

Oblate Mission to the Poor:

in the Light of CC&RR in the Jaffna Province

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Introduction

It is with immense joy and gratitude to our Heavenly Father the Oblates celebrate the 200 years of the approval of CC&RR of the Oblate Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. It is a long journey for all the Oblates to walk in the footsteps of our Beloved Founder St. Eugene De Mazenod for the last 200 years following the Constitution and Rules of our Congregation as a guiding light which shaped our identity, mission and destiny. The identity of the Oblates is linked to their Charism of “Evangelizing the poor and the abandoned” in the footsteps of our Beloved Founder. “Our Oblate Congregation exists for poor and as long as poor exists our congregation will exist” as our former Most Rev. Fr. Superior General Louis Lougen OMI said in his address to the Oblates. Oblate mission to the poor and the abandoned defines our existences as Oblates in the Church.

Meaning of 'Poor' for Our Founder

The concept of “the poor” in the life of St. Eugene de Mazenod, the Founder of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) originated from a combination of personal financial hardship, a spiritual awakening, and the social devastation he witnessed in Post-Revolutionary France. His personal experience of poverty also was the cause which inspired him to serve the poor in the future. Born into a Noble family in 1782 Eugene’s life was upended by the French Revolution. At age eight his family fled to Italy leaving their possessions behind. Financial failure during 2 years of exile his father failed in various

business attempts, leading the family into near destitution. He lived as a political refugee experiencing firsthand what it meant to be “materially in bad straits” and socially marginalized.

Our Founder’s conversion on Good Friday likely in 1807, when Eugene had a profound religious experience while contemplating the crucifix. He realized that Christ’s love was the only source of true happiness leading him to identify with Christ, who was sent to evangelize the poor. The ‘Spiritually Abandoned’ for Eugene, poverty was not just lack of money. It was “spiritual abandonment” - the state of those deprived of religious guidance and the Gospel. Social context in France in 1812, he found a society shattered by 25 years of continuous revolution. He was appalled that the church was neglecting common folk, servants, prisoners, and the rural poor.

The lifelong encounter with both material and spiritual poverty became the cornerstone of his new religious community. Missionaries of Provence in 1816, he gathered priests to live together and preach specifically to the poor. When the group was officially approved by the Pope in 1826 as the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, they adopted the motto “He has sent me to evangelize the poor” (Lk 4:18)

The Poor in the Biblical Perspective: An Oblate Reading.

From Genesis to Revelation Scripture reveals God’s Constant Care for the poor. For the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the biblical version is not optional. “Our special Charism mission is to the poor”. The Oblate Charism finds its deepest root in the biblical portrayal of God who hears the cry of the poor. The Hebrew Scriptures present poverty as both a social reality and a theological concern. God gives Israel laws to protect the ‘ebyon’ - destitute, ‘axi’ - afflicted and ‘ger’ - foreigners. The

prophets denounced injustices. For Oblates this prophetic tradition means that mission must include justice, peace and integrity of creation.

The ‘poor’ understood in the teaching of Jesus is centered around His mission to bring the good news to the poor (LK 4:18). The beatitudes also begin with the exultation of the poor (LK 6:20). When we look at the Gospel of Matthew Christ identifies Himself with the hungry, strangers and prisoners (Mt 25:40). This is why the Constitution states that Oblates are sent “especially to those who are poor.” The first Oblates in Jaffna served “poor fishermen, depending on their daily work for their bread”. The early church too practiced radical solidarity (Acts 4:32). St. Paul and St. James insist that faith must be shown in care for the poor (2 Cor 8:9, Jas 2:2). St. Eugene de Mazenod reading the same scriptures founded the Oblates “to bring the Gospel to those most abandoned”. In Jaffna Province today this is lived in Preaching missions, Counselling and JPIC work in the war affected areas; Mannar, Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu among the “poor with new faces”.

Biblically “poor” means three things: Material need, Spiritual dependence and social marginalization. The Oblate Mission therefore combines evangelization (LK 4:18), human promotion and prophetic witness. To be with the poor is to be with Christ.

Oblate Mission to the Poor in the Light of CC & RR

For the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, mission is not one activity among many. It is the very reason for their existence as a religious Congregation. The Constitutions and Rules state this clearly: the Oblates are “a missionary Congregation” whose purpose is “to continue the mission of Jesus Christ.” The

entire life of an Oblate, prayer, community, and apostolate is ordered towards this mission. According to Constitution 6, the Oblate mission finds its source in the mission of Christ. Jesus was “sent by the Father” to bring good news to the poor. Oblates, therefore, share in this same sending. The mission is described as “evangelization of the poor.” This does not limit the Oblates to material poverty only. The Constitutions speak of the “most abandoned”—those who are poor materially, spiritually, and those who have been left on the margins of the Church and society.

“Our special mission is to the poor and to the most abandoned” (Const 5). Oblates are to go where the need is greatest and where others cannot or will not go. This includes the poor, youth, workers, migrants, indigenous peoples, and those in difficult missions”. St. Eugene’s own words shape this. “We are sent to the poor” The poor are understood not only in economic terms, but also those poor in faith, hope and dignity. What is the “mission to the poor in practice? Constitution 6 says that we go where others do not go; we do what others do not do”. “2 Constitution 35 says “as disciples of Christ who became poor, we adopt a simple lifestyle. We share the life of the poor and are in solidarity with them.

Oblate Mission in Jaffna Province

The Jaffna Province of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate has for 175years lived the congregation’s foundational charism: “to evangelize the poor.” Established in response to the needs of Northern Sri Lanka, the Province continues to serve with the spirit of St. Eugene De Mazenod, reaching the most abandoned. The Oblates arrived in Sri Lanka on 28th November 1847 following Bishop Orazio Bettacchini’s appeal for missionaries for the “poor souls, very poor, the most abandoned.” Led by Fr. Stephen Semeria OMI, who later became Bishop of Jaffna, they

began pastoral work in “Yarlpanam” (Jaffna) diocese. The Ceylon Mission became a Province in 1967, and Jaffna was erected as a separate province in 1999.

According to the Constitution and Rules, the Oblate Mission is defined by three priorities lived out in the Jaffna Province. The first priority is proclamation of the Gospel. Our special mission is to the poor: “The Province upholds the tradition of the Oblate Grand Mission which began in 1858. This Grand Mission includes family visits, zonal masses, and sacraments. (The 2017 Grand Mission in Mannar reached 2100 families). Early records describe the faithful as “poor fishermen depending on their daily bread work for bread.” Responding to his, Oblates founded schools such as St. Patrick’s College, Jaffna, and teacher training center to serve marginalized communities.

The Constitutions call Oblates to be “signs and justice and hope!” Today Ministries extend to Vanni, Trincomalee, focusing on JPIC and pastoral care for war-affected and displaced families. The Jaffna Province thus continues to “write a new page of Gospel” by being present with the poor, building the Church, and witnessing of Hope. Oblate mission during the last 30 years of civil war and post-war mission to the affected victims speaks volumes of being with the traumatized and displaced families in order to give them hope amidst their untold sufferings.

Oblate Mission During the War

The civil war which lasted for 30 years brought heavy loss of lives, properties, and displacement of families from their traditional villages. It was a nightmare for all the families in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka who did not have hope (1983-2009). The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, OMI, have been present in Sri Lanka since 1847. During the 26-year

Sri Lankan civil war, their mission in the northern province — predominantly Tamil — focused on education, humanitarian relief, peacebuilding, and human rights advocacy amidst displacement and violence. **The Oblates maintained schools at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels in war-affected areas of the north. These institutions admitted students of all faiths, which was uncommon in a country divided along ethnic and religious lines. Religious communities affiliated with Oblate parishes, were displaced when convents and schools were damaged or abandoned during the conflict.**

Humanitarian Response to War and Disaster Due to two decades of civil war, Oblates in Jaffna had accumulated “years of experience in helping refugees”.⁵ Following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Fr. Paul Jeevendra, Superior Provincial in Sri Lanka, coordinated aid from Jaffna for approximately 48,000 displaced persons housed in churches and public buildings.⁶ Relief work included psychological counseling, hospital and school chaplaincy, care for the sick, funeral services, and long-term support for orphans.⁷ Peace building and Human Rights Post-war, the Oblates institutionalized reconciliation work through the Oblate Institute of Higher Learning, OIHL. It offers a diploma in National Reconciliation and Peacebuilding with field placements “in areas that were particularly affected by the violence of the civil war”.

The mission also engaged in human rights monitoring. In 2014, Fr. Praveen Mahesan, OMI, Director of the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation in Jaffna, was detained in Kilinochchi — the former LTTE headquarters - during a fact-finding mission. He was released following international pressure from NGOs including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Oblates from both Colombo and Jaffna provinces also participated in demonstrations by the “Families of the Disappeared” in Kilinochchi, with 11

Oblates forming the largest religious Contingent. Throughout the war, the Oblate mission in northern Sri Lanka functioned as both a pastoral and humanitarian presence. By combining education, direct relief, and structured peacebuilding, the Oblates sought to address immediate suffering while working toward long-term reconciliation in a divided society.

Post-War Oblate Mission in Northern Sri Lanka, 2009-2025

After the war ended in 2009, the Oblates in the Jaffna Province shifted from emergency relief to long-term rebuilding: peace education, community renewal, youth formation, and advocacy in war-affected districts like Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Vavuniya and Mannar. Peacebuilding, Formation, and Synodal Planning Peace education remains the core program. The Oblate Institute of Higher Learning, OIHL, continues its Diploma in National Reconciliation and Peacebuilding with field placements “in areas that were particularly affected by the violence of the civil war”¹. Institutionally, the Jaffna Province held an Oblate Assembly in February 2025 at Gnanodhayam, Mannar, under the theme “Synodal Journey of Hope – Renewing Oblate Charism Together”.² Delegates discussed formation, community life, mission, finance, and spiritual growth, with a focus on “new ways to serve their communities, especially in education, social outreach, and religious ministry”.³ The purpose was described as “listening, learning, and moving forward together” alongside the people they serve.⁴ Leadership Visits and Renewal in Oct-Nov 2024, Superior General Fr. Luis Ignacio Rois Alonso visited Jaffna Province for 10 days. ⁵He traveled through Vavuniya, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, and Mannar, meeting Oblates and communities in both urban and remote villages.⁶ He spent 3 days in historic Jaffna, where the first Oblates arrived 175 years ago, participating in perpetual vows and a new ordination.⁷ The visit

aimed to “listen to local concerns and share in the daily life of Oblate communities”.⁸ A Joint Council Meeting of Colombo and Jaffna Provinces was also held in Oct 2024 to discuss “various matters relating to the Oblate mission in Sri Lanka, as well as future planning and collaboration”.⁹ Education, Youth, and Lay Collaboration Oblate schools in the north continue multi-faith enrollment - “a rarity in a deeply-segregated country”.¹⁰

Oblate Mission with the 'Poor with New Faces'

The prolonged war affected the Tamil society in various ways. In the post-war situation Oblates were involved in the mission to the “poor with New Faces”. The traumatized families in the post-war situation were guided gave relief to their mental stress through the Counselling Centers in Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts by the Oblates. The dysfunctional families who lost their bread winners and children were cared materially as well as mentally through these Counselling Centers. These families were the “poor with new faces” and the Oblates accompanied them in the post-war situation by giving hope in their struggles. The Oblates cared also for the youth and adults who were addicted to Alcohol and drugs by establishing a center called “CRADA” in Mannar District at the initial stage in the post-war situation. Now the center for the youth and adults who are affected by drugs and Alcohol have been extended to Eastern district. Youth Empowerment Center in Ariyalai Jaffna too cater to the capacity building of the youth for a better future.

A major milestone in the post-war situation was the establishment of the “Amathikarantal” (LEBARA Wellness Center) at Mankulam. It is the partnership between the Oblates and Meththa Foundations. Inaugurated in 2014, the center has become one of two premier prosthetic rehabilitation facilities serving the Vanni, providing ongoing maintenance, replacement limbs and

comprehensive rehabilitation to hundreds of amputees affected by the prolonged war. It enables parents to provide for their children, allows young people to return to school and gives elderly patients the dignity of living independently. The Oblates in collaboration with the above foundation contributed to the well being of the post-war victims. Oblates remain present in promoting human rights in the war-affected areas.

Fr. Praveen Mahesan, OMI, Director of the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation in Jaffna, was detained in 2014 during a fact-finding mission in Kilinochchi, the former LTTE headquarters.¹⁴ Oblates from Colombo and Jaffna Provinces also joined “Families of the Disappeared” protests in Kilinochchi, forming the largest religious group present.¹⁵

Centre for Peace and Reconciliation (CPR): Responding to the Post-War Context in Northern Sri Lanka

The Centre for Peace and Reconciliation (CPR) of the Oblate Province of Jaffna (OMI) was established as a faith-based ministry to respond to the profound social, emotional, and economic challenges that emerged after Sri Lanka’s three-decade civil war. The Northern Province, which experienced the greatest impact of the conflict, continues to face the consequences of displacement, trauma, loss of life, poverty, and fractured relationships. In this context, CPR carries out a mission of healing and transformation rooted in the Gospel values of justice, peace, forgiveness, compassion, and the dignity of every human person. The mission of CPR is to accompany individuals and communities affected by war through psychosocial care, peace education, leadership formation, livelihood development, and inter-ethnic dialogue. Its work seeks not only to address immediate needs but also to build a society where justice, reconciliation, and lasting peace can flourish.

Healing the Wounds of War

One of CPR's primary missions is to support the healing of people who continue to bear the psychological and emotional scars of war. Thousands of families lost loved ones, experienced displacement, witnessed violence, or continue to search for missing family members. These painful experiences have left deep emotional wounds that affect both individuals and communities. CPR responds by providing psychosocial support and counselling for war survivors, children, youth, women, and vulnerable families. Through counselling sessions, support groups, community gatherings, and safe spaces for sharing personal experiences, people are encouraged to begin the journey of healing and recovery. By promoting emotional resilience, hope, and human dignity, CPR enables individuals to rebuild their lives with renewed confidence.

Promoting Peace and Reconciliation

CPR believes that genuine peace is more than the absence of armed conflict. Lasting peace is achieved when relationships are restored, trust is rebuilt, and communities learn to live together with mutual respect and understanding. The Centre therefore promotes reconciliation among different ethnic, religious, and cultural communities through dialogue, peacebuilding programs, and community engagement. It encourages forgiveness while recognizing the importance of truth, justice, and respect for human rights. Peace education programs and training in **Non-Violent Communication (NVC)** equip participants with practical skills to resolve conflicts peacefully, communicate respectfully, and strengthen social harmony. These initiatives contribute to building a culture where violence is replaced by dialogue and cooperation.

The Superior General's 2024 visit emphasized the mission "to the poor and the most abandoned". Assistant General

Fr. Raymond Mwangala noted Oblates focus “not on conversion but on embodying Kingdom values within the community” and on justice, peace, education, and ministry to those on the margins. He also witnessed housing projects — over 370 homes built for poor families nationwide. Both provinces held congresses in 2024-2025 with themes like” Let Us Be Renewed Pilgrims in Our Context” and “Pilgrims of Hope in Communion” Sessions covered spirituality, formation, administration, and ministries.

Summary

Post-war, the Oblate mission in northern Sri Lanka has focused on healing through education, reconciliation training, youth and lay involvement, and presence with families affected by war and displacement. While security concerns have lessened, the work now centers on social cohesion, trauma, poverty, and rebuilding trust in Tamil-majority areas.

Endnotes

¹ Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate USA, “Oblates Teaching Peace in Sri Lanka”.

² Context of displacement in northern parishes during 1983-2009.

³ Agenzia Fides, “Oblate Missionaries...helping seaquake refugees in northern Sri Lanka”, 7 January 2005.

⁴ Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate USA, “Oblates Teaching Peace in Sri Lanka”.

⁵ National Catholic Reporter, “Detained human rights worker, Oblate priest freed in Sri Lanka”.

⁶ Joint statement by Amnesty International, HRW, ICG, and others calling for release, *Ibid*.

⁷ Report on Oblate participation in “Families of the Disappeared” protests, Kilinochchi.

⁸ Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate USA, “Oblates Teaching Peace in Sri Lanka”.

⁹ Jude CAROWF, OMI, “Oblate Assembly in Jaffna: A Synodal Journey of Hope”, OMI World, Feb 2025.

¹⁰ Jude CAROWF, OMI, “A Blessed Journey: Superior General’s Visit to Jaffna Province”, OMI World.

¹¹ Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate USA, “Oblates Teaching Peace in Sri Lanka”.

¹² National Catholic Reporter, “Detained human rights worker, Oblate priest freed in Sri Lanka”.

¹³ ‘Restoring mobility dignity and hope’ and article on Sunday time Sri Lankan newspaper 12th July 2026.

¹⁴ An article on CPR Mission by Rev.Fr. Ramesh.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ RVA, “Sri Lanka: Oblates Mark 200 Years of Papal Recognition with Thanksgiving Mass”.

¹⁸ Report on Oblate participation in “Families of the Disappeared” protests, Kilinochchi.

¹⁹ Raymond MWANGALA, OMI, “Fraternity and Mission: My Visit to the Oblate Province of Colombo”.