

Faith in Action:

A narrative analysis of the Missionary Legacy of the Deceased Oblates in Sri Lanka as reflected in “Our Tribute”

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Introduction

The missionary congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, as it marks the bicentenary of the papal approbation of its *Constitutions and Rules*, is presented with a significant opportunity to remember and honour the zealous missionaries whose lives personified these foundational principles through unwavering dedication, zealous mission, and selfless sacrifice. Their fidelity to the Oblate charism transformed the *Constitutions and Rules* from written norms into a lived reality. History preserves the memory of both transformative events and extraordinary individuals. While significant events often shape the course of societies, it is the lives of remarkable men and women, through their faith, service, and commitment to humanity, that leave an enduring legacy, inspiring future generations and contributing to lasting social and spiritual transformation.

In this regard, the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka is indeed blessed by the arrival of the missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, whose presence revitalized and strengthened the faith of the Catholic community on the island. The profound changes that followed their arrival are clearly evident when one traces the history of the Oblates in Sri Lanka. Their missionary zeal, pastoral commitment, educational initiatives, and dedication to the poor have left an indelible mark on the life of the local Church. As our Founder, Saint Eugene de Mazenod, wrote to Father Courtès in one of his letters said, it is essential to keep alive the memory

of those who have gone before us and who embodied the Oblate charism with exemplary fidelity in their lives. For Saint Eugene, the true foundation stones of our Congregation are in heaven; the lives and witness of these faithful Oblates who continue to sustain, inspire, and guide the missionary vocation of the Congregation¹.

There are individuals whose exemplary lives and noble character yield a profound and ennobling influence on humanity. The pioneering Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate belonged to this distinguished group. Through their selfless dedication, missionary zeal, and unwavering commitment to the Gospel, they left an enduring legacy that continues to inspire both the Church and society. It is an absolute honour to revisit the rich treasury of the Oblate legacy through the comprehensive volumes of *“Our Tribute”*, which vividly record the missionary endeavours of the legendary Oblates who laboured tirelessly in Sri Lanka. The initial and monumental task of compiling and documenting the lives and ministries of the deceased Oblates was painstakingly undertaken by the post-novitiate students of the Oblate Study Club of the Oblate Scholasticate, Ampitiya, Kandy, under the meticulous guidance of late Rev. Fr. Philip Jesuthasan, OMI. Following his passing, this invaluable mission was entrusted to Rev. Fr. Paul Natchathiram, OMI, who faithfully continues the work to preserve and honour the rich heritage of the Oblates in Sri Lanka.

“Our Tribute” stands as a remarkable historical narrative that accounts the lives and missionary witness of both foreign and local Oblate missionaries who journeyed across the soil of Sri Lanka, strengthening the faith of countless people through their words, actions, and selfless service. While *Our Tribute* spans seven comprehensive volumes and documents the lives and ministries of hundreds of deceased Oblates, the present study does not seek to provide an exhaustive account of every missionary or every historical event contained therein. Rather, it offers a

thematic narrative analysis of selected missionary experiences and apostolic initiatives that most clearly illustrate the realization of the Oblate charism in the Sri Lankan context. By examining representative narratives of missionary struggle, pastoral ministry, education, social commitment, literary apostolate, youth formation, preferential service to the poor, and Marian spirituality, this article argues that the enduring legacy of the deceased Oblates lies not merely in the institutions they established, but in the missionary spirit they embodied a spirit that continues to shape the identity and mission of the Church in Sri Lanka and remains a source of inspiration for the Oblate Congregation today.

1. The Life Account of the Voluminous Writer Fr. Philips Jesuthasan OMI (1940-2019)

Rev. Fr. Philips Emmanuel Jesuthasan OMI, was born on 25 December 1940 in Puloly, Point Pedro, to V. Anthonipillai Philips and Mariampillai Francisca Philips. He was one of twelve children in the family. He received his primary education at Puloly Roman Catholic School from 1945 to 1950 and continued his secondary education at Sacred Heart College, Karaveddy, from 1951 to 1955. Inspired by the exemplary life and missionary zeal of the Oblate missionaries, particularly Fr. N. Joseph OMI, he discerned a vocation to the religious life. In January 1956, he entered St. Joseph's Juniorate at Kohuwala, Nugegoda, under the guidance of Fr. N. Joseph, hoping to dedicate his life to serving God's people through the charism of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.²

Being an exceptionally gifted student, Fr. Jesuthasan excelled in his studies, especially in Ecclesiastical Latin and English. His outstanding academic ability enabled him to complete the juniorate successfully within a year. Consequently, he entered the Oblate Novitiate, "Mount Eden," on 15 August 1957 to begin his formal religious formation. After faithfully completing his year

of novitiate, he made his first profession of vows on 15 August 1958. He then entered the Oblate Scholasticate at Ampitiya, Kandy, where he pursued his philosophical and theological studies at the National Seminary. During these years of formation, he made his perpetual profession of vows on 5 January 1963. He was ordained to the priesthood on 21 December 1964 by His Eminence Thomas Benjamin Cooray, OMI, Archbishop of Colombo, at St. Lucia's Cathedral, Kotahena, Colombo.³

Fr. Jesuthasan began his priestly ministry with remarkable enthusiasm and dedication. He faithfully carried out every responsibility entrusted to him, giving particular attention to the ministry of preaching. He devoted himself wholeheartedly to preparing well-researched and spiritually enriching sermons that addressed the needs of the times. His inspiring preaching touched the lives of countless faithful, especially young people, encouraging them to become committed and active Christians.

One of his significant contributions was his appointment as the first Director of the newly established international pre-novitiate, *Gnannodhayam*, at Keeri, Mannar. Through his foresight, leadership, and personal sacrifice, he laid a strong foundation for this formation house, transforming it into a vibrant and effective centre for the formation of future Oblate missionaries. Fr. Jesuthasan was also a prolific and distinguished writer. Deeply committed to preserving the history and missionary heritage of the Oblates in Sri Lanka, he authored numerous books and articles. Among his notable works, "*Our Tribute*" stands as an invaluable historical record of the Oblate foundation and missionary legacy in the country. His literary contributions extended beyond ecclesiastical history. Recognising the need for quality educational resources, he authored several textbooks for Advanced Level and university students. These books were officially approved by the Government of Sri Lanka as prescribed

texts for the newly introduced subject *Christian Civilization*. In recognition of his expertise, Fr. Jesuthasan also served as one of the principal designers and consultants for the curriculum of this subject.

Committed to academic excellence, he continually revised and updated his publications by incorporating new insights, developments, and Church reforms, ensuring that his readers remained well informed. Among his most widely used publications is “*Last Tribute*”, a comprehensive Tamil prayer book for funeral services. Today, it has become the standard funeral prayer book in almost all Tamil dioceses of Sri Lanka, reflecting its enduring pastoral value and widespread acceptance.⁴

Through his priestly ministry, missionary leadership, and extensive literary contributions, Fr. Philips Emmanuel Jesuthasan OMI, has left an enduring legacy in the Church in Sri Lanka. His life of dedicated service, intellectual excellence, and unwavering commitment to evangelisation continues to inspire generations of priests, religious, and lay faithful alike.

2. Missionary Perseverance of Oblates in the Face of Adversity

At the request of Bishop Orazio Bettacchini, the Pro-Vicar of the then Vicariate of Jaffna, Bishop Eugène de Mazenod, Founder of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), sent four Oblate missionaries to Ceylon. They were Fr. Stephen Semeria, the Superior of the Mission; Fr. Louis Keating, a newly ordained Irish priest; Fr. François Ciamin, who was still a novice at the time; and Brother Gaspard de Steffanis. The four missionaries departed from Marseilles, France, on 21 October 1847 and arrived at Galle, Ceylon, on 28 November 1847. Their arrival marked the beginning of the Oblate mission in Sri Lanka, inaugurating a new chapter in the evangelizing mission of the Congregation in the island.⁵ When Bishop Eugène de Mazenod wrote to Fr. Sameria, he

said that, “Frankly, I only agreed to send missionaries to Ceylon in the hope of seeing them used for the conversion of souls. For the Italian and Spanish missionaries who are looking for their daily bread, it is alright to win it by serving parishes, but our oblates are called to a different ministry.” This statement clearly reflects the missionary vision of the Founder. For Bishop De Mazenod, the Oblate mission was not to be confined to ordinary parish ministry or limited pastoral responsibilities. Rather, the Oblates were called to seek ever new and creative ways of proclaiming the Gospel and leading people to the Kingdom of God. Their missionary vocation demanded a willingness to go wherever the need was greatest, embracing sacrifices and challenges for the salvation of souls. This apostolic spirit would become the hallmark of the Oblate mission in Sri Lanka from its very beginning.

From the very arrival of the Missionary Oblates in Sri Lanka, the impression of Fr. Stephen Semeria about the people of Jaffna was remarkably positive. He wrote: “Yet, like all other people, they also had good qualities. Generally, they were respectful, docile, submissive, spiritual-minded, and consequently quite capable of becoming good and even excellent Catholics, if only they were instructed and guided more diligently on the way of salvation.”⁶ This observation reveals Fr. Semeria’s optimism and pastoral vision. He recognized the spiritual potential of the people and understood that their growth in faith depended on patient instruction, dedicated pastoral care, and compassionate guidance. Such an outlook demanded extraordinary courage and perseverance from the missionaries, whose mission was to gather the scattered flock into one community united in faith and charity.

The ministry of the Oblate missionaries extended far beyond preaching. As true shepherds after the example of Christ, they immersed themselves in the daily lives of the people. They visited homes, listened to personal and family concerns,

reconciled broken relationships, resolved conflicts, corrected scandals and injustices, and accompanied the faithful through their struggles.⁷ Their presence among the people demonstrated that evangelization was not merely the proclamation of the Gospel but also the embodiment of Christ's compassionate love.

Fr. Semeria, the superior of the mission, desired that at least two Oblates should reside together in every mission station so that they could support one another in fraternity, prayer, and ministry. However, the demands of the mission often made this impossible, forcing some missionaries to live and work alone, relying solely on divine providence for strength and protection. Despite these hardships, they remained steadfast, displaying remarkable courage and an apostolic zeal inspired by hope and holiness.⁸

2.1 The Cholera Epidemic: A Context of Missionary Witness

Soon after the arrival of the Oblates, a devastating cholera epidemic broke out in 1849. The epidemic continued for several years, bringing death and desolation throughout almost the entire Vicariate of Jaffna. A town once full of life and activity was reduced to silence. Work ceased, schools were closed, the streets became deserted, and only a few families escaped the deadly disease.⁹ This tragic situation recalls the global COVID-19 pandemic experienced in our own time, although without the benefit of modern medicine or public health measures. But the oblates were very optimistic even in the epidemic catastrophe. Fr. Gourdon (1833-1897) a French missionary, who neither gave up on the victim nor let anyone die without the sacraments, once said that, "Epidemic is a great preacher. Everyone wants to make his or her confession and to prepare themselves for death. They attended services regularly. Thanks to cholera, several big fish have been caught."¹⁰ He himself felt the attack of the mortal disease twice, and a protestant doctor helped him to recover his health.

In the midst of this crisis, the Oblate missionaries courageously placed themselves at the service of the suffering. They travelled throughout the town and surrounding villages, caring for the sick, administering the sacraments, comforting the dying, consoling grieving families, and burying the dead. They carried a small bell while walking through the villages to announce their presence, so that those in need of spiritual assistance could call upon them. Their ministry exposed them to the same dangers as the people they served. The epidemic claimed the life of Fr. Leydier, who died at Vathirai on 16 June 1851, followed shortly by the energetic young missionary Fr. Lacombe, who had faithfully ministered in the cholera-stricken mission of Valikamam West.¹¹ Their deaths testify to the heroic charity of the missionaries, who remained fearless, indefatigable, and obedient to their religious vocation even at the cost of their own lives.

2.2 Climate and the Challenges of Missionary Travel

The establishment of the first Oblate mission in Sri Lanka was accompanied by numerous hardships. The missionaries had to adapt to an unfamiliar culture, language, food, methods of travel, and local expressions of faith. Jesus' words to His disciples aptly describe their situation: *"The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak"* (Mt 26:41). Although their missionary enthusiasm was boundless, their physical weakness often made them suffer until they gradually adjusted to the climate and cultural conditions of their new homeland. The over exertion combined with tropical heat did not permit them to have a good night's sleep. These even affected their appetite for food. For the foreign missionaries, adapting to the harsh climate of Sri Lanka, especially in the northern region, presented a significant challenge. One such example is Fr. Armand Bricard OMI (1924-1953), a young and zealous French missionary whose promising ministry was cut short before he could render the full measure of his service to the People of God in the Diocese of Jaffna. While serving at Point

Pedro, he was severely affected by the region's intense tropical heat. On one occasion, he suffered a serious sunstroke and had to be rushed to the Bishop's residence for immediate care. Despite receiving medical treatment, his condition did not improve, and he was later admitted to the General Hospital in Jaffna, where he peacefully passed away, entering his eternal reward.¹²

They also had to suffer much from the primitive conditions of travel. The bullock cart, springless and with only a thin layer of straw upon the hard planks, was their usual mode of transportation. The roads were terrible, and very often they had to travel on rough tracks. And apart from this, the accommodation in the mission centres were mostly miserable huts put up for the occasion.¹³ Despite coming from the modernized and developed nations of Europe, the missionaries were compelled to travel in a primitive, almost antediluvian manner. To cross rivers and stretches of the sea, they relied on rafts constructed by lashing together three or four coconut palm trunks, exposing themselves to the blazing sun, oppressive heat, and turbulent waves.¹⁴

Among these missionaries, Fr. John Le Bescou OMI (1824-1867), the trusted collaborator of Fr. Semeria, stood out for his exceptional dedication. He willingly undertook long and exhausting journeys to distant mission stations without complaining about deprivation, fatigue, or extreme heat. He was always ready to replace an ill missionary or assist wherever the need was greatest. His generous availability embodied the missionary spirit of total self-sacrifice.¹⁵

Language posed another formidable obstacle for the foreign missionaries. Nevertheless, they persevered with determination in learning Tamil. Some possessed a natural aptitude for languages, while others acquired proficiency only through sustained effort and perseverance. In response to the pastoral demands of the mission, they gradually learned enough of the language to preach, instruct

catechumens, administer the sacraments, and hear confessions. Their willingness to communicate in the language of the people won the trust and affection of the local faithful, who increasingly accepted them as their own pastors.¹⁶

2.3 The Goanese Schism: A Test of Missionary Perseverance

Another major challenge confronting the newly arrived Oblates was the deeply rooted Goanese Schism. The schism began when the privileges enjoyed by the Goanese missionaries for long years were revoked by the Holy See; they were not ready to give them up. So certain missions in Mannar and Mantotte were under double jurisdiction: that of the Goanese clergy and the Vicar Apostolic. There were difficulties and quarrels in offering Holy Mass and administering Sacraments in some of the parishes, and it was a big scandal to the Church.¹⁷ The divisions created by this ecclesiastical conflict complicated their pastoral ministry and often hindered their efforts to unite the faithful under the authority of the Church. Winning the confidence of communities divided by competing ecclesiastical allegiances demanded exceptional patience, prudence, and pastoral sensitivity. Through perseverance, charity, and faithful service, the Oblate missionaries gradually overcame many of these obstacles, laying the foundations for a stronger and more unified Catholic community in northern Sri Lanka.

Through the tireless efforts and visionary pastoral leadership, Bishop Henry Joulain OMI (1852-1919) brought an end to the schism that had persisted for nearly fifty-five years in the regions of Mannar and Mantotte. His primary objective was to reunite the scattered faithful and restore them under the one banner of the Catholic faith and pastoral care. Through his repeated pastoral visits, inspiring sermons, spiritual retreats, and close personal relationship with the people, he touched their hearts,

leading many to repentance and reconciliation with the Church, thereby bringing an end to their prolonged schismatic separation.¹⁸ Encouraged by the success of his pastoral efforts, Bishop Joulain visited the principal schismatic church at Parappankandal. It is reported that, while he was still some distance from the church, he was surprised to find a large crowd of people kneeling to welcome him. They then led him in a solemn procession, accompanied by hymns and ceremonial gunfire, to a beautifully decorated *pandal*, where an address expressing profound Catholic sentiments was read aloud. Deeply moved by this unexpected reception, Bishop Joulain responded with emotion before leading the people to the church and imparting his solemn episcopal blessing. As a result of this reconciliation, approximately 2,000 people were received back into full communion with the Catholic Church.¹⁹

The resolution of the Goanese Schism illustrates that the realization of the Oblate charism extended beyond missionary expansion to the patient ministry of ecclesial reconciliation. By restoring unity among a divided faithful through pastoral charity, perseverance, and fidelity to the Church, the Oblates demonstrated that authentic missionary witness is measured not only by founding new communities but also by healing divisions within the Body of Christ.

2.4 Missionary Outreach to Youth and the Abandoned

Oblate missionaries never fail to form the youth in their respective mission land, because they were well aware that, it is this generation that would carry forward the seeds of faith implanted in them for the next. They actually deposited in their hearts the seeds of precious human qualities, which make good, loyal, useful citizens for the state, and children of the Church, bringing blessings to the family and society is really a missionary work, an eminently social work, which merits undying gratitude.

A striking example of the Oblates' commitment to youth ministry is found in the apostolate of Bro. Eugene Grousseau OMI (1871-1948), whose work left an indelible mark on the young people of St. Mary's Cathedral Parish, Jaffna. At that time, most of the youth from working-class families earned their livelihood by rolling cigars in the local cigar factories. Although the majority were Hindus, nearly ten per cent of them were Catholics. Their work was tedious and poorly waged; they rolled between 700 and 800 cigars a day for a wage of only fifty cents, an income barely sufficient to meet their basic needs.

The harsh conditions of their daily lives had a profound effect on their spiritual well-being. Preoccupied with earning a living, many neglected their religious obligations. Attendance at Holy Mass became irregular, the reception of the sacraments was infrequent, and personal prayer was often ignored. Their lives revolved almost entirely around the monotonous routine of the cigar factories, leaving little room for spiritual, social, or personal development.

Deeply moved by their difficulties, Bro. Grousseau sought an effective way to reach these young workers. Rather than beginning with formal catechesis, he adopted a practical and relational approach. As the person in charge of the Catholic Press in Jaffna, he invited the youth to gather each evening on the small playground near the press to play football. Recognizing that wholesome recreation could become a gateway to spiritual formation, he gradually introduced musical instruments and indoor games to keep them meaningfully engaged and to broaden their outlook beyond the confines of factory life.

At the conclusion of each gathering, Bro. Grousseau assembled the young men to recite the Angelus before they returned home. What began with only a handful of participants gradually developed into a flourishing youth movement. By the end of the

first year, approximately forty young men were meeting regularly each evening. This initiative eventually became the humble beginning of the now well-known St. Joseph's Association.

The impact of this ministry extended far beyond recreation. It brought about a remarkable transformation in the character and behaviour of the participants. Vulgar conversations, inappropriate jokes, and unbecoming conduct gradually disappeared from their workplaces, replaced by a renewed sense of discipline, fraternity, and Christian values. The association also nurtured religious vocations, and several members later embraced the consecrated life or were ordained as Catholic priests. Bro. Grousseau's innovative pastoral approach demonstrates how the Oblates employed ordinary human activities such as sports, music, and fellowship as effective means of evangelization, enabling young people to rediscover their dignity, deepen their faith, and become active members of the Church.²⁰

The utmost care for the poor and the broken became one of the focal concerns of the missionaries upon their arrival in Sri Lanka. A remarkable example of this missionary compassion is Rev. Fr. Norbert Perera OMI (1871-1950), who became well known in Jaffna Catholic tradition for his humble bicycle and the food parcels carried on its carrier. This simple image later became part of the Catholic folklore of Jaffna, symbolizing his closeness to the poor and marginalized. He was deeply attached to the poor, and the poor, in turn, loved him dearly. He understood, perhaps more profoundly than many others, that the poor were none other than Christ Himself present among His people.

Fr. Norbert often sacrificed his own meals in order to feed those who were hungry and worked tirelessly to lessen the suffering reflected on the faces of the poor. In order to provide food for the famished, he collected food parcels from generous benefactors and personally distributed them to those most in

need. His charitable works were marked by profound humility; his greatest desire was to ensure that “his right hand did not know what his left hand was doing.” When his good deeds were praised, even by those in authority, he would often become emotional and weep, saying on one occasion, “God may not be as pleased with me as men are.” These words reveal his humble spirit, simplicity of heart, and genuine zeal for the Gospel. He did not merely serve the poor from a distance; rather, he chose to be among them, sharing their struggles, bringing them hope, and restoring their dignity through small but meaningful acts of love.²¹

The history of the first Oblate missionaries in Sri Lanka is therefore a profound witness to missionary discipleship through struggle. Their willingness to endure disease, loneliness, cultural adaptation, physical hardships, and ecclesiastical challenges demonstrates that authentic evangelization is inseparable from sacrifice. Their lives became a living testimony to Christ the Good Shepherd, who laid down His life for His flock. Through their humble service and preferential love for the poor, they embodied the words of Christ: “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40). The enduring fruits of their ministry continue to inspire the missionary vocation of the Church in Sri Lanka today.

3. Education as an Instrument of Evangelization

Education became one of the foremost apostolic ministries through which the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate sought to evangelize and transform society. Recognizing that the formation of the human person was inseparable from the proclamation of the Gospel, they regarded education as a privileged means of shaping individuals intellectually, morally, and spiritually. The Oblates were firmly convinced that the future of both the Church and society depended upon the sound formation of the younger generation. Consequently, they devoted themselves to establishing

schools that would nurture not only academic excellence but also Christian virtues, discipline, and social responsibility.

To fulfil this vision, the Oblates invited competent and dedicated missionaries from Europe, many of whom were well-trained educators, to undertake the work of teaching and school administration. Brother Byrne, OMI who had just completed his novitiate and made his first religious profession, received his first obedience to the Oblate Mission in Sri Lanka. Together with Brother Joseph Brown, OMI who had completed his novitiate the previous year, he was sent to Sri Lanka to assist Mgr. Semeria on the teaching staff of the Jaffna Boys' Seminary, which later became St. Patrick's College. They constituted the first group of Oblate teaching brothers to arrive in Jaffna, marking the beginning of the Oblates' direct contribution to the field of education in the Vicariate of Jaffna.²² These missionaries willingly embraced the challenges of an unfamiliar culture and language, labouring tirelessly to provide quality education to the local population. Their schools became centres of holistic formation, where intellectual development was integrated with religious instruction, moral education, and character formation.

Archbishop Christopher Bonjean OMI (1823-1892), was one of the foremost champions of Catholic education in Sri Lanka. He was firmly convinced that education was "the most momentous question, a question of life and death" for the Church in the country. At a time when Catholic schools were few in number and deficient in many respects, Bonjean recognized that the prevailing government educational regulations were openly unfavourable to Catholic institutions. Furthermore, many existing Catholic schools were placed under the supervision of Protestant ministers, and students were permitted to use only the Protestant version of the Bible in their religious instruction. In response to these challenges, Bonjean published a pamphlet in 1860 entitled

“A Few Words on Catholic Education.” In this influential work, he strongly criticized the sectarian character of the existing school system and appealed to Catholics to recognize and fulfil their responsibility towards Catholic education. His vigorous advocacy awakened Catholic public opinion and exerted significant pressure on the colonial government to adopt a more liberal educational policy. Consequently, his efforts helped pave the way for the introduction of the grant-in-aid system²³, which provided greater opportunities for the development and sustainability of Catholic schools in Sri Lanka.²⁴

It is said that, if the bricks of St. Patrick’s College could speak, they would all sing the praises of Fr. Murphy OMI (1850-1887). Such a tribute reflects the extraordinary dedication with which he laboured for the advancement of the college, devoting himself wholeheartedly to its growth and development. Among his most enduring contributions was the composition of the college anthem, “Alma Mater,” regarded as one of the finest school anthems ever written. The hymn beautifully captures both the inspiring character of its author and the cherished memories of student life, fostering a lasting sense of identity and loyalty among generations of Patricians. The anthem attained its fullest splendour when performed with the accompaniment of the college band, another initiative introduced by Fr. Murphy. By establishing the college band, he enriched the cultural and musical life of the institution, leaving behind a legacy that continued to inspire students long after his time.²⁵

The educational apostolate of the Oblates profoundly influenced the social and religious landscape of northern Sri Lanka. Under the leadership of pioneering bishops such as Bishops John Semeria, and Christopher Bonjean, the Diocese of Jaffna witnessed the establishment and development of several renowned Catholic educational institutions, including St. Patrick’s College,

and St. Anthony's College, Kayts. These institutions produced generations of religious leaders, educators, professionals, and public servants whose contributions extended far beyond the Catholic community.

The Oblates understood that authentic evangelization was not confined to the pulpit or the parish. Rather, by educating young minds and forming virtuous citizens, they sowed seeds that would bear fruit for generations. Their educational ministry thus became an enduring expression of their missionary charism, leaving an indelible mark on the history of the Church and the social development of Sri Lanka.

At the College's Centenary celebrations in 1950, Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake paid tribute to Rev. Fr. Long OMI (1896-1961) and the pioneering missionaries, stating that Sri Lanka's path to independence was greatly strengthened by their dedication to education. He praised Fr. Long for sacrificing his homeland to serve the nation, nurturing generations of students who later became distinguished leaders in public life. He concluded that Fr. Long's selfless service and commitment to the ideals of education and nation-building deserved lasting remembrance.²⁶

Thus, the educational mission of the Oblates was not merely an effort to establish academic institutions but a profound expression of their evangelizing vocation. Through schools, colleges, and the formation of young minds, they sought to build a society rooted in faith, knowledge, virtue, and service. Their commitment to education became a lasting legacy that strengthened both the Catholic Church and the wider society of Sri Lanka. The institutions they founded continue to bear witness to their conviction that education, when guided by Gospel values, becomes a powerful instrument for human transformation and the proclamation of Christ's message even in the present context.

3.1 Literary Apostolate: Evangelization through the Written Word

The literary contribution of the Oblate missionaries to Sri Lankan society constitutes one of the most enduring dimensions of their missionary legacy. Recognizing that education extends beyond the classroom, they employed literature as an effective instrument for evangelization, intellectual formation, and cultural engagement. Through books, pamphlets, dictionaries, historical studies, and apologetical writings, they sought to deepen both the spiritual and secular understanding of the people while promoting critical reflection on faith and society.

Among the most distinguished figures in this literary apostolate was Swami Gnanapragasar, OMI (1875-1947). Soon after his appointment as Assistant Parish Priest at Kayts, he established a Catholic Lending Library to cultivate among the faithful a love for reading and a deeper appreciation of their faith. Later, upon his transfer to St. Mary's Cathedral, Jaffna, he founded the Patronage of Girls, an initiative aimed at instructing illiterate girls in the fundamental teachings of the Catholic faith, thereby extending educational opportunities to those who were often neglected.

Swami Gnanapragasar's literary output was extraordinary. He published numerous booklets in both Tamil and English on Catholic doctrine, responses to Protestant objections, and critical studies of Hindu beliefs and practices. Beyond these shorter publications, he devoted himself tirelessly to enriching Tamil Catholic literature by producing and promoting high-quality works on doctrine, apologetics, ascetical theology, Church history, and liturgy, written in both prose and poetry.

His exceptional command of the Tamil language, together with his profound knowledge of Hindu philosophy and tradition,

earned him admiration even among those who opposed his religious views. His monumental linguistic achievement, the Etymological and Comparative Lexicon of the Tamil Language, remains one of the most important scholarly contributions to Tamil studies. He also authored several influential historical works, including *The Tamils: Their Early History and Religion*, *A Critical History of Jaffna*, *Jaffna in Portuguese and Dutch Times*, *Origin of Caste among the Tamils*, and *A History of the Catholic Church in Ceylon*. These publications demonstrate that his literary ministry was not merely an academic pursuit but an integral expression of the Oblate mission to enlighten minds, preserve history, defend the Catholic faith, and promote intellectual and spiritual formation.²⁷

The literary apostolate of the Oblates therefore reveals that their evangelizing mission extended beyond preaching and education in schools. Through the written word, they preserved history, enriched Tamil Christian literature, fostered critical scholarship, and formed generations of readers whose understanding of faith, culture, and society was profoundly shaped by their writings. Their literary legacy remains an enduring witness to the Oblate conviction that evangelization also takes place through the world of ideas.

4. The Oblate Commitment to Social Evangelization

Social concern is inevitable in the mission places of the oblate fathers. The difficult conditions of the people urged the Oblates to work for their empowerment in the society. “I loved justice and hated iniquity, and therefore I die in exile.”²⁸ These words of Pope Gregory VII aptly describe many of the Oblate missionaries in Sri Lanka, who stood in solidarity with the poor and marginalized, courageously seeking justice for the most abandoned and outcast members of society. Inspired by their faith and commitment to the Gospel, they dedicated their lives to defending human dignity, advocating for social justice, and

serving those whose voices were seldom heard. In 1859, Mgr. Semeria established the first Catholic library in Jaffna. Two years later, in 1861, with the support of the Society of the Holy Childhood, he founded St. Joseph's Orphanage to provide care and shelter for orphaned children of non-Christian parentage.²⁹ The same was true of Mgr. Bonjean, OMI who instructed his missionaries not to limit their apostolate to the spiritual care of their parishioners but also to devote themselves to the material and social welfare of the people. In 1875, when a cholera epidemic broke out and claimed more than 608 lives in the Mannar District, he directed that St. Mary's Church in Mannar be converted into a temporary hospital to care for the afflicted. In the years that followed, famine accompanied the epidemic, resulting in the deaths of more than a thousand people in northern Sri Lanka. The missionaries, with little regard for their own safety, placed the survival and welfare of the people above their own. Mgr. Bonjean also took the initiative of submitting a memorandum to the Legislative Council, urging the authorities to adopt the necessary measures to prevent similar outbreaks in the future.³⁰

The fight for Catholic education is one such example that became handy to alleviate the fear of future. For example, Rev. Fr. Timothy Long OMI, made lasting contributions to the development of Jaffna beyond the field of education. He was a driving force behind the establishment of the Jaffna Public Library, spearheading the landmark *One Million Rupee Library Fund* and securing generous international support. He also played a pivotal role in advocating for the air service to the North. His vision and tireless efforts left an enduring legacy in the region's educational, cultural, and social development.³¹

Further more, Fr. Peter Pillai, OMI (1904–1964), a Cambridge scholar, polyglot, distinguished educationist, and committed socialist, founded and edited the English journal *Social*

Justice and the Sinhala journal *Samaja Samaya*, both of which received high praise from eminent observers abroad. He campaigned tirelessly for socio-economic reforms and served on the Divorce Commission, the Social Service Commission, and the Education Commission appointed by Mr. C. W. W. Kannangara, the then Minister of Education in Sri Lanka. Fr. Peter Pillai was held in the highest esteem by people from all walks of life, including intellectuals and government leaders. He was regarded as a “human dynamo” and was widely consulted on matters relating to education, social welfare, and public policy.³²

Another remarkable personality featured in our tribute is Fr. Santhiyapillai Peter, OMI (1904–1965), who devoted his life to the pursuit of justice. He was a man of exceptional grit, determination, and indomitable courage. Admired even by his superiors for his forthrightness and integrity, he remained unwavering in defending what he believed to be right. Fearless in his commitment to justice and fair play, he never compromised his principles for the sake of expediency. Such was his steadfast dedication that justice itself became synonymous with the name of Fr. Peter.³³

A further noteworthy example of the Oblates’ achievement in addressing social issues was their contribution to securing the Northern Railway. Fr. Charles Hendry Lytton, OMI was the driving force behind this tremendous effort. While serving in the Wannai, he realized that the root cause of the physical and moral hardships of the people was the region's isolation from the Jaffna Peninsula. The Wannai possessed fertile soil and abundant water resources, but it lacked sufficient laborers. Fr. Lytton believed that if there were proper means of transportation, many people from Jaffna would travel to the Wannai to cultivate the land.

He also observed that the government had invested large sums of money in irrigation projects, creating fertile agricultural land with adequate water, yet there was no efficient means of transporting produce through the dense forests. As the saying goes, “Trade and development depend on transport and time.” At a time when economic development increasingly depended on efficient transportation, the railway became the most practical solution for saving time and promoting trade. Therefore, Fr. Lytton argued that the North should be connected with the South by rail. If the western and southern parts of the country enjoyed railway services, he questioned why the North and the East should be deprived of the same privilege.

Many people criticized his proposal, claiming that it was an impossible dream, and some even mockingly referred to it as the “railway to the moon.” Nevertheless, Fr. Lytton never abandoned his campaign. He persistently lobbied influential government officials and worked tirelessly to secure the necessary financial support. At last, his efforts were rewarded, and the railway to Jaffna became a reality in 1904. This was his greatest achievement, earning him the title of “The Great Apostle of Social Service.” The railway transformed the region by connecting the previously isolated North with the seat of the government and opening new opportunities for economic and social development.³⁴

These missionaries had deep influence in people, bringing serenity to the troubled and embittered hearts, pacifying the divisive spirits with perfect calm and justice to stand for the fair social order for the upliftment of the ordinary people. the Oblate missionaries demonstrated that authentic evangelization embraces both spiritual ministry and social responsibility. Through their unwavering commitment to education, healthcare, social justice,

public welfare, and infrastructure development, they responded to the concrete needs of the people and worked tirelessly to improve their living conditions. Whether by caring for the sick and orphaned, defending educational rights, promoting social reforms, or advocating for transformative projects such as the Northern Railway, they became instruments of justice and human development. Their legacy remains a lasting testimony to a missionary vision that sought not only the salvation of souls but also the dignity, well-being, and holistic development of society.

5. Mary as a Source of Inspiration for Missionary Zeal

The Oblate missionaries were renowned for their profound love and unwavering devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Inspired by the spirituality of St. Eugene de Mazenod, who regarded Mary as the Patroness and Mother of the Congregation, they consistently promoted Marian devotion wherever they carried out their missionary work. They believed that a deep devotion to the Blessed Mother would strengthen the faith of the people and lead them to a closer relationship with Christ.

When Bishop Christopher Bonjean, OMI, first visited the Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu as Apostolic Vicar, he was deeply distressed by its condition. He wrote: “What unhappiness assailed my soul when I saw for the first time this miserable sanctuary. I affirm that it won’t be said that a Bishop, an Oblate of Mary Immaculate, will leave the sanctuary of our Immaculate Mother in this miserable state. I have taken the resolution to erect in this savage wood a beautiful temple to Mary which will be a mute preaching to the innumerable pilgrims, Mohammadians, Hindus and Buddhists.”³⁵

Determined to fulfil this vision, Bishop Bonjean laid the foundation stone for a new church at Madhu on 8 August 1872 and

appointed Fr. Poulin, OMI, as the priest in charge of the shrine. However, the construction was met with strong opposition from the Kadayar community, who attempted to remove the foundation stone and claim possession of the church. After a prolonged legal dispute, the Supreme Court of Ceylon, on 1 July 1875, ruled that the Shrine of Madhu rightfully belonged to the Apostolic Vicariate. Overjoyed by the verdict, Bishop Bonjean attributed the victory to the intercession of Our Lady of Victories. As an act of thanksgiving, on 2 July 1876, in the presence of thousands of pilgrims, he solemnly crowned the statue of Our Lady of Madhu with a golden crown. To ensure the future development of the shrine, Bishop Bonjean also purchased forty acres of forest land adjoining the church and obtained permission from the colonial government to cut timber for the construction of the new sanctuary. Through Bishop Bonjean's vision, perseverance, and unwavering Marian devotion, the once-neglected shrine hidden in the forest was transformed into the principal Marian pilgrimage centre of Sri Lanka, attracting thousands of pilgrims each year for the annual feast celebrated on 2 July.³⁶

Fr. Nicholas Santiago, OMI (1869–1954), was one of the outstanding promoters of Marian devotion. He had a special love for the Blessed Virgin, whom the Oblates venerate as their Queen and Patroness. He became widely known as the propagator of the Three Hail Mary Devotion. To all those who approached him for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, he strongly recommended the daily recitation of three Hail Marys every morning and evening without fail. Through this simple yet profound practice, he encouraged the faithful to seek Mary's continual protection and intercession, fostering a lasting Marian spirituality among the Catholic community. Another distinguished promoter of Marian devotion was Bishop Guyomar, OMI (1884–1956) who worked tirelessly to spread and deepen devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, particularly through the Holy Rosary, throughout the

Diocese of Jaffna. A significant event marking the beginning of his episcopate was the solemn coronation of Our Lady of Madhu, which symbolized his deep commitment to Marian spirituality. Recognizing the importance of the Madhu Shrine as a place of prayer and reconciliation, he introduced numerous improvements to the shrine and developed it into a major national pilgrimage centre. He also increased the number of annual feasts and devotional celebrations, thereby encouraging greater participation of the faithful.³⁷

Bishop Alfred Guyomar OMI further expanded Marian devotion by promoting other pilgrimage centres within the diocese, including Our Lady of Fatima at Pandatharippu, Our Lady of the Rosary at Sinnamadh, and several other Marian shrines. In collaboration with Fr. B. A. Thomas, OMI, he also established a contemplative community known as the Rosarians for both men and women. Their principal mission was the perpetual recitation of the Holy Rosary before the Blessed Sacrament, offering continuous prayer for the Church, the nation, and the salvation of souls. This initiative reflected the Oblate conviction that Marian devotion and Eucharistic adoration are inseparable sources of spiritual renewal.³⁸

A remarkable testimony to Marian devotion is found during the Second World War. At a time when Sri Lanka faced the threat of Japanese attacks because of the presence of British military forces on the island, Archbishop Masson, OMI, placed his complete trust in the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He made a solemn vow that if Sri Lanka were spared from the devastation of war, he would build a basilica in her honour. His prayer was answered, and Sri Lanka escaped the destruction that many had feared. In fulfilment of his promise, Archbishop Masson built the Basilica of Our Lady of Lanka at Tewatte, Ragama, dedicating it to Our Lady of Lanka, the Patroness of the nation.

To this day, the basilica stands as a lasting monument to the Marian faith of the Oblate missionaries and continues to be one of the most important centres of Marian pilgrimage in Sri Lanka.³⁹

These examples clearly demonstrate that Marian devotion occupied a central place in the spirituality and missionary life of the Oblates. Through their preaching, pastoral initiatives, establishment of Marian shrines, promotion of the Rosary, and personal witness, they nurtured a profound love for the Blessed Virgin among the faithful. Their efforts have left an enduring legacy, making Marian devotion an integral part of the Catholic faith and religious culture in Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

The lives of the deceased Oblates recorded in *Our Tribute* reveal that the history of the Oblate mission in Sri Lanka is not merely a chronicle of remarkable individuals but a living testimony to the concrete realization of the Oblate charism in diverse historical circumstances. Their missionary witness demonstrates that evangelization was never confined to the administration of the sacraments or the routine exercise of parish ministry. Rather, it embraced the whole person and the whole society through pastoral care, education, social reform, compassionate service to the poor, youth formation, and the promotion of Marian spirituality.

The narratives examined in this study further illustrate that missionary fruitfulness emerged not from favourable circumstances but through perseverance amid hardship. Epidemics, tropical diseases, cultural adaptation, linguistic challenges, ecclesiastical conflicts, poverty, and personal sacrifice became the very context in which the missionaries embodied the Gospel. Their fidelity confirms the vision of Saint Eugene de Mazenod that an Oblate is called to seek “the most abandoned” with apostolic courage and creative charity. In this respect, the history preserved in

Our Tribute is not simply a record of past achievements but an interpretation of how the Oblate vocation was incarnated within the social, cultural, and ecclesial realities of Sri Lanka.

Beyond documenting missionary activities, *Our Tribute* serves as an indispensable historical source that safeguards the collective memory of the Oblate presence in Sri Lanka. It demonstrates how individual acts of fidelity gradually shaped the development of the local Church and contributed to the wider educational, social, and cultural transformation of the nation. The schools they founded, the institutions they established, the social reforms they promoted, and the countless lives they touched continue to bear witness to a missionary legacy whose influence extends far beyond their own generation.

Ultimately, this research work affirms that the enduring legacy of the deceased Oblates lies not primarily in the institutions they built but in the missionary spirit they embodied. Their lives continue to challenge contemporary Oblates and the wider Church to renew the same zeal for evangelization, the same preferential love for the poor and abandoned, and the same readiness to respond creatively to the needs of every age. It is said that remembering helps us to be thankful, and forgetfulness could lead to ingratitude. As the Congregation celebrates the bicentenary of the papal approbation of its Constitutions and Rules, the witness of these missionaries remains a compelling reminder that the authentic fulfilment of the Oblate vocation is found in faithful service, generous sacrifice, and unwavering commitment to the mission of Christ.

Resources

¹ Cf. Letter to Courtés, July 22, 1828.

² Cf. M. Paul Nadchethiram, Ed., “*Our Tribute*” Vol IV-Part II (2011-2022), 88.

³ Cf. M. Paul Nadchethiram, Ed., “*Our Tribute*” Vol IV-Part II (2011-2022), 88-89

⁴ Cf. M. Paul Nadchethiram, Ed., “*Our Tribute*” Vol IV-Part II (2011-2022), 92-94

⁵ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., “*Our Tribute*” Vol I, viii-x

- ⁶ Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol I, 42.
- ⁷ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol I, 3.
- ⁸ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol I, 3
- ⁹ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol I, 7-8
- ¹⁰ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol I, 210.
- ¹¹ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol I, 12.
- ¹² Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol III, Part I, 41-42.
- ¹³ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol I, 47
- ¹⁴ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol II, Part I, 9.
- ¹⁵ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol I, 34.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol I, 34.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol II, Part I, 5
- ¹⁸ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol II, Part I, 110.
- ¹⁹ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol II, Part I, 110-111.
- ²⁰ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol II, Part II, 248-249.
- ²¹ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol III, Part I, 9.
- ²² Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol I, 14.
- ²³ The grant-in-aid system was a government policy that provided financial assistance to approved denominational schools while allowing them to remain under the management of their respective religious authorities. Archbishop Bonjean's persistent advocacy for equal educational rights contributed significantly to the adoption of a more liberal educational policy, making it possible for Catholic schools to receive government grants without surrendering their Catholic identity. This marked a turning point in the growth and stability of Catholic education in Sri Lanka.
- ²⁴ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol I, 162.
- ²⁵ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol I, 116-117.
- ²⁶ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol III, Part I, 124.
- ²⁷ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol II, Part II, 228-229.
- ²⁸ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol III, Part I, 275.
- ²⁹ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol I, 52.
- ³⁰ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol I, 168.
- ³¹ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol III, Part I, 124.
- ³² Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol III, Part I, 1170-171
- ³³ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol III, Part I, 181.
- ³⁴ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol III, Part I, 166-167
- ³⁵ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol I, 170.
- ³⁶ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol I, 170.
- ³⁷ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol III, Part I, 54.
- ³⁸ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol III, Part I, 66.
- ³⁹ Cf. Philips Jesuthasan, Ed., *"Our Tribute"* Vol III, Part I, 162.