

Statues that speak

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Remembering the Oblate Missionaries who helped build Northern Sri Lanka

As we, Oblates, prepare to celebrate the bicentenary of the Papal Approbation of the Constitutions and Rules of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate from 1826 to 2026, the Oblate presence in Sri Lanka invites us not merely to look back at history but to listen to it. In Jaffna and throughout Northern Sri Lanka, history has been written not only in books but in churches, schools, seminaries, roads, fishing villages, religious communities and, above all, in the lives of people. It has also been written in stone and bronze. Statues of Oblate missionaries stand as silent witnesses to a remarkable history. They tell us that someone lived, loved, struggled, served and gave his life for others. They are visible signs of an invisible legacy, reminding us that missionary service is measured not by years but by the depth of love and lasting transformation.

For more than 175 years, the Oblates have served the people of Sri Lanka, becoming part of their history, culture and struggles. They preached the Gospel, established churches, educated generations, formed priests, defended the poor, served fishermen and farmers, developed remote missions, founded religious congregations and walked with people during times of upheaval. Among the many Oblates, eleven stand out in a particularly visible way. Their statues, erected in places connected with their service, invite us to remember not only the men but the missionary spirit they represent. Some were born in Sri Lanka; others came from distant lands. Some were bishops, some parish priests, some educators, some scholars, some builders and some

founders. Yet they were united by one conviction: that the Gospel must become incarnate in the concrete lives of the people.

Bro. James Manuel, OMI: A missionary who built communities

At Mount Carmel Church in Gurunagar, Jaffna stands the statue of Bro. James Manuel. His ministry was not confined to church walls. He understood that a parish is a community that must be formed and supported. He contributed to the construction of the church, parish hall and oratory and played an important role in strengthening parish life. He was particularly concerned about the young, creating spaces for youth to grow in faith and responsibility. His contribution reminds us that a Christian community is built through relationships, not merely stones.

Fr. S. Swami Gnanapragasar, OMI: The missionary scholar, 'Par excellence'

Fr. S. Swami Gnanapragasar holds a unique position among the Oblates who served in Sri Lanka. His statue can be found around **eight locations throughout the northern part of the country**. Affectionately known as the “Nallur Swami,” he gained recognition as a scholar, historian, and defender of the Tamil language. His missionary approach revealed an important truth: The Gospel does not undermine a people’s language and culture. Rather, the missionary must engage with the people’s world and communicate the Gospel in a language they understand. Through his study of Tamil literature and history, he played a crucial role in preserving the intellectual heritage of the Tamil community. His life exemplifies the idea that faith and culture can coexist harmoniously; the Gospel is capable of engaging in dialogue with a people’s deepest treasures.

Born as Vaithiyalingam in Manipay on 22 January 1875 to Saminathapillai and Thangamuthu, he entered the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in 1901 and devoted forty-three

years of priestly ministry, centred largely in Nallur, after being raised in Achchuveli. His apostolic zeal was extraordinary: he cared for thirty-seven mission stations, established nineteen new mission centres, guided fifteen schools and became the spiritual father of more than three thousand faithful. His scholarship was equally remarkable. He published 131 books and pamphlets, while many handwritten manuscripts remain preserved. His writings embraced religion, social life, history, Tamil studies, lexicography and the arts.

In his pioneering work '*Sorpirappu Oppiyal*' (Comparative Etymology), he explored the relationship between Tamil and fifty other languages, revealing both his love for Tamil and his exceptional linguistic vision. His achievements earned him numerous honorary titles, including 'Little St. Xavier,' 'Little Apostle Paul,' 'Polyglot Scholar' and 'The Great Swami,' while more than twenty-three books have been written about his life and work. His lasting influence was recognised internationally through commemorative postage stamps issued by Germany in 1939 and by Sri Lanka in 1981, a rare tribute to a missionary whose service united faith, scholarship and culture.

Fr. Andrew Cierpka, OMI: The missionary who helped a village develop

In Thalvupadu, Mannar, the memory of Fr. Andrew Cierpka is connected with the development of the village. A missionary may preach and administer the Sacraments, but he may also help a village obtain roads, electricity and water. Fr. Cierpka understood that the Church cannot remain indifferent to basic needs. His efforts contributed to the development of the community, and the place became associated with his name as "Cierpka Puram." His story illustrates that development serves the dignity of the human person and is not separate from evangelisation.

Fr. Louis Dessy, OMI: A missionary of the people of Sillalai

Sillalai in Jaffna, remembers Fr. Louis Dessy as a missionary who gave himself generously to the people. His work included church-building, education, literature and personal service. He understood that a mission grows through the daily generosity of a priest who gives himself to his people. The Church is built through buildings but more importantly through people. Fr. Dessy contributed to both, reflecting the many dimensions of the Oblate vocation. His memory is preserved in the affection of ordinary people who can say: “He was one of us.”

Bishop John Stephen Semeria, OMI: A bishop who strengthened the church

The story of the Oblate mission in Jaffna cannot be told without remembering Bishop John Stephen Semeria, OMI. As the first Oblate Bishop of Jaffna, he shepherded a growing Church during an important period. The bishop was a pastor who had to guide the Church, strengthen missions, support education and encourage local vocations. The history of the Diocese of Jaffna is deeply connected with the Oblates. Bishops such as Semeria helped establish structures through which the Church could grow. His legacy is found in the institutions and communities that continued after him. His Statue is **in the Bishop's house of Jaffna**.

Bishop Jerome Emilianuspillai, OMI: The first Sri Lankan Tamil bishop

In the grounds of Jaffna Cathedral stands the statue of Bishop Jerome Emilianus Pillai, OMI, one of the most significant figures in the history of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka. Born on 20 July 1901 at Ulhetiyawa, Wennappuwa, Bishop Emil came from a remarkable family. He studied at St. Anthony's College, Kayts, St. Patrick's College, Jaffna, St. Benedict's College,

Colombo, and Ceylon University College. As a young man, he captained the University football team.

He entered the Oblates in 1924 and made his first vows in 1925. Together with Thomas Benjamin Cooray, he became one of the first Sri Lankans to study at the Oblate International Scholasticate in Rome, where he obtained doctorates in Philosophy and Divinity and was ordained a priest in 1929. After returning to Sri Lanka, he served in education and administration, becoming Principal of the Teachers' Training College at Colombuthurai, General Manager of the Schools of the Diocese of Jaffna and later Vicar General of the Diocese.

In 1949, he was nominated Coadjutor Bishop of Jaffna. His episcopal consecration on 22 May 1949 was historic: he became the first Sri Lankan Tamil to be raised to the episcopate. His motto was "Vinculo Caritatis" — "In the Bond of Charity." In 1950, he became Bishop of Jaffna. His twenty-two years as bishop coincided with enormous political, social and ecclesial changes. Sri Lanka was moving from colonial rule into independence. The Second Vatican Council brought new perspectives and reforms.

Bishop Emil guided the Diocese through this transition with gentleness and firmness. He developed distant missions in the Vanni and other peripheral areas. New churches and schools were established. He travelled extensively to visit scattered communities. One of his greatest achievements was the development of the diocesan clergy. He understood that the future of the Church depended upon the formation of local priests and took a personal interest in the recruitment and formation of seminarians.

He played a major role in the development of the Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu, promoting it as a place of genuine prayer and pilgrimage. Bishop Emil also faced the challenges

surrounding Catholic education during the social and political changes of the 1950s and 1960s. He was known to serve people personally, even carrying a visitor's luggage. He died on 17 July 1972. His funeral revealed the profound place he occupied in the hearts of the people. Schools and businesses in Jaffna closed as a mark of respect. Thousands gathered to pay their final respects. His remains were laid to rest in the grounds of Jaffna Cathedral. The statue of Bishop Emilianus Pillai represents the emergence of a local Church capable of being led by its own sons and daughters. He was a bridge between the missionary Church of the past and the increasingly self-reliant Church of the future.

Fr. B. Anthony Thomas, OMI: The weak man who became a founder

At the Rosarian Ashram in Jaffna stands the statue of Fr. B. Anthony Thomas, OMI. Born on 7 March 1886 in Pandianthalvu, near Jaffna, Anthonipillai Thomas was physically weak from birth and not expected to survive. Yet it was precisely this weak man who would become a priest and founder of the Congregation of the Rosarians. He studied at St. Charles' School and St. Patrick's College, Jaffna, passing the Senior Cambridge Examination with distinction in 1903. For a long time, he believed his poor health made priesthood impossible. But during a Scripture lesson, the words of Christ struck him: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."

He entered St. Martin's Seminary in 1904 and persevered despite his health. He entered the Oblates, made his first vows in 1909 and was ordained a priest on 6 January 1912. In response to the need for contemplative religious life in mission lands, Fr. Thomas founded the Congregation of the Rosarians at Tholagatty on 2 February 1928. The beginnings were humble, but the congregation grew, eventually establishing communities in India. Fr. Thomas also founded a contemplative congregation for

women. The Superior General of the Oblates once described him as a man who possessed the qualities associated with sanctity.

The great lesson of Fr. Thomas's life was perseverance. He did not allow physical weakness to define his vocation. He transformed weakness into strength and suffering into an offering. He died on 26 January 1964. Thousands gathered at the Rosarian Ashram to pay their respects. His life declares that the question is not, "What can I do with my strength?" but rather, "What can God do with my weakness when I place it in His hands?"

Fr. Timothy Long, OMI: The educator who helped form a nation

In Jaffna, the memory of Fr. Timothy Long, OMI, is inseparably connected with St. Patrick's College. Born in Limerick, Ireland, on 2 April 1896, he arrived in Sri Lanka on 11 December 1921 and joined St. Patrick's College in January 1922. He obtained an M.A. from Cambridge University and became a teacher of Classics, a preacher, a sports enthusiast and an influential educator. In 1936, he became Rector of St. Patrick's College. He understood that education was about forming human beings, not merely about examinations. Under his leadership, the College achieved distinction in academics and sports.

He believed in the importance of sports in the formation of character. His influence extended beyond the school to the development of the North, including efforts connected with air services, the Million-Rupee Library in Jaffna and the production of the Passion Play. At the centenary celebrations of St. Patrick's College in 1950, Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake paid tribute to Fr. Long and the missionaries who educated generations of Sri Lankans. Fr. Long had spent thirty-three years in Sri Lanka. He came as a young Irish priest and became, in many ways, a son of Jaffna. His legacy is visible in the magnificent buildings of St. Patrick's College, but his greatest legacy is the thousands of young men whose minds he formed. A teacher may stand before

a classroom for one hour, but his influence may continue for a lifetime. His statue is **in the compound of the Jaffna public library.**

Fr. Victor Deslandes, OMI: The missionary who served the whole person

In Passaiyoor stands the statue of Fr. Victor Deslandes, OMI. Born in France in 1872, he arrived in Sri Lanka in 1903. His first ministry was the formation of seminarians, teaching Sacred Scripture, Dogma and Church History. In 1907, he was appointed parish priest of Passaiyoor. The mission was difficult; the people faced economic hardship, and many were fishermen. Fr. Deslandes did not merely preach to the fishermen; he learned about their work, studied their fishing methods, helped introduce better nets and improved techniques, and worked for their economic welfare.

He defended poor communities against exploitation. In places such as Iranaitivu, he protected people from robbery and helped fishermen obtain better opportunities to sell their catch. His ministry was both pastoral and social. He built churches and schools, supported education, worked among the poor and defended people in difficulty. In Passaiyoor, he completed the church and helped establish a stronger community. His relationship with the people was so deep that, after his death on 5 February 1932, they insisted that he be buried among them. He had become their father. His life reveals a profoundly incarnational understanding of mission: God comes close to human beings in their actual circumstances, and the missionary must do the same.

Fr. Hilarian Vethanayagam, OMI: The missionary who built with faith and creativity

At Thodarpaham, the Oblate Provincial House in Jaffna, stands the statue of Fr. Hilarian Vethanayagam, OMI, affectionately known as Fr. Vetha. Born in Gurunagar, Jaffna, on

3 April 1929, he came from a deeply Catholic family. He entered St. Martin's Minor Seminary in 1945, made his first vows in 1951 and was ordained a priest in 1957. His early ministry included work in Mannar, Pandivirichan, Madhu, Adampan, Vidathaltivu and Uruthirapuram.

In 1974, he went to the Philippines to study Architectural Engineering and qualified as an architect. His contribution to the Oblate mission in India was extraordinary. He designed and supervised formation houses, chapels, provincial houses and religious buildings. He possessed a remarkable ability to carry an architectural vision in his mind before putting it on paper. He personally supervised construction, and his architecture was marked by intercultural creativity, appreciating Indian cultural forms and creating spaces in which Catholic faith could be expressed within Indian culture.

His contribution extended throughout Sri Lanka, designing and supervising churches, chapels, religious houses and institutional buildings in different dioceses. The Oblate Provincial House at Thodarpaham represents his architectural contribution and his long association with the Oblate mission in the North. Fr. Vetha also lived through a period of profound crisis. As leader of the Jaffna Oblate Delegation, he served during years of ethnic tension, violence and war. He was deeply concerned about the suffering of the Tamil people. For a period, circumstances forced him to leave Sri Lanka. He served in India, the Philippines and Australia before returning to Jaffna. Wherever he went, he continued to design, build and encourage. One of his final contributions was the St. De Mazenod Chapel at the Juniorate in Colombuthurai. He died on 29 November 2018. Some priests preach with words, some through education, some through care for the poor. Fr. Vetha preached through architecture. He did not use his gifts for personal glory; he placed them at the service of God and the Church.

Fr. Louis Joseph, OMI: A missionary among the poor

In Mandaitivu, Jaffna the memory of Fr. Louis Joseph is associated especially with the poor and fishermen. He served not as a distant religious figure but as a priest who entered into the realities of his people, understanding their struggles and working for their welfare. His concern included education, the encouragement of vocations and the protection of the vulnerable. Fr. Louis Joseph embodied a ministry that brought together faith and social concern. His statue reminds us that the Church must continue to hear the cry of the poor.

Eleven statues, One missionary story

These eleven Oblates lived in different periods and served in different ways. Bro. James Manuel built community. Fr. Louis Joseph stood with the poor. Fr. Gnanapragasar entered the world of languages and Tamil culture. Fr. Andrew Cierpka helped develop a village. Fr. Louis Dessy served the people of Sillalai. Bishop Semeria strengthened the Church. Bishop Emilianus Pillai became the first Sri Lankan Tamil bishop. Fr. Anthony Thomas founded the Rosarians. Fr. Timothy Long formed generations through education. Fr. Victor Deslandes served fishermen and the poor. Fr. Hilarian Vethanayagam transformed artistic gifts into missionary service.

Their ministries were different, but their mission was one. They were missionaries of the Gospel, yet their Gospel was never abstract. It became a school, a church, a library, a road, a seminary, a religious congregation, a building, a vocation discovered, a community that discovered hope. Their legacy cannot be measured only by the structures they left behind. The greatest monument to a missionary is not made of stone; it is the human life transformed by love.

The statues as a challenge to the present

Today, many people pass these statues without knowing the stories behind them. The bicentenary offers an opportunity to look again. The statues ask us: What kind of missionaries are we today? Do we still possess the courage to go where people are suffering? Do we still believe that education can transform society? Do we still defend the poor? Do we still value language and culture? Do we still understand that mission requires both prayer and practical action? The Oblate missionaries who served Sri Lanka did not come into an easy world. They travelled long distances, faced disease, learned new languages and served during times of political change and conflict. Yet they remained and persevered. Their lives challenge every generation to ask whether the missionary spirit is still alive.

From statues to living witnesses

The greatest danger to any missionary legacy is forgetfulness. Therefore, the purpose of remembering these Oblates is not simply to praise the past but to receive a responsibility. The next generation must ask what needs to be built today. The Oblates of the past built schools. What kind of education does society need today? They served the poor. Who are the poor and forgotten today? They defended human dignity. Whose dignity is threatened today? They crossed boundaries. What boundaries must missionaries cross today? The missionary spirit is not a museum piece; it is a living vocation. The Oblate Constitutions and Rules were intended to form men who would be available for mission. That spirit is visible in the lives of these eleven missionaries.

Conclusion: Let the statues speak

In Jaffna Cathedral, Bishop Emilianus Pillai stands as a symbol of a local Church coming of age. At the Rosarian Ashram, Fr. Anthony Thomas reminds us that weakness can become strength in God's hands. In Jaffna, the memory of Fr. Timothy

Long recalls the transforming power of education. In Passaiyoor, Fr. Victor Deslandes speaks of a priest who loved fishermen and defended the poor. At Thodarpaham, Fr. Hilarian Vethanayagam reminds us that talent becomes beautiful when offered to God.

Across the North, the statues of Bro. James Manuel, Fr. Louis Joseph, Fr. Gnanapragasar, Fr. Andrew Cierpka, Fr. Louis Dessy and Bishop Semeria add their voices to this great story. Together, they form an open-air history of the Oblate mission. They tell us that missionaries became part of the soil, part of the memory of the people, part of the history of the Church. Now, through their statues, they continue to stand among us. But the statues themselves cannot continue the mission. We must.

The past has given us a heritage. The present gives us a responsibility. The future gives us a question: What will we build for those who come after us? As the Oblate family celebrates two hundred years since the Papal Approbation of its Constitutions and Rules, the answer must be found in the same spirit: to go where there is need, to serve where others are forgotten, to educate where ignorance limits human dignity, to defend the poor, to enter cultures with respect, to build communities, to form leaders, to remain close to the people, to give oneself entirely to God and to the mission. The statues of these Oblates are silent, but their lives are not. They speak through the churches, schools, communities and people who still remember. And if we stand quietly before those statues, we may hear the question they continue to ask: “The mission was entrusted to us in our time. What will you do with it in yours?”

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