

The contribution of the Oblates to sacred music in the Sri Lankan Catholic Church

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Introduction

The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) have made a significant contribution to the development and enrichment of sacred music in Sri Lanka. Since their arrival in 1847, they have promoted liturgical music as an essential part of Catholic worship, education, and evangelization. The Oblates arrived in Sri Lanka in a very appropriate time and in a time of great turmoil in the life of the faithful. They toiled hard and invested everything possible to build a beautiful church in our blessed motherland. Many missionary Oblates who came with lots of enthusiasm and with the burning zeal for souls never return to their country. We need to be grateful not only for their dedicated service but also for their missionary zeal.

Sacrosanctum Concilium is the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963, as a fundamental document of the Second Vatican Council, it aimed to reform Catholic worship, promote the active participation of the faithful, and adapt rituals to modern needs and the entire chapter of six is on the sacred music. This document boosted or paved the way for the enthusiasm of the Oblates to contribute more to Sacred Music. Following the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the Oblates encouraged the incorporation of Sri Lankan cultural elements into Catholic worship.

Indigenous rhythms and melodies were blended with traditional Catholic liturgical forms while maintaining the sacred character of the liturgy. The Oblates introduced and promoted

the rich tradition of Catholic liturgical music, including Gregorian chant, polyphonic choral music, and hymn singing. They encouraged the active participation of the faithful in the liturgy through congregational singing. Some of their major contributions include Composition of Hymns in Local Languages, Development of Liturgical Music and Training of Church Musicians.

Oblate priests and musicians composed and translated many hymns into Sinhala and Tamil, making the liturgy more meaningful and accessible to local communities. They also adapted Western sacred melodies to suit Sri Lankan musical traditions. The Oblates established choirs in parishes and schools and trained choir directors, organists, cantors, and instrumentalists. The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate have played a vital role in shaping sacred music in Sri Lanka through liturgical renewal, hymn composition, music education, choir formation, and the integration of local cultural traditions into Catholic worship. Their efforts have enriched the spiritual life of the Church and preserved a vibrant musical heritage that continues to inspire Catholic communities throughout the country.

In this article I would like to focus on the contribution of the indigenous Oblates to the Sacred Music in Sri Lanka in the recent past. I firmly believe this article will be more meaningful as the Oblates all over the world joyfully commemorate the 200th year of the papal approval of their Constitution and Rules.

Among many, Fathers Marcelline Jeyakody and Adrian Joseph are described as a towering figure in Sri Lankan Catholic sacred Music. The hymns they composed are still sung and cherished by the faithful today.

Rev. Fr. Adrian Joseph, OMI

Fr. Adrian Joseph was born on 9th January 1924 at Atchuvely and was baptized by his uncle, a well-known personality and a scholar, r.Ganapragasar OMI. The whole family was gifted with musical talent. Though he is a jack of all trades among all of his talent and qualities Fr.Adrian was well known all over Sri Lanka as great musician, composer and organist. He has produced numerous vernacular hymns and set them in oriental music, both in Tamil and Sinhalese to be used in the liturgy of the Church in Sri Lanka. He was so special because of his contribution in the field of music to both Sinhala and Tamil languages.

He contributed not only by composing hymns and creating deeply moving liturgical music for liturgy, but also by writing several articles on the nuances of Church music. Among his writings, one of the most notable was the article *"Creating a Ceylon Church music"* in Messenger. He started with translating the traditional Latin hymns into Tamil and Sinhalese, while keeping to their original western melody and music. It made possible for the whole community, comprising of both Sinhalese and Tamils to sing the same hymn in their own languages. Then he slowly introduced the oriental music and melodies into his composition. Among his many contributions the Gospel Carols which he composed based on Sacred Scripture was one of his celebrated works in both languages. The Tamil version was *"ithaya Veenai"* (இதயவீணை) and the Sinhala version was "Hade Veenai"

He toiled hard to promote congregational singing in multi-lingual Christian communities. The music expert still holds an extremely favorable impression of the Sinhala High Mass he composed. At a time when the Church gave importance to the Psalm after the first reading, Fr. Adrian published and composed Psalms with oriental melodies and music that helped the faithful to pray with the Word of God.

Another hallmark of his contribution is that he published, composed, and gave new life to the old and traditional hymns that have been sung by generations during Holy Week. They remain the one and only reliable collection of music and proper hymns we have for Holy Week to this day. He called to eternal rest on the 17th of February 2002. Thus contribution of Fr. Adrian to the liturgical renewal and Church Music cannot be easily forgotten.

Rev. Fr. Marcelline Jayakody, OMI

He was born on 3 June 1902 in Sandalankawa which is in Kurunegala District in Sri Lanka. More specifically, he was the son of an ayurvedic doctor. He wrote lyrics and music for more than 1,000 songs. The sacred Music in Sri Lanka cannot forget him because he moved church music away from dubbed Latin hymns to local melodies. “the greatest contribution made Fr. Marcelne to the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka is in the sphere of church music” The *Soma Sapiri Sama* and *Rayatharu bablanawa* have given him a nationwide recognition as musician far excellence. Fr. Jayakody's hymns were simple and close to the people. He is also known for composing peculiar music for Duwa passion play (*dukprapthi Prasangaya*)

He was awarded by many including the Sri Lankan state for his outstanding contribution in the field of music. Fr. Marcelline Jayakody won the State Literary Award in 1979 for his poetry book *Muthu*, the first Catholic priest to do so. Also he got the national title “*Kala Shuri*”. Then, Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1983, Asia’s “Nobel Prize”. The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka will never forget the immense contribution, Fr. Jayakodi has made until he breathed his last on the 15th of January 1998 at the feet of our blessed Mother at Tewatte.

Rev. Fr. Antony Francis Kulas, OMI

“A Teacher of Music, A Servant of Sacred Song”.

Fr. Antony Francis Kulas, OMI, was born on 12th September 1924 at Vankalai in Mannar. Vankalai is a village renowned for its rich tradition of sacred hymns, and many of its people are gifted singers. Throughout his life, Fr. Kulas dedicated himself not to personal fame, but to the formation of others. To my knowledge, he never released any music albums, instead, his greatest contribution was in training musicians and choristers across Sri Lanka. His classroom was wherever there was a need - in parishes, schools, seminaries, and convents.

Even after his retirement, his passion for music never faded. He continued to teach piano to young children, many of whom have today grown into professional keyboard players. Not only lay people, but also many priests and religious sisters learned keyboard from him. People came from far and wide to the church just to listen to his music. He was a simple man with a deep love for teaching. With his harmonium strapped to a bicycle, he would travel from place to place, teaching the little ones and nurturing their talent. Fr. Kulas did not leave behind recordings, but he left behind something far greater, a generation of musicians who continue to lead worship and praise God through music. His life is a beautiful witness that true ministry is in forming others.

Rev. Fr. Parnanthu Vimalraj, OMI

“The Voice of a Wounded Nation, The Heart of Sacred Song”.

Fr. Vimal hails from an artistic family, and he has carried that heritage with grace throughout his formative years and into his priestly ministry. He is truly extraordinary in the field of sacred music. His contribution to the musical life of the Church in Sri Lanka is immeasurable.

Fr. Vimal is no stranger to any musical instrument. But the true mark of his genius lies in the way he has given voice to the pain and untold suffering of the war-affected people of Sri Lanka. Like King David in the Bible, he has brought to light the cry of wounded humanity and turned it into prayer and praise.

He stands among the greats. Next to Fr. Marcelline Jayakody, OMI and Fr. Adrian Joseph, OMI, Fr. Vimal is one who has poured his heart and soul into sacred music. He has experimented with different melodies and musical styles for his hymns, always seeking to make worship more alive and more relevant.

As a producer, he has made it a point to utilize local talented singers in his albums. He has also collaborated with foreign singers, local artists, and members of the Tamil diaspora, bringing a universal voice to Sri Lankan sacred music. All who have worked with him admire his dedication and talent.

His Musical Legacy:

1. As Composer: Approximately 150 hymns.
2. As Lyricist: Approximately 80 hymns.
3. As Singer: 20 hymns.

What makes his work remarkable is its completeness. Fr. Vimal has composed for every liturgical need: Entrance hymns, Meditation hymns, Offertory hymns, Communion hymns, Thanksgiving hymns, Marian hymns, and hymns for the Saints. His music has become the prayer of the Church.

Albums Released:

To date, he has released 9 albums under the names such as *Irankumaya*, *Payamillaiye*, *Thaye Thanjam Neeye*, *Nalavare*, *Thiyakee*, *Enthakam Nee*, *Tholane Tholiye*, *Uruviddu Uruvanthu*, and *En Uyirana Yesuve*. Through these albums, Fr. Vimal has not just created music. He has created a spiritual heritage. His songs

carry the tears of a people, the hope of a nation, and the faith of the Church. In him, sacred music in Sri Lanka has found both a healer and a prophet.

Rev. Fr. Sebamalai Anpurasa, OMI

Fr. Anpu: A Voice that Sings and Writes for the Church.

Fr. Anpu is widely known as a writer, speaker, preacher, commentator, and poet. In this multifaceted journey of ministry, he has published 24 books. Among them, three have received the prestigious National Literary Award, and four have been honoured with the Northern Provincial Best Book Award.

Yet, his identity is not limited to the written word alone. Fr. Anpu is also a gifted musician whose love for sacred melody shines through in his albums. In 2003, he released *Anpukannikai*, followed by *Unthan Ninaivinile* in 2012, and *Enthesa Thiruppadalkal* in 2014. Each album reflects his deep spirituality blended with musical creativity. One of his most remarkable contributions to sacred music is the revival of a historic work by Fr. Jacome Consalze, OMI.

This treasure, known as *Viyakula Prasangam* which is the Lamentation Songs of the Lenten Season - was given new life by Fr. Anpu. In 2004, with a creative and pastoral touch, he presented it under the title *Viyakula Paakkalum Viyakula Prasangamum*, making these ancient melodies accessible to the present generation. His musical adventure extended beyond Sri Lanka as well.

In 2009, at the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in France, he composed and presented a musical commentary titled *Loorthu Visuvasathin Vilainilam*. It stands as a milestone, showing how his ministry in music crossed borders and touched hearts in an international context. In 2020, Fr. Anpu undertook another significant project called *Mannar Mathotta Vasakappa*. This album revived a 400 year old tradition of dramatic music and this is unique

to Mannar. Through the Northern Cultural Unit, he brought to life those forgotten melodies, ensuring that this cultural and spiritual heritage would not be lost.

In all, Fr. Anpu's contribution to sacred music in the Sri Lankan Catholic Church is immense. Through his writings, compositions, and revivals, he has become a bridge between the past and the present, allowing today's generation to hear, sing, and live the old melodies with new devotion.

Rev. Fr. Balasingam Jeyabalan, OMI

“The Voice of Healing and Prayer in Song”.

Fr. Balasingam Jeyabalan, OMI, hails from Elamaruthankulam, a serene village in the Vavuniya District. He was born on 27th March 1969. From his early years, he carried in his heart a deep love for God and for music. Fr. Jeyabalan is widely known for his charismatic songs that have become part of healing and prayer services across Sri Lanka. His melodies have a unique power to touch hearts and lead people into a deeper experience of God's presence. Many of his compositions are sung during charismatic gatherings, where the faithful find comfort, healing, and renewed faith.

Though he had a natural talent for music, he pursued it with discipline. He studied music in India and successfully achieved Grade 4 in Vocal and Keyboard. This formal training enriched his gift and helped him serve the Church more effectively. His contribution to sacred music is both rich and varied:

Albums: He has produced three full music albums, and one special volume released in two parts.

Bajan Series: Fr. Jeyabalan composed a beautiful series of Bhajans - devotional hymns designed to help people focus their minds in prayer and meditation.

Passion Plays: He directed three Passion Plays presented entirely through song. These musical presentations were deeply moving and were highly appreciated by the faithful for their spirituality and artistry.

Psalms: He has also composed melodies for Psalms 7 and 9, giving the Word of God a new voice in worship.

Quality Production: One of his albums, “Mannium”, stands out as one of the finest quality productions in Sri Lankan sacred music. It reflects both his musical excellence and his deep spiritual insight.

Fr. Jeyabalan’s music is not for the stage, but for the altar and the prayer room. Through his songs, Bhajans, and psalms, he has helped thousands of people in Sri Lanka to pray, to be healed, and to encounter God. His life and ministry are a testimony that music, when offered to God, becomes a true instrument of grace.

Rev. Fr. Mohottige Don Rabindra Rajapakse, OMI

1. Choir training for feasts and celebrations.

In Oblate parishes, feast days, Novenas, and Christmas/Easter celebrations are the heart of community worship. Training the choir wasn’t just about music. It was about forming voices to lead prayer. By coaching the choir year after year for these feasts, he helped to keep Sinhala liturgical singing alive at the parish level. That work is often “a little” in terms of recordings, but “profound” in terms of impact, because every hymn sung by the community during a feast carries his formation.

2. *Ma Himi Mahima* CD album

The album title *Ma Himi Mahima* means "My Lord's Glory". Releasing a CD in that era was a big step for local sacred music. Most Sinhala Catholic hymns were passed down orally or in booklets. A CD album gave parishes, schools, and families a permanent way to pray and sing at home.

3. The nature of his contribution

He may not have had a large catalog, but his work fits a pattern we see a lot in Sri Lankan sacred music. Born in Kelaniya in 1956 and passing in 2018, he lived through the time when Sinhala Catholic music was moving from handwritten hymnals to recordings. People like him were the bridge.

Rev. Fr. Linus Souza OMI

Fr. Lius is remembered as a great contributor to sacred music in the Church in Sri Lanka. A native of Vankalai, a devout and traditional Catholic parish in the Diocese of Mannar, he came from a deeply faithful Catholic family. With his God-given golden voice, Fr. Lius dedicated his life to enriching the liturgy. He encouraged the faithful to take part in congregational singing and worked tirelessly to promote sacred music and to compose hymns for worship. Through his service, he helped make our celebrations more prayerful, vibrant, and beautiful. May his contribution to the Church continue to inspire us to lift our voices in praise.

Through his remarkable contribution, he has compiled a collection of hymns, both of his own composition and those by other composers. He has released two albums, *Ithayam Thirandhen* "I Have Opened My Heart" and *Neeye En Aanandham*, 'You Are My Joy'. Through these works, he has brought to life the hymns composed by Rev. Fr. Adrian, OMI.

In addition, he has published three collections of hymnals that are greatly appreciated by the faithful around the world. He holds a special devotion to Our Lady of Madhu and has made a significant contribution through his hymns in her honor.

At present he serves as a chaplain at the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in France, assisting especially Sri Lankan devotees to pray with Our Mother Mary through hymns sung in their own language.

Rev. Fr. Angelo Dilhan Wijewickrama, OMI

Fr. Angelo Dilhan Wijewickrama, OMI, was born on 1st December 1963 in Modera, Kotahena North. He began his journey in sacred music in 1991 while he was a scholastic brother. His very first recording was a cassette titled *Aru Nalu*, which featured three devotional hymns. The warm response to that tape encouraged him to continue composing, and since then he has contributed a significant number of hymns to Catholic sacred music in Sri Lanka.

His next major work, *Pahan Sitha*, was a cassette containing 10 Catholic devotional hymns. It was widely appreciated by listeners and helped establish his name among the faithful. In 1994, at Maggona, he had the special privilege of giving musical life to the final lyrics of the late Fr. Marcelline Jayakody — *Oba Mage Iti Pahanai*, a beloved hymn to Our Lady, composed just before Fr. Jayakody's passing. He later released *Pahan Sitha 2*, a collection of 16 devotional hymns, further deepening his contribution to liturgical music. Most recently, in 2023, at the invitation of the then Administrator of the Madhu Shrine, Fr. Philip, OMI, he produced *Dev Maw Bathi Gee*, a CD dedicated to devotional songs in honor of Our Lady of Madhu.

In addition to these albums, Fr. Angelo has also composed several theme songs, which can be found on his YouTube channel. Fr. Angelo Dilhan Wijewickrama, OMI, has used music as a ministry — bringing prayer, comfort, and devotion to countless people through sacred song.

Rev. Fr. Cosmapatabendige Julian Eymard Dalpatadu, OMI

He was born on the 11th of April 1963 in Colombo. His major contribution to sacred music is the hymnal he launched in 2010 titled *Jivithe Kageda Jeevithe Katada*. In 2025, he also launched another book titled *Pubuditha Elidarawwa*. Among his most remarkable contributions are the hymn books *Sevana*

Kurusiye in 2013 and Swargaya Kara in 2018, which was released with a CD album. The combination of audio recordings and clear lyrics made his work very popular among people. His service to sacred music in Sri Lanka can be seen in 3 key areas:

1. Compiling and publishing Sinhala hymnals

By bringing out books like *Jivithe Kageda Jeevithe Katada* (2010) and *Pubuditha Elidarawwa* (2025), he gave congregations a curated collection of worship songs in Sinhala. This helped churches that primarily worship in the local language to have theologically sound and singable material, instead of relying only on translations.

2. Making worship music accessible through audio

The release of Swargaya Kara with a CD album in 2018, and the emphasis on audio and lyrics for *Sevana Kurusiye*, was important. Many people in Sri Lanka learn hymns by listening first. Providing professionally recorded audio alongside the printed lyrics helped his hymns spread beyond church walls to homes, radio programs, and YouTube, making sacred music part of daily devotional life.

3. Strengthening local Christian identity

Titles like *Sevana Kurusiye* and Swargaya Kara reflect themes of service, the Cross, and heaven - central to Christian faith but expressed in Sinhala poetry and melody. By writing and compiling in Sinhala, he helped grow a distinctly Sri Lankan expression of sacred music that resonates with local culture while staying rooted in worship.

Rev. Fr. Warnakulasooriya Prabath Nilushan Fernando OMI

He is a gifted singer and a vibrant preacher whose ministry has been enriched through charismatic hymns. What makes his songs so special is their simplicity. His hymns are easy to sing and easy to remember, allowing entire congregations to join in with joy

and faith. To date, he has released two albums. The first, *Nathara Uwa Mane*, came out in 2004, and the second, *Novena wana Premaya*, was released in 2023. Both albums reflect his deep love for prayer and his desire to lead people into a closer relationship with God. Born in 1973 on Sea Street, Colombo, he has contributed more than 40 hymns to sacred music in Sri Lanka. Through his voice, his preaching, and his compositions, he continues to inspire devotion and bring the spirit of worship alive in parishes.

Rev. Fr. Don Shanil Dinuka Jayawardena, OMI

“A Voice of Worship and Communication”.

He is a well-known and vibrant preacher, born in 1981 in Katunayake. Though he has not released any albums or CDs so far, his contribution to sacred music in Sri Lanka has been both meaningful and deeply felt. He is a gifted musician who can play many instruments, and his talent shines through in the hymns he has composed. His songs are known for their melody, simplicity, and spiritual depth, making them easy for congregations to learn and sing. Some of his most loved compositions include *Maa Kuse Thutin Daru*, *Adarayen Nahawala*, *Suruduthu Arayuwa Mawetha Ayilla*, *Ma Mudawa*, *Mage Kandula Pahanata Dawata*, *Sagaraya Badu Adare*, and many more.

Beyond music, he holds a degree in social communication. This background has helped him use media and communication effectively to spread the Gospel. Through his preaching and his hymns, he brings the message of faith alive in a way that speaks to both the heart and the mind. Even without commercial recordings, his hymns have traveled from parish to parish, becoming part of devotional gatherings, youth programs, and prayer meetings across the country. In this way, he continues to make a quiet but powerful contribution to the growth of sacred music in Sri Lanka. music that praises, heals, and unites God’s people.

Rev. Fr. Jude Carowf, OMI

A Late Bloomer with a Heavenly Voice.

He may be considered a young one in music, yet he has already made a quiet but significant number of contributions to sacred music in Sri Lanka. Born into a devout Catholic family in Sillalai, a village fondly called the "Small Rome" for its deep faith and many vocations, Music and prayer were part of his life from the very beginning. Though pastoral duties kept him busy for many years, his talent for melody eventually found its voice.

So far, he has composed numerous hymns that are now sung in parishes across the country. In 2022, he released a very popular album titled *Balavan Yesuve*. The album was warmly received for its simple devotion and touching melodies. A special focus of his compositions is Marian devotion. He has composed nine Marian hymns, each reflecting love for Mother Mary in both lyrics and tune.

Beyond that, he has also created a hymn in honor of St. Eugene de Mazenod, the founder of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. This composition stands as a tribute of gratitude to the missionary spirit that shaped the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka. Though he came to music later in life, his works reveal that when faith and talent meet, even a quiet beginning can produce songs that will echo in the Church for years to come.

Conclusion

In dealing with the contribution of a few Oblates to Sacred Music in Sri Lanka, we begin to glimpse the immense legacy left by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in this field.

I readily admit that this article has not covered all the Oblates who, in one way or another, have served the Church through music. Many more names deserve to be remembered, studied, and

celebrated. Yet, I am happy that this work has created a platform for wider discussion and future research on this important theme.

The Second Vatican Council reminds us of the true purpose of sacred music. “The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art... Sacred music is to be considered the more holy, the more closely it is joined to the liturgical action.” *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 112

The Oblates in Sri Lanka have lived this teaching. Through hymns, albums, bhajans, psalms, and liturgical compositions, they have not only enriched worship but also healed wounds, consoled the suffering, and given voice to the faith of a people. From training choristers in villages, to composing for every part of the Mass, to producing music that speaks to both local and diaspora communities, their work shows that music can be a true ministry.

The contribution of the Oblates to Sacred Music in Sri Lanka is therefore not just artistic. It is pastoral, prophetic, and missionary. It continues to form musicians, lead communities in prayer, and carry the cry of the human heart to God.

May this article serve as a small tribute and an invitation that scholars, musicians, and the faithful may continue to research, preserve, and promote this rich heritage, so that the song of the Oblates may keep echoing in the Church of Sri Lanka for generations to come.

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