although Rev. Fr. Alfred Mouille OMI was a person with a strict and firm personality, he was also a person of great compassion and kindness.” (Madhu codex II)⁶

Following Rev. Fr. Emmanuel Bastiampillai, Rev. Fr. **Charles Senthilvel OMI** served as the Administrator of the Madhu Shrine. He gave special attention to develop of the infrastructure facilities of the shrine. The Bishop B. Deogupillai also granted him freedom to carry out his responsibilities.

During his administration, seven houses were constructed, each at a cost of Rs. 36,000/=. It was also during his period as Administrator that the **Diocese of Mannar was established**, and the episcopal ordination ceremony of its first Bishop, **Bishop Thomas Saundranayagam**, was held at the Madhu Shrine on 30 July at 5.30 p.m.

Bishop Thomas Saundranayagam: Bishop of Mannar (1981-1992)

In 1981, the Honourable Prime Minister of the Republic of Sri Lanka, Mr. R. Premadasa, visited Madhu on the evening of

14 August. During his visit, he promised to fulfill three requests presented to him and later implemented them:

- Digging tube wells and installing pumps for them
- Deepening the Madhu tank and removing the accumulated mud and soil
- Constructing 200 new covered toilets for the use of pilgrims

After serving as Administrator for five years, Rev. Fr. **Charles Senthilvel OMI** handed over the administration of the shrine on 30 October 1981 to Rev. Fr. T. B. Devarajah of the Diocese of Mannar.⁷

Following Fr. Devarajah, Rev. Fr. **Soosaithasan Croos OMI** served as the Administrator of Madhu Shrine from **13 October 1984 to 4 February 1989**, during a period he encountered many challenges and crises.

Referring to this period, he recorded in the *Madhu Codex* thus: “Throughout my period of administration, the entire country was experiencing a tense situation, and it was an extremely fearful and difficult time.”

Due to the unstable situation, especially in the **Northern and Eastern regions of Sri Lanka**, major feast celebrations could not be conducted. Although extensive preparations had been made, people were unable to come to the shrine because of the prevailing circumstances.

On 7 February, the people of **Pandivirichchan and Chinna Pandivirichchan** were forced to leave their villages due to military pressure and sought refuge at Madhu.

On 8 February 1987, soldiers of the Sri Lankan Army’s “Gajabau Regiment” surrounded the Madhu Shrine at around 10.00 a.m.

The **Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord** was signed in Colombo on **29 July 1987** between Sri Lankan President **J. R. Jayewardene** and Indian Prime Minister **Rajiv Gandhi**. As such for the August Feast, a considerable number of people from the Southern parts of Sri Lanka too, attended. Among them were 35 priests and approximately 60,000 devotees.

Following the Peace Accord, the **Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF)** was stationed in the Northern and Eastern parts of Sri Lanka. On 7 March, Indian troops arrived Madhu Shrine area.

The feast on **8 December 1988** was celebrated with only a very small number of people. At around 2.30 p.m., the Administrator was taken by the Indian Army to their camp and detained for an entire day. Through the intervention of the Bishop of Mannar, the Government Agent of Mannar and the Assistant Government Agent, he was released the following day.

After resting for ten days at the Bishop's House in Mannar, he returned to Madhu on **22 December**. After completing his ministry at Madhu, Rev. Fr. **Soosaitasan Croos OMI** was transferred to the parish of Vavuniya on 4 February 1989. After Rev. Fr. Soosaitasan Croos OMI, Rev. Fr. **P. Jesurajah** from the Diocese of Mannar served as Administrator of Madhu Shrine. He was followed by Rev. Fr. **A. P. Devasahayam** from the Diocese of Jaffna.

Bishop Rayappu Joseph: Bishop of Mannar (1992-2016)

Following Rev. Fr. A. P. Devasahayam, Rev. Fr. **Stanislaus Philips OMI** of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) served as Administrator from **August 1999 to September 2006**.

During this period, a severe war situation prevailed in the **Northern and Eastern regions of Sri Lanka**. Large numbers of people from the North were displaced and came to the Madhu area seeking safety and protection. People lived in fear in Madhu and its surrounding areas. During this difficult time, Fr. Stanislaus encouraged the people and remained with them, offering consolation and support.

At a time when intense fighting was taking place in the **Vanni region**, approximately **35,000 people** had taken refuge at Madhu Shrine. On the night of **20 November 1999**, a tragic incident occurred in the history of Madhu Shrine. At around **10.00 a.m.**, Sri Lankan military forces advanced towards Madhu from Pandivirichchan with heavy artillery attacks. Heavy fight was continuing between the Sri Lanka Army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Madhu area.

Seeking safety, people gathered inside the church and in the priests' residence to spend the night. At around 10.45 p.m., three shells fell on the **Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus**, killing **37 people** and injuring approximately **58 others**. Among the deceased, the bodies of **26 victims were buried at Madhu**, while the remaining bodies were sent to their respective villages.

During the conflict between the **Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)** and the Sri Lankan Army, people from **Maathoddam and the Vanni region** frequently came to Madhu seeking refuge. In 2001 over 35 thousand displaced people were in Madhu Shrine seeking refuge.

Whenever circumstances permitted, people came in small numbers to the shrine to participate in major and minor feast celebrations.

In **2001**, when Madhu Shrine was under the control of the LTTE, approximately **100,000 people** participated in the feast celebration. The hospital functioning at Madhu Shrine was taken over by the **Sisters of the Holy Cross in August 2003**.

On 20 November 2003, approximately 3,500 square feet of granite marble stones imported from India were laid in the sanctuary area and the courtyard of the altar of Our Lady of Madhu.

The road leading from Madhu Road into the shrine premises was renovated in a modern manner and opened for public use.

Furthermore, foundation work was begun for a new building consisting of **50 rooms** and a spacious dining hall. The purpose of this building was to provide accommodation for priests during feast celebrations and to serve as a retreat and meditation centre.

Near the Administrator's Office, foundation was laid for a building consisting of 20 rooms for priests' accommodation. The first-floor construction was completed before Fr. Philips was transferred. Plans were also prepared for the further expansion and development of the Shrine. These plans were later implemented by those who continued the work. In September, the mud was removed from the large tank, and the smaller tank was deepened. On 8 July 2005, renovation work on the verandah of the church began.

During the period when Rev. Fr. Stanislaus Philips OMI served as Administrator, several construction and renovation projects were carried out at the Shrine despite many challenges. With the approval of the Bishop, facilities such as drinking water, toilets, and sanitation services were developed for the benefit of pilgrims.

During the period when displaced people were staying at Madhu, all activities were conducted in an orderly manner as though it were a parish community. School classes, catechism classes, Catechetical Day celebrations, catechism exam competitions, sports competitions among catechism students, Small Christian Community (SCC) meetings, and discussions among SCC animators were regularly conducted. Thus, the Shrine of Madhu remained a place filled with continuous pastoral activities.

Rev. Fr. Stanislaus Philips OMI was the last Oblate missionary priest who served at Madhu shrine as administrator.⁸

The services of the Oblates from the Northern Province as well as those from the Southern Province (in Sinhala language) were significant. Their contributions included liturgical services, preaching, administration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and various pastoral activities according to the needs of the situation.

The Oblates also played an important role in recording and preserving many valuable historical details about Madhu Shrine and its development. In particular, Rev. Fr. Messier OMI (Rev. Fr. Massier OMI), who began the tradition of writing ‘*Codex Historicus*’ of Madhu Shrine in 1886, deserves to be remembered with gratitude. Following him other Oblate missionaries faithfully maintained the custom of writing the *codex*.

Another person who deserves grateful remembrance is Rev. Fr. A. J. B. Antoninus OMI, who authored the English book “**The Chronicle of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Madhu**”, documenting the history and significance of the Shrine. Former Bishop of Chilaw Edmund Peiris OMI, an eminent Sri Lankan Church Historian, in his introduction to this book, compliments the author regarding the sources used in the following words: “The imposing bibliography, mass of quotations, references and the variety of documents used, bear witness to our author’s industry and enthusiasm”.⁹

Conclusion

Archival records, historical books and articles relating to Madhu Shrine provide ample evidence to certify that European and indigenous bishops and priests belonging to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate Congregation made a tremendous contribution to the growth and development of this sacred shrine.

Among them were seven bishops and more than thirty priests. These priests contributed in various capacities-as Administrators of the Shrine, temporary administrators, and in many other forms of service. They served continuously at Madhu Shrine from 8 February 1848 until 31 March 1973. Even after this period, three more Oblate priests continued their service at the Shrine.

Apart from these services, Oblate priests from the Southern Province also contributed significantly through preaching, administering the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and providing other pastoral services. Attempting to limit and describe the contribution of the Oblates merely in written words would be an incomplete assessment of their immense service.

It is truly remarkable that such a shrine emerged and developed in the dense forests of the Vanni region. Oblate missionaries dedicated themselves completely to developing the Shrine of Madhu, expanding its infrastructure, and transforming it into a major pilgrimage centre that provides greater facilities for pilgrims.

Their contributions can be broadly understood in three areas:

1. Construction and development of the Shrine
2. Improvement of infrastructure facilities
3. Organisation and promotion of spiritual activities

The Oblates were responsible for transforming a small hut-like chapel into a large stone church. Beginning with the foundation laid in **1872**, they constructed a magnificent church with a suitable portico and façade. Gradually, they established facilities such as residences for priests, confession chapels and other necessary buildings, thereby shaping the Shrine of Madhu into the important spiritual centre.

When considering the infrastructural facilities of the Shrine, the Oblate missionaries worked with great vision and commitment to transform it into a renowned Marian shrine. They constructed hospital, post office, internal roads, built small houses for the pilgrims in the shrine, dug wells, developed and improved the tank, expanded water supply facilities, provided electricity and lighting facilities, established shops and arrangements for obtaining food supplies, and improved sanitation and transportation facilities.

Through these continuous efforts, they succeeded in transforming Madhu Shrine into one of the most famous shrines dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The reason why today hundreds of thousands of people from Sri Lanka and other countries around the world gather at Madhu is because of the inner peace and spiritual experience they receive there. In general, all those who undertake a pilgrimage experience

inner satisfaction and peace of mind. They deeply believe that their prayer will be favorably answered.

When considering the liturgical life in the Shrine, the external environment prevailing at Madhu is found to be highly conducive for spiritual experience. The well-organized major and minor feasts, morning and evening prayers, recitation of the holy rosary, encouragement and opportunities provided for receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the continuous presence of large numbers of devout pilgrims filling the church at all times, and the importance given to maintaining the holiness and discipline of the Shrine; all these factors attract the devotees.

In this way, the bishops and priests belonging to the Oblate Congregation have contributed continuously and gradually throughout history to the establishment and development of the Shrine of Madhu.

Any historical event can be properly understood and its conclusions can gain greater validity only when it is examined objectively. Therefore, to understand the greatness and significance of the contributions of the Oblates objectively, their works must be studied within the religious, social, geographical, and historical contexts in which they carried out their mission.

It is not an exaggeration to state that without the visionary contributions of the Oblates, the Shrine of Madhu could not have developed into the great Marian shrine that it is today in Sri Lanka.

However, the primary reason for the uniqueness and greatness of this Shrine is due to the intercession and miracles of **Our Lady of Good Health of Madhu** (*Maruthamadu Matha*). Her maternal presence, powerful intercession, and the blessings experienced by countless devotees have made this Shrine a place of special power house.

Endnotes

¹ See, W. L. A. Don Peter, *Historical Gleaning*, Colombo, 1992, p. 129.

² See, A. J. B. Antoninus, *The Chronicle of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Madhu*, Jaffna, p. ii. Hereinafter reference from this work will be simply cited as (A.J.B). A major part of this article is based on this book.

³ Probably later the statue was taken to Jaffna for repair in 1905. This may be the reason why the statue is comparatively too heavy for its size.

⁴ 01st September 1939 to 02 September, was the period of second world war.

⁵ No records are available about the events which took place between June 1967 and April 1973.

⁶ These words of appreciation were recorded in Madhu codex by Rev. Fr. E. Bastiampillai the successor of Rev. Fr. Alfred Mouille OMI.

⁷ Rev. Fr. Charles Senthilvel OMI, had faithfully recorded about the events in Madhu Codex. Unfortunately Codex I & II, were lost probably between 2011 and 2018. So no details were available about the events from 02 Nov. 1976 to 01 January 1981 for reference. Fr. Charles started to write Madhu Codex III.

⁸ Details regarding the administration of Fr. Stanislaus Philips OMI, were collected from Madhu Codex written by him (*Madhu Codex, III*).

⁹ (AJB,p.v)

Reference Books

Codex Historicus of Madhu Church, I, II, & III.

Rev. Fr. A. J. B. Antoninus OMI, *The Chronicle of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Madhu*, Jaffna, 1979. (AJB)

Rev. Fr. W. L. A. Don Peter, *Historical Gleaning*, Colombo, 1992.

Rev. Fr. Gnanamuthu Pilendran, *Madhu Matha Thiruththala Varalaru*, 2025, Sillalai, Jaffna 2025.