

Accompanying Immigrants: A Timely Mission of the Oblates from the Province of Jaffna

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“The experience of migration accompanies the history of the People of God. Abraham sets out without knowing where he is going; Moses leads the pilgrim people through the desert; Mary and Joseph flee with the child Jesus to Egypt.”

(Dilexi te no. 73)

Pope Leo XIV, in his first apostolic exhortation, *Dilexi te*, states that the Church has always recognized in migrants a living presence of the Lord. Accordingly, the Church responds to the needs of migrants. In the nineteenth century, when millions of Europeans emigrated in search of better living conditions, two great saints distinguished themselves through their pastoral care of migrants: Saint John Baptist Scalabrini and Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini. Recognizing the hardships faced by migrants in a new land, including the risk of exploitation and the danger of losing their faith, they accompanied them to their destinations, offering spiritual, legal, and material assistance.

The Church's tradition of serving migrants continues today. Likewise, as thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils migrated to Europe as a result of the civil war and in search of better living conditions during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the Oblates of the Province of Jaffna recognized the urgent pastoral needs of these immigrant communities through their local ordinaries. Although pastoral care for Tamil Catholic immigrants has also been provided by diocesan clergy and other priests serving in various capacities, this article focuses specifically on the contribution

of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) and the development of the chaplaincies entrusted to their care up to 2026.

Tamil Catholic Chaplaincy – France

In the early 1970s, the spiritual needs of Tamil Catholics were met by Fr. Francis Pierre Audiau of the Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP) and Sr. Antoinette Forget, FMM. Fr. Audiau had previously served as a missionary in India, while Sr. Antoinette Forget had served in Sri Lanka. As a result, both had some knowledge of the Tamil language and culture.

Later, Tamil diocesan priests from Sri Lanka who were in Europe for various purposes organized Holy Masses, liturgical celebrations, and other pastoral programmes for the faithful who were originally from the North and East of Sri Lanka. As the Tamil Catholic community continued to grow, a request for a chaplain was submitted to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka. Consequently, on 6 March 1994, Fr. P. P. Philip, OMI, then Provincial Superior of the Province of Jaffna, appointed Fr. Simeon Sebamalai Thuram, OMI, as the first Tamil Catholic Chaplain in France in consultation with the Oblate Province of France.

Since its establishment, the chaplaincy has been served by six chaplains: Fr. Simeon Sebamalai Thuram, OMI (1994 - 1997), Fr. Santhiapillai Maria Sebastian, OMI (1997 - 2003), Fr. Arulrasa Amalathas, OMI (2003 - 2009), Fr. Linus Soyza, OMI (2009–2015), Fr. Joseph Juvalan Kamalanthan, OMI (2015 - 2019), and Fr. Paul Mathew Mathanraj, OMI (2019 – until now).

Fr. Sebamalai Thuram, OMI coordinated the pastoral ministry from St. Joseph Church, Goncourt, Paris. An important step in the development of the chaplaincy was taken in 1998, during the tenure of Fr. Maria Sebastian, OMI, when a chaplaincy office was established at 47 Rue de la Roquette, 75011 Paris.

As the ministry continued to expand, the Archbishop of Paris entrusted the Tamil Catholic Chaplaincy with the Notre Dame Réconciliatrice Chapel located at 57 Boulevard de Belleville, 75011 Paris, on 31 October 1999.

The chaplaincy initially served five mission centers: Paris, Sarcelles, Aubervilliers, Noisy-Champs, and Le Perreux. As the Tamil catholic population increased across France, the ministry gradually expanded to Bordeaux, Toulouse, Mulhouse, Albi and Lyon. At present eighteen suburbs are included in its mission. The chaplaincy celebrated its Silver Jubilee in 2019, marking twenty-five years of dedicated pastoral ministry.

Tamil chaplain at the Shrine of Lourdes, France

The Oblates have been serving at the Shrine of Lourdes, France, for more than forty years as chaplains for different language groups. In 2025, they celebrated forty years of Oblate presence at the Shrine.

The Shrine of Lourdes holds a special place in the spiritual life of Sri Lankan Tamil Catholics. From the early 2000s, the Shrine authorities observed a steady increase in the number of Tamil-speaking pilgrims. Recognizing their pastoral needs, the Shrine decided to provide regular pastoral services in Tamil so that Tamil pilgrims could feel more at home.

An important opportunity arose during the preparations for the 150th anniversary of the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Saint Bernadette Soubirous (1858 - 2008). To respond to the growing pastoral needs of Tamil pilgrims, Fr. Sebamalai Anpurasa, OMI, of the Province of Jaffna, was appointed to serve at the Shrine. He carried out pastoral ministry among Tamil - speaking pilgrims from 2007 to 2010. Fr. S. Anpurasa is the first chaplain for Tamil speaking pilgrims.

When Msgr. D'Arodes de Peyriague assumed office as Rector of the Shrine in 2014, he envisioned having a Tamil chaplain alongside the existing chaplains serving pilgrims in Italian, Spanish, Flemish, English, and German. To realize this vision, he approached the Oblates. In response, Fr. Linus Soyza, OMI, was appointed as the Tamil Chaplain and Coordinator for Tamil pilgrims on 25 March 2016. He has continued this ministry ever since.

Tamil Catholic Chaplaincy – Italy

The Tamil Catholic Chaplaincy in Italy is located in Palermo. From there, with the assistance of Oblate missionaries and other Tamil diocesan and religious priests who are in Italy for various ministries or higher studies, the chaplain provides spiritual services to Tamil Catholic communities across the country.

Prior to the formal establishment of the chaplaincy in Palermo, there was already a large Tamil Catholic community in Napoli. While serving in Rome, Fr. Bastiampillai Rayappu, OMI, served the Tamil Catholic community in Napoli and celebrated Holy Mass from 1980 to 1982. This ministry was later continued by other religious and diocesan priests who were living in Italy for various purposes.

As the Italian Oblates sought to give greater priority to ministry among immigrants and to respond to their spiritual needs, Fr. David Emmanuel Ratnaraj, OMI, came to Napoli in 2004. Based at the Oblate community at Via Egiziaca a Pizzofalcone, 30, Napoli, he celebrated Mass in English for immigrants at the Port of Napoli and accompanied Tamil immigrants pastorally. He celebrated Holy Mass and administered the sacraments for the Tamil catholic community at St. Joseph Church, Via Medina 3, Napoli. During his tenure, the Tamil Catholic community in Napoli celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the beginning of Tamil liturgical services and marked the occasion with the

publication of a jubilee souvenir. Fr. Ratnaraj, OMI, carried out his ministry in Napoli until 2009.

While serving at the Oblate General House as Assistant to the General Treasurer (1994 - 2005), Fr. Victor Jeyasingam, OMI, organized Tamil Masses for immigrants with the assistance of other priests. As the number of Tamil migrants in Palermo continued to grow, he devoted particular attention to their spiritual needs given the significance it has with the life of St. Eugene. After completing his service at the Oblate General House, he was appointed as the Tamil Chaplain for Palermo with the consent of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka and the Province of Italy. He served until 2012 while residing at the Oblate community of *Villa Grazia*.

Following this pioneering period, Fr. Vimalrajan Parunanthu, OMI, assumed responsibility for the chaplaincy in 2012 and served until 2018. During his tenure as chaplain, Leoluca Orlando, Mayor of Palermo, presented him with the *Tessera Preziosa del Mosaico Palermo* award at the Mayor's Office on 22 January 2018, in recognition of his service to immigrants in the city.

Since 2018, Fr. Peter Rajanayagam, OMI, has continued this ministry until now, providing pastoral care to Tamil Catholic communities throughout Italy while fostering community life and preserving their faith and cultural identity.

Tamil Catholic Chaplaincy – Norway

The Oblates have been working in Norway since 1977. Fr. Pethurupillai Iruthayanathan (who was then Oblate) came to Norway from Sri Lanka in 1987 and was appointed diocesan chaplain for Tamil-speaking Catholics in the Diocese of Oslo. Alongside his ministry to the Tamil Catholic community, he also carried out various diocesan responsibilities.

The Oblate Scandinavian Delegation was officially established in 2003, transitioned from the Vice-Province following changes in membership. The Delegation comprised Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Fr. Paul Marx, OMI, then Delegation Superior, requested the Province of Jaffna to send more Oblates to assist with the mission in Scandinavia. In response to this request, Fr. Jagath Gunapala, OMI, and Fr. Michael Sebamalai Perera, OMI, arrived in Norway on 18 June 2003. After completing their Norwegian language studies, Fr. Michael Sebamalai Perera, OMI, was appointed as a Tamil Chaplain in Oslo, serving the faithful in the capital and its surrounding areas, while Fr. Jagath Gunapala, OMI, was assigned as a Tamil chaplain to Bergen.

The Oslo Chaplaincy currently serves the mission centers of Oslo, Jessheim, Lillestrøm, and Tønsberg. Since its establishment, the chaplaincy has been served by Fr. Michael Sebamalai Perera, OMI (2003 - 2004), Fr. Inpanathan Amirthanathan, (2004 - 2009), Bharath Villavarayan (2009 - 2011), Fr. Victor Jeyasingam, OMI (2013 - 2014), Fr. Paul Jeyanthan Pachchek, OMI (2014 - 2018), Fr. Gnanapragasam Atputharajah, OMI (2018 - 2020), Fr. David Emmanuel Ratnarajah, OMI (2022 – until now), and Fr. Jude Angelo, OMI (2022 - until now). Fr. Iruthayanathan Pethurupillai, Fr. Inpanathan Amirthanathan, Bharath Villavarayan were Oblates and later left the Congregation and were incardinated into the diocese of Oslo.

The Bergen Chaplaincy has been served by Fr. Iruthayanathan Pethurupillai (1987 - 2004), Fr. Jagath Gunapala, OMI (2004 - 2011), Fr. Saviripillai Edmund Reginald, OMI (2011 - 2017), Fr. Paul Jeyanthan Pachchek, OMI (2018 - 2022), and Fr. John Saminather Rene Beshman, OMI (2022 – until now). It includes St. Paul's Parish in Bergen, where the Tamil Catholic community consists of approximately 350 Sri Lankan - born Tamils and a similar number of Norwegian - born Tamils. The chaplaincy also serves Florø and Nordfjordeid, each with approximately

forty Tamil Catholic families, as well as St. Svithun Church in Stavanger, where around sixty Tamil Catholic families belong to the community.

Tamil Catholic Chaplaincy – Denmark

The Oblates from the Province of Jaffna have been serving in Denmark since 2006. While carrying out the oblate mission, they assisted Fr. Jude kulas, the Tamil chaplain in the diocese.

In this context, Fr. Alren Soosaipillai, OMI, arrived in Denmark in 2006 as part of the Oblate mission. While carrying out his regular pastoral ministry, he also assisted the Tamil Catholic community by celebrating the holy eucharist, administering the sacraments, and responding to their spiritual needs. In 2013, the Bishop of Copenhagen, the Most Rev. Czeslaw Kozon, appointed him as the Tamil Catholic Chaplain along with his other pastoral missions, for the mission centers of Holbæk, Herlev, Kolding, Vejle, Aabenraa, and Svendborg. He served in this ministry until 2022 when he returned to Sri Lanka.

Fr. Edmund Reginald, OMI, arrived in Denmark in March 2021 and was subsequently appointed Tamil Catholic Chaplain. He currently provides pastoral care to the Tamil Catholic faithful in eleven of the country's thirteen mission stations: Randers, Horsens, Vejle, Struer, Herning, Kolding, Aabenraa, Svendborg, Holbæk, Næstved and Herlev.

Observations

- Fr. F. Ligouri Nicholas Croos, OMI, served as chaplain for Tamil immigrants in the Netherlands from 2004 to 2005.
- The Oblates live in community. While serving the spiritual needs of Tamil immigrants as chaplains, they also contribute to the Oblate mission in their respective countries and fulfill various community responsibilities.

- Before the Oblates assumed responsibility as chaplains, the pastoral needs of Tamil immigrants were met by diocesan clergy and religious priests who were serving in the respective countries or neighbouring countries for various ministries or higher studies.
- Providing pastoral care to Tamil immigrants is challenging because the faithful are dispersed across different parts of each country and come from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. Chaplains spend considerable time travelling to reach these communities and strive to foster unity among them.
- Over the years, the chaplaincies have become well established and well organized. They have developed various pious associations, youth groups, and publications, including *Uravukal* (உறவுகள்) in France and *Paarai* (பாரை) in Italy.

The history of the Tamil Catholic chaplaincies in Europe demonstrates the enduring commitment of the Oblates of the Province of Jaffna to accompanying Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants in their journey of faith. Responding to the pastoral needs created by migration, the Oblates developed chaplaincies that have provided not only sacramental ministry but also spiritual guidance, faith formation, and a sense of community for Tamil Catholics living far from their homeland. Through their pastoral presence and collaboration with local dioceses, the Oblates have made a significant contribution to the life of the Church among Tamil Catholics in Europe. In this way, the mission of accompanying migrants continues to embody the Church's enduring commitment to walking with people in their hopes, challenges, and faith journeys.

Sources

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