

The Mission beyond Borders: The Missionary Contribution of the Oblate Province of Jaffna

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Introduction

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) have been serving in Sri Lanka since 1847. The Province of Jaffna emerged through several historical and administrative stages. At the request of Mgr. Orazio Bettacchini, an Oratorian from Italy and the then Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna, the Oblates were sent to Jaffna in 1847. The first group of four Oblates arrived in Jaffna via Galle on 28 November 1847. From that time, the administrative structure underwent several stages, namely the Jaffna Vicariate, the Colombo Vicariate, the Vicariate of Ceylon, the Province of Ceylon, and finally the Province of Sri Lanka. Today, there are two Oblate Provinces in Sri Lanka: the Province of Jaffna and the Province of Colombo.

Oblate Mission in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh

The Oblates had been working in 2 apostolic vicariates, namely the Jaffna Vicariate and the Colombo Vicariate, until 1907, when the General Administration decided to unite them under a single Oblate administrative unit known as the Vicariate of Ceylon. In 1967, the Vicariate of the Mission of Ceylon became the Province of Ceylon, and later it became the Province of Sri Lanka in 1973.

The Province of Sri Lanka became so stable that it could respond to the request of other South Asian countries expanding their missionary activities to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In this context, Fr. Anthony Fernando, OMI, then Provincial of Sri Lanka, laid

the foundation for the Oblate mission in India. Accordingly, the first two pioneer missionaries, Fr. Emmanuel Mariampillai, OMI, and Fr. Stanislaus Philips, OMI, arrived in India on 29 June 1968 at the request of Most Rev. Dr. R. Arulappa, the Archbishop of Madras-Mylapore. The pioneers were followed by Fr. Edmund Murugupillai, OMI, Fr. Joseph Samaracone, OMI, Fr. P. P. Philip, OMI, Fr. Jacob Thiruchelvam, OMI, Fr. Hillarian Vethanayagam, OMI, Fr. Rayappu Mariyanayagam OMI, Fr. Gerard Rosairo, OMI, Fr. Wijeyaratnam, OMI, Fr. N. Arulnesan, OMI, Fr. Anton Rex Kulas, OMI, Fr. Soosai Damian, OMI, Fr. John Cardossa, OMI, Satkunam Iruthayanathan, Jeevaratnam and Gnanapragasam (the latter three became Ex-Oblates). Then, the Oblate mission in India was an Oblate delegation of Oblate Province Colombo, and now it is an Oblate Province of India.

Similarly, the Oblate mission in Pakistan was established in 1971. Rt. Rev. Dr. Benedict Cialeo, OP, Bishop of Lyallpur (now Faisalabad), invited Fr. Lucien Schmitt, OMI, then Provincial of Sri Lanka, to send Oblate missionaries because the diocese was in urgent need of priests. In response, Fr. Lester Silva, OMI, Fr. Basil Silva, OMI, and Fr. Theogenes Joseph, OMI, arrived in Pakistan on 14 February 1971. On 18 February 1971, the agreement between the Diocese of Lyallpur and the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate was signed by Bishop Benedict Cialeo, OP, and Fr. Lucien Schmitt, OMI. Following this pioneering mission, many Oblates from Sri Lanka continued to serve in Pakistan. Among those from northern Sri Lanka were Fr. Alfred Rayappu, OMI, Fr. N. Arulnesan, OMI, Fr. Percy Mariathas, Fr. Temsey Croos, OMI, Fr. Joachim Thaninayagam, OMI, Bishop Victor Gnanapragasam, OMI, Fr. Joseph Aloysius Roy, OMI, Fr. Renard Remindran, OMI, and Fr. Eugene Benedict, OMI. Today, the Oblate Delegation of Pakistan is under the Province of Colombo, and Fr. J. J. Edward, OMI, and Fr. Thyagan Fonseka, OMI, from Sri Lanka continue to serve there.

The Oblate mission in Bangladesh began in 1973. In 1972, the General Council in Rome accepted an invitation from the Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh to establish a major seminary and oversee new mission stations, entrusting this mission to the Province of Sri Lanka. Fr. Lucien Schmitt, OMI, then Provincial of Sri Lanka, appointed Fr. Philip Dissanayake, OMI, as the first missionary to Bangladesh. The Oblate mission formally began on 29 July 1973. He was later joined by Fr. Henry Van Hoof, OMI (Belgium), Fr. Andre Charvet, OMI (France), Fr. Antony Fernando Marcelliar, OMI, Satkunam Iruthayananthan (then an Oblate), Fr. Emil Moraes, OMI, Fr. Angelo Martin, OMI, Fr. Anton Rex Kulas, OMI, Fr. Jacob Thiruchelvam, OMI, Bro. Kingsley Cooray, OMI, and Fr. A. F. Loshington, OMI (the latter eight were from Sri Lanka). Today, the Oblate Delegation of Bangladesh is under the Province of Colombo. In 2022, the Delegation celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the Oblates.

During this period, the Oblates also began missionary work in Malaysia. Fr. John Mary Conchevovs, OMI, Fr. Andre Charvet, OMI, Fr. Yves Caroff, OMI, Fr. Charles Navaratnam, OMI, Fr. Florimond, Fr. S. N. Arulnesan, OMI, Fr. Emil Moraes, OMI, and Fr. Louis Ponniah, OMI were sent to Malaysia. However, due to visa restrictions, they were unable to continue their ministry there. Further, Fr. S. N. Arulnesan, OMI, was sent to the United Arab Emirates.

The Emergence of the Province of Jaffna and Its Missionary Endeavours

The Province of Jaffna passed through several administrative stages: Provincial Delegation, Jaffna Delegation of Colombo Province, the General Delegation with autonomous authority, the Vice-Province, and finally a Province.

The Provincial Delegation of Jaffna was elevated to a General Delegation with effect from 8 December 1984, with full-fledged autonomy following the Plenary Session of the Oblate General Council held in Rome during September - October 1984. Fr. Louis Ponniah, OMI, was appointed Superior of the General Delegation, which comprised the territories of the civil districts of Jaffna and Mannar.

Subsequently, the General Delegation of Jaffna was elevated to the status of a Vice-Province on 23 August 1989. After more than a decade of growth and development, the Vice-Province of Jaffna was erected as a full-fledged Province on 8 July 2001.

Since then, the Oblates of the Province of Jaffna have undertaken various initiatives in response to the signs of the times. Their missionary activity has extended beyond the boundaries of Sri Lanka, contributing to the mission of the universal Church.

The following section presents the other initiatives undertaken by the Oblates from Jaffna.

[The ministry among Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants has already been discussed in the previous article. The following sections present other missionary initiatives undertaken by the Oblates from Jaffna.]

The Contribution of the Oblates from Jaffna, Abroad

General Administration, Rome

Fr. Bastiampillai Rayappu, OMI:

Worked at the Dicastery for the Propagation of Faith (1978 – 1986)

Fr. Philippiah Jesunesan, OMI:

General Councilor for Asia Oceania (1998 – 2004)

Fr. Victor Jeyasingam, OMI:
Assistant General Treasurer (1994 – 2005)

Fr. Antonine Jeevendra Paul, OMI:
Grant Director (2005 – 2013)

Fr. Joseph Theogenes, OMI:
Administrative Assistant (2001- 2008)

Fr. Abaranam Jerome Velichor, OMI:
General Archivist (2017- until now)

Fr. Eugene Benedict, OMI:
General Councilor for Asia Oceania (2022 - until now)

Asia Oceania

Japan and Korea

Fr. James Jeyachandran OMI:	1994 - 2011
Fr. Packianathan Christy Nirmalarajan, OMI:	2010 - 2012
Robert Robinson (Left the congregation)	

Philippines

Fr. Hillarian Vethanayagam, OMI:	1974 - 1975
Fr. Joseph Theogenes OMI:	2008 - 2013
Fr. Saveri Jeyarajan Coonghe, OMI:	2024 - until now

China-Mainland

Fr. Francis Daniel, OMI:	2004 – 2005
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Australia

Fr. James Jeyachandran, OMI:	2012 – until now
Fr. Meno Basti, OMI:	2018 - until now
Fr. Thevasantharasa Anthonipillai, OMI:	2022 – 2026
Fr. John Patrick John Mary, OMI:	2022 – until now

European Region

France

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 Juvanal Kamalananthan, OMI:	2015 - 2019
Fr. Paul Mathew Mathanraj, OMI:	2019 – until now

Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes, France

Fr. Sebamalai Anpurasa, OMI:	2007 – 2009
Fr. Linus Soyza, OMI:	2016 – until now

Aix en Provence Foundation House, France

Fr. Sahayathasan James Surenthirarajah, OMI:	2024 – until now
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Italy

Fr. David Emmanuel Ratnaraj OMI:	2004 - 2009
Fr. Victor Jeyasingam, OMI:	2005 – 2012
Fr. Vimalrajan Parunanthu, OMI:	2012 - 2018
Fr. Peter Rajanayagam, OMI:	2018 – until now

Germany

Fr. Meno Basty, OMI:	2012 - 2016
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United Kingdom

Fr. Francis Daniel, OMI:	2009 - 2018
Fr. S. Mariyathas Selvaratnam, OMI:	2013 - 2019
Fr. Vimalrajan Parunanthu, OMI:	2020 – until now
Fr. Godfrey Emmanuel, OMI:	2023 – until now

Danmark

Fr. Soosaipillai Alren, OMI:	2006 – 2022
Fr. Fredrick A. Thevaraj, OMI:	2012 – 2015
Fr. Joy Fernando, OMI:	2015 – until now
Fr. Saviripillai Edmund Reginald, OMI:	2021 – until now

Norway

Fr. Jagath Gunapala, OMI:	2003 – until now
Fr. Michael Sebamalai Perera, OMI:	2003 - 2004
Fr. Inpanathan Amirthanathan (left the Oblates):	2004 - 2009
Fr. Victor Jeyasingam, OMI:	2013 - 2014
Fr. Saviripillai Edmund Reginald, OMI:	2011 - 2017
Fr. Paul Jeyanthan Pachchek, OMI:	2014 - 2022
Fr. Gnanapragasam Atputharajah, OMI:	2018 - 2020
Fr. John Saminather Rene Beshman, OMI:	2022 - until now
Fr. David Emmanuel Ratnarajah, OMI:	2022 – until now

Sweden

Fr. Amirthanathar Siyanstan Jenis, OMI:	2024 – until now
Fr. F. Manokaran Piragash Nijanthan, OMI:	2024 – until now

Latin American Region

Mexico

Fr. Keethapongalan Bede Sujaharan, OMI:	2018 – until now
Fr. Xavier Justinrajah, OMI:	2022 – until now
Fr. Packianathan Christy Nirmalarajan, OMI:	2026 – until now

Brazil

Fr. Velichor Volantine Morris, OMI:	2024 – Until now
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African Region

Namibia

Fr. Edmund Michael, OMI:	2005 - 2010
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South Africa

Fr. P. P. Philip, OMI: 1999 – 2002

Lesotho

Fr. Rayappu Mariyanayagam, OMI 2007 – 2012

Kenya

Fr. Joachim Thaninayagam 1996 - 1997

Fr. Praveen Mahesan Selvadurai, OMI: 2015 – until now

Zambia

Fr. Eugene Amalraj, OMI: 2023 – until now

Conclusion

As the Congregation celebrates the bicentenary of its papal approbation, it is an occasion not only to celebrate the present but also to remember its rich missionary heritage. The Province of Jaffna, nurtured by generations of Oblate missionaries since 1847, has itself become a missionary-sending Province. Through the generous service of its members in different parts of the world, it has contributed to the missionary life of the Congregation and to the mission of the Universal Church.

This historical overview has highlighted some of the missionary contributions of the Oblates from the Province of Jaffna. Many other Oblates have also served, and continue to serve, in various missionary contexts beyond Sri Lanka. Their dedication remains a source of gratitude and inspiration for future generations of missionaries.

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