

The Spiritual Conscience of Episcopal Governance in Henri Joulain, OMI

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Introduction

My formation in the French language, both in Paris and later at Madurai Kamaraj University, instilled in me a deep desire to discover the lives and missionary legacy of the French missionaries who dedicated themselves to the service of the Church in Sri Lanka. During my research, I came across a valuable work in the Oblate Library, *Our Tribute to Our Oblate Predecessors*, edited by Fr. Philips Jesuthasan, OMI. The inspiring witness of these missionaries, their faith in Christ, their zeal for souls, and their unwavering commitment to the mission led me to reflect more profoundly on the nature and demands of the priesthood.

My interest was further awakened by the rich collection of historical documents preserved in the Archives of the Bishop's House, Jaffna, many of which were in a fragile and deteriorating condition. During the process of digitizing the diocesan archives, I discovered three volumes of the diary of Bishop Henri Joulain, OMI, covering the years 1893–1919. Recognizing their historical and spiritual significance, I undertook the task of translating these manuscripts from French into English. As I immersed myself in Joulain's writings, I became increasingly captivated by the burdens, challenges, and spiritual struggles that marked his episcopal ministry. His diary reveals not only the history of a diocese but also the inner world of a shepherd carrying the weight of pastoral responsibility in a complex missionary context. The present article is the fruit of that encounter. Drawing

principally from the first eight years of Joulain's diary, it seeks to reflect on the nature of his episcopal ministry, the challenges he faced, and the spiritual convictions that sustained him in the service of the Church.

History preserves actions. It records decisions, events, movements, and achievements. Yet beneath these visible realities lies something far less accessible and far more decisive: the interior conscience of those entrusted with authority.

The episcopate of Henri Joulain, OMI, Bishop of Jaffna at the turn of the twentieth century, offers a rare opportunity to enter such an interior world. His *Codex Historicus*, Volume I, preserved in the diocesan archives of Jaffna, is not a literary or reflective diary in the modern sense. It is administrative in tone often concise, sometimes abrupt. It records pastoral journeys, confirmations, disputes, acquisitions, financial decisions, and missionary developments. At first glance, it appears to be a factual register of episcopal activity. Yet when read attentively, it reveals something deeper: the steady presence of a conscience aware of its responsibility before God. Joulain himself expresses this understanding succinctly:

“L'évêque ne reçoit pas un honneur, mais une responsabilité.”¹

“A bishop does not receive honour; he receives responsibility.”

This statement provides the hermeneutical key to his entire episcopate. Jaffna at the time of his governance was a complex and fragile missionary diocese. It faced caste divisions that threatened ecclesial unity, schismatic movements that challenged authority, Protestant expansion that competed for influence, and financial instability that constrained growth. Infrastructure was limited, distances were considerable, and communication was slow. In such a context, episcopal leadership required not only

administrative competence, but also moral clarity, spiritual endurance, and prudent judgment.

This study proposes that Joulain's episcopate can be understood through a central theological insight: that authority in the Church is fundamentally the weight of souls.

1. The Weight of the Apostolate

The episcopate of Henri Joulain, OMI, offers rare access to an interior world through his *Codex Historicus*, Volume I. Though administrative in structure, the text reveals a deeply theological consciousness one in which governance is never merely external, but always preceded by an interior act of moral discernment. This becomes immediately evident in his understanding of episcopal office:

“La dignité épiscopale n’est pas une élévation, mais une charge.”²

“Episcopal dignity is not an elevation, but a burden.”

This statement is not rhetorical flourish. It is existential conviction. He is not describing an idea; he is declaring a reality he lives. For Joulain, the episcopate does not signify ascent into rank, but descent into responsibility. He does not receive authority as possession, but as entrustment. The office does not elevate him above others; it binds him to them to their faith, their failures, their divisions, and their salvation. Thus, the bishop is not one who stands above the Church, but one who stands answerable for it. Joulain interprets his appointment not as honour, but as accountability not before institutions, but before God.

This orientation is decisive. It shifts the entire axis of his governance. His decisions are not framed primarily by administrative efficiency or ecclesiastical expectation, but by a deeper question: What must I answer for before God? The diocese is not simply a territory to be administered, but a charge of souls

entrusted to his conscience. Each act whether of correction, discipline, or pastoral initiative carries within it the weight of future judgment.

It is here that the *Codex Historicus* acquires its true significance. What appears outwardly as record is, in reality, examination. Joulain writes not merely to document events, but to situate himself within them to ensure that his actions correspond to the responsibility he bears. The diary thus becomes a space where governance and conscience meet, where authority is silently tested before it is exercised.

This explains the characteristic tone of his episcopate: firm, sober, and at times severe. Such firmness does not arise from temperament alone, but from conviction. If episcopal dignity is indeed a burden, then negligence cannot be tolerated, indifference cannot be ignored, and disorder cannot be allowed to persist. For Joulain, to govern is to bear responsibility not only for actions performed, but for omissions permitted.

In this light, his episcopacy is best understood not as the exercise of power, but as the endurance of obligation. He governs under a horizon that is not merely historical, but eschatological. The ultimate tribunal is not that of public opinion or institutional evaluation, but that before which every shepherd must stand: the judgment of God.

Thus, the statement “not an elevation, but a burden” is not a definition alone. It is the interior law of his episcopal existence. It is the principle that shapes his decisions, disciplines his authority, and gives coherence to his mission. Through it, Joulain emerges not merely as an administrator of a diocese, but as a bishop who governs under the weight of conscience a conscience formed by faith, sustained by responsibility, and oriented toward divine accountability.

This burden demands vigilance:

“Nous devons veiller sans cesse sur le troupeau confié à notre garde.”³

“We must keep constant watch over the flock entrusted to our care.”

It also carries an interior gravity:

“Nous aurons à rendre compte de tout.”⁴

“We shall have to give an account of everything.”

Such statements disclose the horizon within which he lives his office. Governance is not merely functional; it is answerable. Every act is weighed not only in time, but in eternity.

This awareness explains his pastoral concern:

“Nous regrettons l’indifférence que beaucoup de catholiques montrent pour la religion.”⁵

“We regret the indifference that many Catholics show towards religion.”

His response is not resignation, but initiative:

“Nous avons annoncé une Mission...”⁶

“We have announced a Mission...”

At times, responsibility requires firmness:

“Il fallait agir avec fermeté.”⁷

“It was necessary to act with firmness.”

Thus, the *Codex Historicus* becomes not merely a record of events, but a register of conscience a space where authority is exercised under the weight of divine accountability.

2. Authority as Entrustment

Joulain’s theology of authority is further clarified in his language of care:

“Que le Seigneur Jésus bénisse nos efforts pour la sanctification des âmes confiées à nos soins.”⁸

“May the Lord Jesus bless our efforts for the sanctification of the souls entrusted to our care.”

The key term is 'confiées' entrusted. Authority, therefore, is not ownership. It is custody.

For Joulain, this distinction is decisive. The diocese does not belong to the bishop; it is placed in his hands. The souls under his care are not subjects to be governed, but persons entrusted to his vigilance, his judgment, and ultimately his answerability before God. Authority, then, is not a right to dispose, but a responsibility to preserve. It means that authority is not freedom to act; authority is obligation to care.

The verb 'confier' carries within it a relational and theological depth. To entrust is: to place something valuable in another's care, to expect fidelity rather than control, to establish a bond that is at once gift and obligation.

Joulain receives his episcopal office within this logic. What is given to him is not power, but souls and with them, a mandate: to guard, to guide, and to sanctify. His prayer reveals this clearly: sanctification is not his achievement, but his task under grace. Even his efforts require divine blessing, which means his authority is always exercised in dependence, never in autonomy.

This transforms the nature of governance. The bishop is not a proprietor of the Church, but its steward. He stands between God and the people, not as owner, but as custodian of what belongs to another. The diocese, in this sense, is not his domain, but his charge a trust that must be returned, accounted for, and justified.

Such a vision explains the seriousness with which Joulain approaches his office. If souls are entrusted, they can also be lost through negligence. Authority thus becomes a form of moral vigilance. Every decision carries weight because it affects not merely order, but salvation. The entrusted flock is not an abstraction; it is the concrete body for which he must one day answer.

Here the interior tribunal of conscience reappears with greater force. Before acting, Joulain is again guided by his inner moral judgment. His authority is always derivative, never original. It flows from Christ, the true Shepherd, and must therefore reflect His mind, His justice, and His mercy.

This is why his language remains consistently sober and prayerful. He does not claim success; he invokes blessing. He does not assert control; he expresses responsibility. Even in initiative, there is restraint: he acts, but he also submits his action to divine judgment.

In this light, authority becomes a sacred trust. It is exercised not in self-assertion, but in fidelity. It demands not dominance, but care. And above all, it requires that the one entrusted never forget the origin and end of that trust: what is received must be preserved, what is preserved must be sanctified, and what is sanctified must be rendered back to God.

Thus, for Joulain, authority is not possession. It is entrustment under judgment a custody that binds the bishop not to power, but to responsibility, and not to himself, but to God.

3. Pastoral Method: Seeing Before Judging

His pastoral visitation reflects this principle:

“Le 28 mai, je commençai ma visite pastorale, qui devait durer près de quatre mois.”⁹

“On the 28th of May, I began my pastoral visit, which was to last almost four months.”

This is not ceremonial language. It reflects method.

For Joulain, visitation is not a formality of office but an act of disciplined attention. The duration itself nearly four months is revealing. It indicates not haste, but patience; not inspection from distance, but presence sustained over time. He does not govern

from reports alone. He chooses to see, to encounter realities as they are lived: parishes, clergy, lay conditions, tensions, and spiritual vitality or decline. This is the first movement of his pastoral method: to see before judging.

Seeing, for Joulain, is not passive observation. It is a moral act. It involves:

listening before speaking,
discerning before deciding,
understanding before correcting.

Such a method guards against superficial judgment. It allows him to grasp not only actions, but causes; not only disorders, but the conditions that produce them. His authority, therefore, is informed by proximity. Joulain's authority is not based on distance or reports. It is shaped by being close to the people and situation. He governs not as an external administrator, but as one who has entered into the life of his diocese.

This same principle becomes evident in moments of conflict:

“Notre principale préoccupation était d’éviter que ces troubles ne donnent lieu à des procès.”¹⁰

“Our main concern was to ensure that these disturbances did not lead to tribunal trials.”

Here, Joulain's priority is clearly defined. He does not begin with punishment, nor with juridical assertion. His first concern is containment and preservation. He seeks to prevent escalation to ensure that disorder does not harden into litigation, and conflict does not become institutional rupture. This reveals a second dimension of his method: to preserve before condemning.

Legal processes, while necessary, represent for Joulain a last recourse, not a first response. They formalize division, fix positions, and often deepen wounds. By seeking to avoid them, he demonstrates a pastoral instinct oriented toward:

reconciliation rather than confrontation,
stability rather than exposure,
healing rather than public judgment.

His authority, therefore, is not expressed through immediate coercion, but through measured restraint. He intervenes, but without precipitating unnecessary rupture. This approach does not imply weakness. On the contrary, it requires a deeper strength the ability to hold tension without dissolving into reaction. Joulain's governance resists both extremes: neither passive tolerance nor precipitous severity. Instead, it follows a deliberate path: observe, understand, contain, and only then, if necessary, correct.

Thus, his pastoral method can be described as a sequence of conscience:

first, to see reality truthfully,
then, to judge it justly,
and finally, to act proportionately.

In this light, visitation and conflict management are not separate aspects of his episcopate. They are expressions of a single principle: authority must be exercised only after reality has been patiently received and responsibly discerned.

His priority is not domination, but stability. Stability, for Joulain, is not mere order. It is the condition in which faith can endure, communities can remain united, and pastoral care can continue without fracture. To preserve this stability is itself a form of responsibility one that reflects his deeper conviction that he must answer not only for actions taken, but also for divisions allowed to grow.

Thus, Joulain's method reveals a bishop who governs not by immediacy, but by attentive presence; not by reaction, but by discernment; and not by power alone, but by a conscience that insists: one must first see, before one dares to judge.

4. Marian Interpretation of Mission: Providence Through Madhu

Joulain consistently interprets success theologically:
“Ce fut un nouveau triomphe de la Sainte Vierge sur le schisme.”¹¹

“It was a new triumph of the Blessed Virgin over the schism.”

This reveals not pious exaggeration, but theological vision. He does not place himself at the center of history. He places providence. For Joulain, providence is not an abstract doctrine; it is historically mediated, and in his context, it is read through Mary above all through the sanctuary of Madhu. Madhu is not simply a devotional center. It is a theological locus, a place where he discerns the action of God within the concrete fractures of his diocese.

To speak of a “triumph of the Blessed Virgin” is therefore not to attribute victory to human strategy or episcopal initiative. It is to recognize that grace precedes, accompanies, and completes mission. Joulain’s language relocates causality: what appears outwardly as pastoral success conversion, reconciliation, weakening of schism is interpreted as Marian mediation of divine providence.

Madhu becomes, in this perspective, a school of providence. Historically marked by refuge, pilgrimage, and shared devotion across divisions, the shrine embodies precisely what Joulain seeks pastorally: unity where there is fracture, faith where there is indifference, and return where there has been separation. In turning repeatedly toward Madhu implicitly or explicitly he is not escaping governance, but grounding it in a Marian horizon. This Marian reading shapes his method in three decisive ways:

i. Decentering of the Bishop

Joulain does not interpret mission as the extension of his own effectiveness. By attributing success to the Blessed Virgin, he deliberately displaces himself from the center of causality. He does not see himself as the principal source of pastoral fruitfulness. Instead of claiming, “I achieved this,” he recognizes that the true origin of renewal lies in God’s grace, which he perceives as working through the intercession of Mary.

This shift is not merely rhetorical; it is interior and theological. Authority acts, plans, and initiates, yet it refrains from claiming authorship of results. The bishop becomes a cooperator rather than the origin of renewal one who participates in a work that precedes and exceeds him. In this way, Joulain avoids the subtle temptation to appropriate success, to convert pastoral fruit into personal affirmation or authority into self-reference.

Such a posture preserves an essential spiritual freedom. By not absorbing achievements into his own identity, he remains inwardly detached from outcomes. Success does not inflate his self-understanding, nor does it become a measure of his personal worth. Instead, it is received with gratitude, as a gift rather than an acquisition.

Thus, his governance remains interiorly free from self-appropriation. What is achieved through his ministry is not possessed as personal accomplishment, but received as grace entrusted to his care. This decentering allows him to act with responsibility without falling into self-assertion, and to lead without losing sight of the true source of all fruitfulness.

ii. Mission as Return, Not Conquest

To describe progress as Mary’s “triumph” is to fundamentally reframe the meaning of mission. It shifts the

horizon from victory over others to restoration of communion. Mission, in Joulain's vision, is not conquest over opponents, but the gathering back of those who have become distant. It is not an expansion of control, but a healing of separation.

Mary, as Mother, embodies this logic. A mother does not conquer her children; she calls them back. Her authority is not exercised through domination, but through attraction, patience, and mercy. Thus, her "triumph" does not consist in defeating an adversary, but in restoring relationship. It is the victory of belonging over alienation, of communion over division.

In a context marked by schism, this perspective becomes decisive. Schism is not merely an institutional break; it is a wound in communion. To approach it with the logic of conquest would risk deepening the rupture turning separation into opposition and difference into hostility. Joulain, however, avoids this path. His aim is not to defeat those outside, but to reunite them. He does not seek victory over persons, but their return to the Church.

Here the sanctuary of Madhu assumes a central role. Historically, Madhu has been more than a devotional site; it has been a place of refuge, pilgrimage, and encounter across divisions ethnic, social, and even religious. It stands as a space where differences are suspended, and where a shared devotion creates a deeper unity. For Joulain, this is not accidental. It reveals something essential about how grace operates. Madhu becomes, therefore, a living sign of mission rightly understood:

a place where unity is not imposed, but discovered,
where belonging is not enforced, but awakened,
where return is not coerced, but invited.

In this sense, mission unfolds not through pressure, but through presence. The pilgrim does not arrive as a subject to be conquered, but as a seeker to be received. The movement toward

God is interior, gradual, and free. Joulain recognizes that such a movement cannot be produced by authority alone. It must be allowed to emerge under grace.

Thus, “unity without coercion” becomes the defining mark of this Marian vision. It respects freedom while inviting conversion. It heals without humiliating. It gathers without forcing. In a fractured ecclesial landscape, this approach preserves both truth and charity.

Theologically, this reflects a deeper insight: the Church grows not by domination, but by attraction. What draws people back is not the imposition of authority, but the experience of grace often mediated through spaces, symbols, and devotions that speak to the heart. Madhu becomes precisely such a mediation: a place where the maternal presence of Mary makes the possibility of return tangible.

In this light, Joulain’s understanding of mission reveals a profound pastoral wisdom. He recognizes that the true victory of the Church is not the defeat of its opponents, but the restoration of its members. The goal is not expansion of boundaries, but the healing of relationships. Mission, therefore, is fulfilled not when others are overcome, but when they come home.

iii. Providence Through Mediation

Joulain’s theology is implicitly incarnational. Providence, for him, is not an abstract principle operating above history, but a living reality unfolding within it. Divine action does not bypass human conditions; it engages them, working through concrete mediations persons, places, and devotions through which grace becomes perceptible and effective. In this framework, Mary is not a decorative presence within mission, but a privileged medium through which providence becomes present.

This perspective gives Madhu a distinctive theological significance. It is not simply a center of devotion, but a space where grace is experienced and recognized. Through the rhythms of pilgrimage, prayer, and Marian devotion, Joulain perceives a gradual transformation of hearts often hidden, yet real. Such transformation cannot be produced by administrative structures alone. Organization may regulate external life, but conversion belongs to another order. Where institutional action reaches its limits, Marian intercession continues the work in a quieter, interior manner.

Thus, when Joulain speaks of a “triumph of the Blessed Virgin,” he is not employing devotional language loosely. He is offering a theological reading of events. What appears outwardly as pastoral success is interpreted inwardly as the manifestation of grace mediated through Mary. The language of triumph, therefore, does not indicate domination, but disclosure the emergence of divine action within historical circumstances.

Madhu becomes, in this sense, a place of discernment. It forms in the bishop a particular way of reading reality: not merely in terms of outcomes and efficiency, but in terms of signs and grace. Events are no longer evaluated solely by their immediate results, but by their participation in a larger movement of providence.

This vision has direct consequences for governance. It prevents the reduction of mission to strategy and authority to technique. Joulain remains active and responsible, yet interiorly aware that he is cooperating in a work not his own. His task is not to generate grace, but to recognize it, align with it, and serve its unfolding.

In this way, providence through mediation becomes a principle of pastoral discernment. It holds together action and dependence, structure and grace, initiative and receptivity. Joulain

governs, therefore, within a sustained awareness that the true agent of mission is not himself, but God working quietly, maternally, and effectively through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin.

5. Discipline and Restoration

Perhaps nowhere is Joulain's balance more evident than in his exercise of discipline. During apostasy, he speaks with unmistakable clarity:

“Le Jeudi Saint, j’ai publié en chaire que tous ceux qui communiqueraient avec l’apostat seraient également excommuniés.”¹²

“On Holy Thursday, I proclaimed from the pulpit that all those who communicated with the apostate would also be excommunicated.”

This is not excess. It is precision.

For Joulain, discipline is not reaction, but protection of communion. Apostasy is not merely a private failure; it is an ecclesial rupture. To allow it to spread without response would be to fail in his responsibility as guardian. Thus, exclusion here is not an act of hostility, but a boundary setting act of truth a way of safeguarding the integrity of the Church and preventing contagion of error.

The timing is significant: Holy Thursday. On the very day that commemorates communion, priesthood, and unity, he defines the limits of that communion. The act is therefore not arbitrary. It is theologically situated. The Eucharist, which unites, cannot coexist with a rupture that denies its truth. Discipline, in this sense, becomes a form of eucharistic fidelity. Yet this is only one movement of his authority. For the same bishop who excludes is also the one who restores:

“Je le présentai au peuple comme l’enfant prodigue retournant à la maison de son père.”¹³

“I presented him to the people as the prodigal son returning to his father’s house.”

Here, the language shifts from juridical to evangelical, from sanction to reconciliation. The apostate is no longer defined by rupture, but by return. Joulain does not merely absolve privately; he reintroduces publicly, restoring not only sacramental standing, but ecclesial belonging.

The image he chooses is decisive: the prodigal son. This is not accidental rhetoric. It reveals how he interprets restoration: not as concession, not as administrative closure, but as grace received after conversion.

By presenting the apostate to the people, Joulain also educates the community. Discipline is not meant to create permanent exclusion, but to prepare the possibility of return. The community, which witnessed the boundary, must now witness the mercy. Thus, authority shapes not only the individual, but the ecclesial imagination teaching when to exclude and how to welcome back.

This reveals the inner unity of his approach:

Discipline without restoration becomes severity.

Restoration without discipline becomes indifference.

Joulain holds both together because both arise from the same source: responsibility for souls. Excommunication, in his practice, is not final condemnation. It is a medicinal act a moment of rupture intended to awaken conscience, to make visible the seriousness of separation, and to call the person back to truth. Its purpose is not exclusion as an end, but conversion as a goal. Restoration, therefore, is not contradiction of discipline, but its fulfillment.

This is why the same authority can both exclude and restore without inconsistency. In both cases, Joulain acts under the same principle: he must answer for the souls entrusted to him.

To tolerate error would be negligence; to refuse return would be failure of mercy. Thus, his episcopal authority reveals a deeper coherence: it protects the Church by setting limits, and it heals the Church by reopening communion.

In this light, Joulain emerges not as a disciplinarian alone, nor as a reconciler alone, but as a bishop who understands that truth and mercy are not opposites, but successive moments of the same pastoral responsibility.

The same authority that excludes also restores because both acts are governed by a single conviction: that no soul entrusted to him can be abandoned, neither in error nor in return.

Conclusion

The *Codex Historicus* of Henri Joulain, OMI, contains far more spiritual, pastoral, and theological insights than can be fully explored within the limits of a single study. His diary is not merely a historical record of episcopal administration, but a profound witness to the interior conscience of a bishop who understood authority as responsibility before God. Every page reflects a man who governed not simply through structures and decisions, but through discernment, vigilance, prayer, and accountability for the souls entrusted to his care.

The present study has therefore not attempted to exhaust the richness of Joulain's writings. Rather, it has sought to identify several central themes that illuminate the spiritual foundation of his episcopate: authority as burden, governance as entrustment, discipline balanced by restoration, mission grounded in providence, and pastoral leadership shaped by conscience and prudence. Through these selected aspects, a coherent vision of ecclesial authority emerges one rooted not in domination, but in stewardship and fidelity.

What makes Joulain particularly relevant is that his reflections transcend their historical context. Though written

within the missionary realities of Jaffna at the beginning of the twentieth century, his understanding of episcopal service speaks with remarkable clarity to the Church of every age. In a time when authority can easily be reduced to administration, influence, or institutional control, Joulain recalls a more demanding and deeply evangelical vision: the bishop as shepherd, custodian, and servant who must ultimately render an account before God.

For this reason, the selected themes presented in this article may serve as guiding principles for those entrusted with episcopal ministry and ecclesial leadership. They remind the Church that governance cannot be separated from conscience, discipline from mercy, mission from grace, or authority from humility. Joulain's episcopate demonstrates that authentic leadership in the Church is sustained not merely by efficiency or power, but by spiritual responsibility carried in fidelity before God.

Ultimately, the enduring value of Henri Joulain's *Codex Historicus* lies not only in the historical events it records, but in the spiritual vision it reveals. Beneath its administrative language stands the witness of a bishop who understood that episcopal dignity is not an elevation, but a burden and who sought to bear that burden with conscience, courage, and faith.

Endnotes

¹ Henri Joulain, *Codex Historicus*, Vol. I (Jaffna Diocesan Archives), fol. 7r.

² *Ibid.*, fol. 12v.

³ *Ibid.*, fol. 18r.

⁴ *Ibid.*, fol. 14r.

⁵ *Ibid.*, fol. 22r.

⁶ *Ibid.*, fol. 31v.

⁷ *Ibid.*, fol. 58r.

⁸ *Ibid.*, fol. 41r.

⁹ *Ibid.*, fol. 47v.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, fol. 66r.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, fol. 67v.

¹² *Ibid.*, fol. 70r.

¹³ *Ibid.*, fol. 89v.