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Articles written for OMI World – website of the Order of Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) – describing the early history of the OMI missionaries in the development of the Catholic Church in Jaffna (and Sri Lanka)

Sri Lanka

On August 10 and 11, 1847, Bishop Orazio Bettachini was passing through Marseilles and he asked Bishop de Mazenod to send some Oblates to Ceylon. At this time Bishop Bettachini, an Oratorian from the Congregation of Saint Philip Neri, had been a missionary in Ceylon for five years. In 1845, the Congregation of Propaganda had appointed him titular bishop of Toro and coadjutor to the Apostolic Vicar of Colombo, Bishop Gaetano Musulce, with responsibility for the northern part of the island.

This was the second request the Bishop of Marseilles had received for this part of the world. In 1846, Father Valentin, who was a missionary in Ceylon after he had left the Oblates, had written to the Founder requesting Oblates for Kandy where he was stationed. The Founder had informed Propaganda of this request and stated his willingness to send some priests. The reply of Propaganda, dated August 24, 1846 stated that four missionaries had been sent and that it was sufficient for the time being.

In 1847 Bishop de Mazenod's response to Bishop Bettachini was enthusiastic and positive. On August 12, he informed Father Vincens, superior of Notre-Dame de l'Osier, of his decision. "What a field of labour is opening up before us! One million five hundred thousand Gentiles to be converted in the most beautiful country in the world. One hundred and fifty thousand Christians to be instructed; what an immense population, disposed by their goodness of character and their natural attraction for things religious to listen docilely to the voice of God's messengers proclaiming the Good News to them; on the other hand, there is heresy to be warded off ... How would it be possible to resist so many pressing motives and not respond with gratitude to cooperate powerfully in such a great good work? I have therefore accepted this new mission, one of the most beautiful in the world. I foresee that one day this great island will become an endowment which our Congregation will sanctify entirely."

The Founder's enthusiasm is explained by the fact that the needs of the country corresponded exactly to the ends of the Congregation: to regenerate a Catholic population which was abandoned and which needed instruction, and especially to proclaim the Gospel to "one million five hundred thousand Gentiles to be converted!"

But what a promise Bishop Bettachini had made to him? It is surprising to see that already the Founder foresaw, from the moment Ceylon was mentioned for the first time, that "this great island would one day become an endowment of our Congregation which it will sanctify entirely."

The missionaries

In October 1847, Bishop Bettachini left for Ceylon with Father Semeria, who had been appointed superior of the Oblate group and his fellow Oblates: Fathers Keating, from Ireland and Ciamin from Nice, as well as Brother De Steffanis who came from Genoa. It

seems that they were hoping to work with Father Reinaud in the central province but when they reached the island at the end of the year, Propaganda had put Kandy under the authority of Bishop Musulce and appointed Bishop Bettachini Apostolic Vicar of Jaffna in the north. Father Semeria did not hesitate to follow Bishop Bettachini to the north where there were already six Goan priests who were soon to join their compatriots in Colombo, two Spanish Benedictines, three priests from Lombardy and an Italian Oratorian. It was doubtless in the hope of “sanctifying the whole of the island” that Bishop de Mazenod sent 31 Oblates to Ceylon from 1847 to 1861. Of these, 22 were French, 4 Irish, 4 Italian, and one Belgian. Three others were to enter the Congregation in Ceylon: Christophe Bonjean, Patrick Flanagan and Paul Poorey. There were, therefore, thirty-four Fathers and Brothers who ministered in Ceylon during those years. Seven had died before the end of 1861: Fathers Leydier, Ciamin, Lacombe, Flurin, and Crousel and Brothers Byrne and Poorey. Two others became ill and were sent back to France: Fathers Lallement and Vivier.

Writing to Propaganda on August 11, 1847, Bishop Bettachini informed them that he was leaving soon with the Oblates of Mary Immaculate but he wanted Propaganda to lay down the condition that they would depend on him and not on their superior in Marseilles. On the same day Bishop de Mazenod also wrote to the Roman Congregation telling them that he was sending Oblates to Jaffna on condition that “they would not depend on the caprice of the Goan priests but that they would work under the direction of Bishop Bettachini.” These conditions were respected. Father Semeria always cooperated with Bishop Bettachini who made him his secretary. He accepted that Bishop Bettachini placed the three priests in three missions distant from one another: Father Semeria in Jaffna to the north, Father Ciamin in Mantotte to the west and Father Keating in Batticaloa to the East. Later, Father Semeria would see to it that the missionaries were allocated two by two in the missions. When the second group arrived, Fathers Semeria and Le Bescou were in Jaffna, Fathers Ciamin and Leydier in Point Pedro and Fathers Keating and Mouchel in Batticaloa.

Difficulties in the vicariate of Jaffna

The life of the Oblates in those first years of their sojourn was anything but easy. First of all, there were several outbreaks of cholera from 1850 to 1855 during which time there were many deaths among the Ceylonese and a few among the Oblates. The latter often risked their lives to administer the sacraments to the sick. There was another tragedy that saddened the missionaries and slowed down their work of evangelization: the Goan schism. When Bishop Bettachini first arrived in Jaffna, there was only one Goan priest left in the vicariate and he was soon joined by another who arrived directly from Goa. They proclaimed themselves proprietors of the churches and refused to allow the missionaries to enter. This happened in Mantotte, Mannar, Kayts and Jaffna where for some years a Goan priest took possession of the church of Our Lady of Refuge.

Relations between Bishop Bettachini and the Oblates were generally good whereas the bishop’s relations with Bishop de Mazenod tended to be strained. At first the latter complained that the Apostolic Vicar wanted all the grants from the Propagation of the Faith for himself. Starting in 1850, Bishop de Mazenod wrote numerous letters to the Congregation of Propaganda Fide and to Bishop Bettachini asking that Father Semeria be appointed coadjutor. Bishop Bettachini acknowledged that Father Semeria was the most likely person to succeed him but he believed that the appointment of a coadjutor was “premature and inopportune” because he was in good health and the vicariate was very

scarce in priests. He held on. For his part, Bishop de Mazenod continued to insist because he wanted to ensure the position of his sons. In 1852, he wrote: "It would not be becoming for me if, at my death, I were to leave my Congregation with an uncertain future in a distant island as if they were merely missionaries." Bishop Bettachini lost his patience and wrote a less than courteous letter to the Bishop of Marseilles who complained to Propaganda. Cardinal Franzoni then wrote to the Apostolic Vicar: "The letters which you write ... are conceived in such terms as to cause suffering, as far as possible, to your correspondents... I urge you therefore to observe that Christian moderation which will refine this excessive ardour and bitterness of expression... which serves no purpose except to alienate minds and hearts."

In all his letters to Propaganda, Bishop Bettachini continued to postpone until later his request for a coadjutor, but he was also consistent in saying that he would obey when Propaganda wished to give him one. On January 25, 1856, he finally accepted the decision of Propaganda but he reminded the Prefect: "The one thing I beg of you is that you do not give my incapacity as a reason or present arguments to convince me that I am a fool and an imbecile, because I would find that too painful." As can be seen from these words, the Apostolic Vicar's language that was not very polite and that he easily lost his patience. In fact he was not well loved. Father Semeria, in a courageous and charitable letter written on July 26, 1855, wrote: "Try to make yourself loved rather than feared by the missionaries and by the faithful." On the previous day he had written to Propaganda that Bishop Bettachini "is inspired by a holy zeal" but "he is far from winning the hearts of the missionaries or the Christians and far from gaining the respect, affection and devotion which are so necessary for a superior who wants to do good."

Bishop Semeria was appointed coadjutor in 1856 and then became Apostolic Vicar in 1857, on the death of Bishop Bettachini, which took place on July 22. He was then able to put into action the plans he had been making for so long. He established a team of missionaries, of which he himself often took charge, and he preached parish missions according to the traditional method of the Congregation, in the isle of Kayts, which was troubled by the schism, in Valigamme, Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Jaffna. These missions proved to be as fruitful as those preached in Europe and Canada. He also worked on another point in his plans: providing schools and even a seminary in which to prepare catechists and priests.

In his report to the Chapter in 1861, Bishop Semeria wrote that there were 55,000 Catholics in the vicariate, distributed in 240 Christian units which formed eight missions or districts: Jaffna, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Mannar, Mantotte, Point Pedro, Valigamme and Kayts.

Relations with Bishop Bravi, coadjutor and then Apostolic Vicar of Colombo

The Apostolic Vicariate of Ceylon was erected in 1834 and divided in two vicariates in 1845. Bishop Antonio Gaetano Musulce was Apostolic Vicar in 1843. In 1849 he was given as coadjutor for Colombo, Bishop Bravi, a Sylvestrian Benedictine. In 1849 Bishops Musulce and Bravi asked the Congregation of Propaganda to send European missionaries but not from France. Propaganda could not find any Italian missionaries and so they transmitted the request to Bishop de Mazenod who gave a positive reply on December 18, 1850. He added, however: "I do not understand why Bishop Bravi so discourteously excludes French missionaries who are certainly not less zealous than others."

In 1851, necessity obliged the two bishops to accept the four Oblates sent at the request of Propaganda: Fathers D. Pulicani, J.-P. Perréard, A. Duffo and L. Lallement. In some of their letters they explained why they wished to have Italians. Most of the missionaries in the vicariate were Oratorians from Goa (15 priests out of 19). The Oratorians had preserved the faith in Ceylon during the Dutch persecution. In 1835, religious institutes were suppressed in the Portuguese colonies and their properties were seized. The priests from Goa who remained in Ceylon were loved by the people but were now aged and not very zealous. They did not want to have any European priests but would accept the few Italians who were already in the vicariate. Besides, they did not like Bishop Bettachini and the vicariate of Jaffna. Bishop Bravi was anxious to maintain friendly relations with them and therefore he feared that the arrival of French Oblates, who were already installed in Jaffna, would bring unwanted interference in the affairs of Colombo. Besides, being a Sylvestrian, he wanted his Order to inherit the vicariate, but the vicariate was too poor in personnel for him to realize his plans. Although he did not refuse the Oblates imposed on him, he expressed clearly his views in their regard: "If the four missionaries must now come as promised, then let them come, but let them come simply as missionaries, alone, isolated, without the least idea of forming a mission for themselves or establishing a house of their Order." Nevertheless Bishop Bravi assured Bishop de Mazenod that he would be a second father for the Oblates. In return he received the assurance that Father Semeria would only be nominally the superior of the young Oblates and that they should hide their Oblate crosses and be dispersed in poor and distant missions.

The four young priests, with no immediate superior, made no delay in the ardour of their youth and their zeal, to take initiatives that were more generous than prudent. In particular they decided, according to European custom, to give first Communion to young people and even to children, whereas the priests from Goa would often allow Christians to receive Communion only at the hour of death. This brought the fire of the Goans' anger on their heads and then that of the bishops in the vicariate. Besides, in a long-drawn-out controversy between Bishops Bettachini and Bravi about the ownership of certain missions such as Saint Anne of Talavila, Chilaw and Kurunagala, the Oblates in Colombo took up the defence of the vicariate of Jaffna, drawing upon themselves the anger of Bishop Bravi who promised never again to accept any Oblates in his vicariate even if it meant going to look for missionaries in Australia.

Bishop Bravi's opposition to the Oblates increased towards the end of Bishop de Mazenod's life. During a visit to Rome in 1851, the intuition had by the latter in 1847 was confirmed by Monsignor Buratti, a secretary in Propaganda, who assured him that the whole of the island would be entrusted to the Oblates. In a meeting of Propaganda on April 2, 1855, one of the topics discussed was the advantage to be gained by entrusting the apostolic vicariates to religious Congregations who would be able to ensure the replacement of missionaries. The general opinion was that in the vicariate of Colombo the Sylvestrian Benedictines had few vocations and would not be able to undertake such a burden. It was therefore suggested that the Goan should be replaced gradually by the Oblates, one of whom would be appointed Apostolic Vicar.

Fortified by knowledge of this situation and by his own convictions, Bishop de Mazenod was insistent in his letters to Propaganda that other Oblates should be sent to the vicariate of Colombo where the climate was more healthy and in that way his sons would be better prepared to take over the vicariate. One of the secretaries of Propaganda informed Bishop Bravi of the content of these letters, which, in speaking to superiors, made judgements that

were less than favourable to the vicariate of Colombo and to Bishop Bravi. That explains the displeasure of the latter. On the occasion of a visit to Rome in 1856 he obtained an assurance from Propaganda that the vicariate would remain in the hands of the Sylvestrines, who undertook to send missionaries. In 1863, three years after the death of Bishop Bravi, the Sylvestrian Bishop Sillani was appointed Apostolic Vicar of Colombo. In 1861, the three Oblates who were left on the vicariate of Colombo after the departure of Father Lallement in 1856, were working in Kandy and Siyane Korale. In his report to the General chapter in 1861, Bishop Semeria had special praise for Father Pulicani, whose work had always been appreciated by Bishop Bravi. In the words of Bishop Semeria: "The witness given to the apostolic zeal and the qualities of Father Le Bescou, I owe to the worthy Father Pulicani who works with much zeal and success with Fathers Perréard and Duffo in the vicariate of Colombo. Because he makes himself all things to all, Father Pulicani is loved by all the native Christians and by the foreign Christians as well. He is equally respected by the Protestants and the Buddhists. Wherever he goes there are numerous and sometimes startling conversions; he is the instrument God uses to bring them about. Also, in all the missions which has directed, his departure has been deeply regretted and he has left imperishable memories."

The desire of Bishop de Mazenod was realized in 1863 with the appointment to Colombo of Bishop Bonjean, o.m.i., The evangelization of the whole island was carried on by the Oblates until 1939 when the diocese of Chilaw was erected, separating it from the diocese of Colombo and entrusting it to the native clergy who were by then quite numerous.

Yvon Beaudoin, o.m.i.

Jaffna, Sri Lanka

Jaffna was the head of the whole Northern or Jaffna Vicariate and the residence of the Vicar Apostolic. It was situated in the so-called peninsula of Jaffna and was separated from the island of Sri Lanka by a narrow channel. On account of the fertility of its soil and the density of its population this peninsula was superior to the other regions of the Northern Province. The inhabitants were mostly Tamils and much less Muslims. Both Tamils and Muslims spoke Tamil language.

Jaffna was the capital city of the Northern Province. The Northern Province, Eastern Province, North-western Province are the three, out of the six provinces into which the civil administration of then Ceylon was divided, formed together the Northern or Jaffna Vicariate. The Northern Province had the area of 5,427 square miles and the total population was 315,000 in 1861. Each province was divided into various missions. The mission of Jaffna was one of the three missions in the Jaffna peninsula.

According to a report on 'The Various Missions of Ceylon' sent on 12 February 1844 to propaganda Fide by the Vicar Apostolic of Ceylon, Bishop Caetano Antonio, a Goan Oratorian, the mission of the city of Jaffna there were 3290 Catholics, distributed in ten churches, of which seven were built of stones and covered with tiles; three were covered with the leaves of the palm. The principal church was dedicated to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, distant from the fort (Dutch fort of Jaffna) by about one mile. Another, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary of Refuge, was 500 paces (yards) distant from the fort and 600 paces from the principal church. Another dedicated to St James the

Apostle was 600 paces from the fort and 400 paces from the principal church; another dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary of Miracles was 200 paces from the principal church. Another dedicated to St John the Baptist was distant on the other side from the principal church by 400 paces; another to St Anthony, distant on the other side from the principal church by 400 paces; another to the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Rosary, distant from the principal by one mile and 200 paces; another dedicated to St Nicholas, distant one mile from the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Refuge; another dedicate St Sebastian, 400 paces distant from the church of St Nicholas; another dedicated to the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, distant from the church of St Sebastian by four miles. There were ten very small churches, made of clay and with a thatched roof in the sub-mission of Irannadivu, which was part of the mission of the city of Jaffna; there were ten very small churches, made of clay and with a thatched roof. One was distant from another by six miles, twelve miles, eight miles, and sixteen miles. Four were dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, four to St Anthony, two to St. James the apostle.

The arrival of the Oblates

It was in November 1847 the missionaries of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate arrived in Sri Lanka on the invitation of the newly appointed Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna Bishop Orazio Bettachini, an Italian Oratorian. The first band of four Oblates under the superiorship of Fr. Étienne Semeria, o.m.i., landed Jaffna, for which they were destined to, on 10 March 1848. When they arrived in Jaffna, an enthusiastic welcome was accorded by the Catholics of the town and the neighbouring villages to the missionaries who were coming to them in the name of the Lord. Fr. Semeria, Fr. Louis Mary Keating, o.m.i., and Bro. Gaspard De Steffanis, o.m.i., remained with the Bishop at his residence. They applied themselves seriously to the study of Tamil language. Fr. Semeria helped Bishop Bettachini in writing his personal, pastoral or circular letters. Bro. De Steffanis looked after the temporal and material matters of the house.

From the day he reached Jaffna till the hour of his fatal malady, the life of Bro. de Steffanis was one of incessant toil, care and devotedness. For 31 years he was charged with the management of the temporal affairs of the Jaffna Mission – a difficult and delicate office which he fulfilled with tact and skill peculiarly his own. His character and his affable manners easily won for him the hearts of all with whom he came into contact. Apart from the vast and invaluable service he rendered to the Mission in the intelligent supervision of its temporal concerns, he was equally a champion of the cause of Christ. He wrought secretly, yet persistently and effectually, also much spiritual good. By his kindness, his good advice, counsel, exhortations and his generosity, how many had been snatched from a life of dishonour, how many sinners had been induced to change their lives and return to God.

In the meantime, Fr. Semeria proposed to the Vicar Apostolic to establish a Seminary in the Vicariate to train seminarians, catechists and religion teachers. But Bishop Bettachini was more interested in opening an English School for the Catholic children; and sent Fr. Semeria to India on 22 May 1848 to visit and do a study on the ministry of the Jesuits at the College at Negapatam and the Jesuit Seminary at Pondicherry; and to look for a possibility of getting two Jesuits who knew their Tamil to accompany him on his pastoral visitation for a year or two. As a result Bishop Alexius Canoz S.J., the Vicar Apostolic of Trichinopoly, sent his own vicar general, Fr. Castanier, S.J., to Jaffna at the end of May 1848. He was helping Bishop Bettachini in his pastoral visit, at the same time, was looking for in Jaffna an opportunity of erecting a college for Jesuits of their

own. Fr. Bruni S.J. came to the vicariate in January 1849 to replace him. In March 1849 Bishop Bettachini decided to give the mission of Kayts and Mannar to Jesuits. Thus four more Jesuits came to the vicariate and worked until 1852.

Oblates in various fields

On 08 September 1848 Fr. Semeria was officially appointed Secretary, the post equivalent to that of Vicar General, of Bishop Bettachini and the pastor of the mission of Jaffna, with Fr. Keating as his assistant. When Fr. Jean Le Bescou, o.m.i., arrived in Sri Lanka newly in May 1849, he was assigned to assist in the mission of Jaffna while Fr. Keating was transferred to the mission of Batticaloa.

In the meantime Bishop Bettachini divided the old mission of Jaffna into three divisions in August 1849. The first comprised the main church of the town (St. Mary's Cathedral), and the churches of James and St. Mary of Gurunagar, the second comprised the churches of Our Lady of Refuge, St. Nicholas of Navanturai, St. Peter of Navali, and the third comprised the churches of St. Anthony of Passaiyoor, St. John of Chundikuli, and the churches along the sea coast up to the mission of Mannar. Fr. Semeria and Fr. Le Bescou were assigned to the first and the second divisions respectively and Fr. Cesare Mola, a Lombardy-Italian secular priest, was given the third.

The Oblate missionaries were very active and worked untiringly to promote particularly the religious instruction to the children and the adults. The ignorance of the Christians in the religious truths was alarmingly big in the last decades because of the lack of regular and proper instruction. Gradually a remarkable improvement was noticed. There was more increasing attendance to Sunday mass, frequent reception of the sacraments; much public scandalous behaviour was corrected to a certain extent. Fr. Semeria wrote in 1850, "Great good is being accomplished and will continue to be accomplished. Jaffna furnishes us with a proof of this. Formerly the most fervent Catholics confessed hardly for Easter and these fervent souls were rare; but now we have daily in our church about 30 communions. Before this time, the Blessed Sacrament was not even reserved in the church, but at present several persons pay a daily visit to the Most Blessed Sacrament. In the preceding years, when the repository was erected on Holy Thursday, Our Lord was often left quite alone and I was indignant at this; this year all throughout the day and night the chapel was almost full. Formerly it was impossible to gather together the children for catechism; for the last two years I have been successful and today even elderly persons assist at the reunions quite spontaneously. In a short time, I have baptized from 60 to 70 adults."

Mission with dying

There was an outbreak of cholera epidemic in August 1849 in Jaffna and its suburbs. Jaffna, which had been a town full of life and activity suddenly, turned into a ghost town. Work was suspended, schools were deserted, and the streets were empty. The happy homes became heart-rending scenes. Many families were totally or partially destroyed. There was hardly a family that was not affected by the dread disease. There was fear, fright, mourning and weeping everywhere. The people were helpless and desperate. Fr. Semeria in a letter to Bishop Eugene de Mazenod in October 1850 explained: "we, Fr. Le Bescou and myself, are in Jaffna in the midst of great desolation, surrounded by the dead and the dying struck by that terrible plague of God, the morbus cholera. The outbreak of this cruel disease occurred in Jaffna on the feast of the Assumption. Each and every day since then, the disease has caused a certain number of victims. Only a few of those affected by the disease have survived. Every day, we have 10, 12, 15, 18 and even 22

deaths.” In September 1850, in the midst of their dedicated ministry, Fr. Semeria and his assistants, Fr. Le Bescou and Bro. De Steffanis, caught the infection, but Providence came to their rescue and spared their life. The epidemic continued for five long years, and Fr. Semeria and his men continued their relief work with heroic dedication. In March 1855, Fr. Semeria exhorted the people to recourse to Mary Immaculate whose dogma was just promulgated on 08 December 1854 by Pope Pius IX, in order to obtain through her intercession, a cessation of the epidemic. He himself organized a Triduum, which was held on 05, 06, and 07 March in St. Mary’s Cathedral, Jaffna. The whole town participated and each day’s devotions closed with a gigantic penitential procession. On the last day of the Triduum, no new cases of cholera or any deaths occurred, and that was the end of the epidemic. Fr. Semeria was ever thankful to the Immaculate Virgin for this great miracle. The people of Jaffna were ever grateful to the Fr. Semeria and his missionaries for their help and sacrifice in the time of their desperation.



Education ministry

Bishop Bettachini took much interest in catholic education of the children in his mission. It was in about the year 1850 Bishop Bettachini founded two English schools namely the Jaffna Boys’ Seminary (now it is St. Patrick’s college) and the Jaffna Female Seminary (now it is Holy Family Convent School). Fr. Semeria took much interest in it and played a key role in its establishment, and it was because of his effort the schools started receiving an annual grant of 150 pounds from the Government from 1851. This grant went a long way to improve and maintain these schools and to provide the Catholic children with better educational facilities. It was Fr. Léon Charles Mauroit, o.m.i., who became the first manager of the Jaffna Boys’ Seminary.

In January 1851, Fr. Semeria founded in Jaffna the Association of St. Joseph. The objective of the Association was to instruct the ignorant Christians, to induce lax Christians to attend Sunday Mass and approach the Sacraments, to make known the truths of Faith to non-Christians and prepare the well disposed for Baptism. In 14 September 1851 Fr. Le Bescou OMI was transferred to the other division of the mission of Jaffna. He was entrusted the churches of St. Anthony of Passaiyoor, St. John of Chundikuli, Kilaly and the churches along the sea coast up to the mission of Mannar. But, in the following year with the transfer of Fr. Le Bescou from the mission of Jaffna, Bishop Bettachini made again the mission of Jaffna together in 1852, which was divided into three in 1849. And now Fr. Semeria and Fr. Louis Mary Keating, o.m.i. made in charge of whole of the mission of Jaffna. In September 1853, the churches of Mullaitivu were also attached to the mission of Jaffna and given to a team of Oblates of Fr. Semeria, Fr. Mauroit and Fr. Victor Lacombe, o.m.i. The churches of Mullaitivu had been kept attached to the mission of Jaffna until 1857. This was the first mission to Fr. Lacombe. He was very energetic priest, always joyous and courageous. While engaged himself in learning the language he committed himself in working among the cholera-stricken people. When he was transferred to the mission of Valikamam, Fr. Léon Jean-Baptiste Pélissier, o.m.i. was sent to join the team in the mission of Jaffna in August 1855. Fr. Pélissier had been in the mission only for a year.

Servant of the servants

When Fr. Semeria succeeded Bishop Bettachini as Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna on 26 July 1857, Fr. Mauroit succeeded Fr. Semeria as Pastor of the mission of Jaffna. He was assisted temporarily by Fr. Frédéric Mouchel, o.m.i., until Fr. Jean Pouzin, o.m.i., was given in September 1857. Fr. Mauroit had been in the mission from September 1853. He was an apostle of the Sacred Heart and during his stay in Jaffna. He propagated a special devotion to the Sacred Heart among the people. It was during his stay in Jaffna that a cholera epidemic broke out in the district of Jaffna for the second time in 1862 and continued for many years. Fr. Mauroit risked his own life, and went out to the help of the poor victims. Day and night he was on the move, going from place to place attending to their spiritual and corporal needs. He heard their confessions, administered the last Sacraments, and baptized some pagan victims, without any rest or sleep. Finally, in July 1864, he himself contracted the deadly disease. Everyone thought that it was the end of him, but he recovered miraculously and continued his ministry.

Fr. Mauroit served as Pastor of the mission of Jaffna for eleven years, till 1868, when he was appointed Secretary to Bishop Ernest Christophe Bonjean, o.m.i., who had succeeded Bishop Semeria as Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna on 04 July 1868. In 1857, Fr. Mauroit was appointed Procurator of the Vicariate of Jaffna. In 1859, he went to Europe as delegate of the Oblates in Sri Lanka and to take the offerings of the people of Jaffna to the Holy Father. On his return, in addition to his duty as the Procurator, he was also appointed Manager of the Catholic Press and Vicar General, which posts he held till his death. On his return from Europe, he took up residence at St. James' church, Gurunagar and was the Pastor of that church for several years. He was the designer and the architect of present stately church of St. James, perhaps the best in Jaffna. He laid the foundation for it on 25 July 1861. The beautiful dome was completed in 1876. The present presbytery was begun in 1889 and completed three years later.

Great renewal in the mission

With the beginning of the year 1859 the mission of Jaffna was born again by a great

renewal. The mission band, which was comprised of great and energetic missionaries Bishop Semeria, Fr. Bonjean and Fr. Constant Chounavel, o.m.i., inaugurated the great Parish Mission on 26 December 1858. Thus Bishop Semeria recorded it: “The dawn of the New Year saw the Grand Mission, inaugurated at Jaffna on the 26 December under the auspices of my glorious Patron, St. Stephen, in full swing. Having been a missionary in this town for nearly eight years, I was well aware of all its needs of which one can form an idea by just casting a glance at what I have already written on the subject. Even though the spiritual needs which I noticed at Jaffna were great and of such a nature as to incite me to begin our ministry of preaching Missions with the capital of the Northern Vicariate, nevertheless, owing to difficulties of all sorts of which I was equally aware, I thought it more expedient to put it off for some time. I wished the Catholics of the town to see for themselves the immense good accomplished by the Missioners in other places and thus demand from us quite spontaneously the same great grace for themselves.” Fr. Christophe Bonjean explained his own experience in the mission of Jaffna as “what was not then our surprise – what was not our joy to see the people participating with a most remarkable enthusiasm in all the exercises of the Mission! This enthusiasm was all the more edifying for us and the more meritorious for our Catholics because very heavy showers of rain, such as could be seen only in the tropics, fell almost without any interruption during the last days but they did not by any means succeed in cooling down the zeal of the people. From all sides the faithful were seen hastening under a beating rain and then remaining in the church in spite of their wet clothes. One day it rained so heavily after the morning exercises that it was absolutely impossible for the people to leave the church; they wished to have another sermon but, as the Fathers had already retired to their cells, they spent the time in an excellent manner in making the Way of the Cross. We had ordinarily more than 1,000 and at times 1,500 people very remarkable figure if only we were to bear in mind that many persons were able to come for the Mission only alternatively as someone was needed to stay at home to guard the house. Moreover the majority of our Catholics are poor fishermen, depending on their daily work for their bread; a day without a catch of fish meant for them a day of complete fast.” The Mission was successfully completed on 27 February 1859.

Care of children

Bishop Semeria after taking charge of the vicariate inaugurated the policy of entrusting schools to Religious Orders or Congregations in 1859 – a measure that made not only for the increased efficiency of the schools but also for their future stability. This policy was inaugurated when the Oblates themselves took charge of the Jaffna Boys’ Seminary with Bro. Joseph Brown, o.m.i., as its Principal in 1859. He was assisted by Bro. Robert Byrne, o.m.i.. Bishop Semeria got down these two Oblate Brothers from the Oblate Province of England for the teaching staff of the Jaffna Boys’ Seminary. In 1862, two more Brothers Patrick Conway, o.m.i., and Roland Dowling, o.m.i., joined the teaching staff of the Seminary. In regard to Catholic Girls’ Seminary, Bishop Semeria got down, on 2 November 1862, the Religious Sisters of the Congregation of the Holy Family of Bordeaux, France, who took charge of the Female Seminary and the Orphanage, which had been managed by Mrs. O’Flanagan. This was the first time in the history of Sri Lanka that a community of Religious Sisters came to serve in the country. With regard to vernacular education, Bishop Semeria set up the ideal that to every church there should be attached a vernacular school, or rather two: one for boys and one for girls. In order to provide these schools with good teachers and to better ensure their stability and Catholic character, Bishop Semeria took the initiative and established two Diocesan Congregations of Sri Lankan men (on 17 April 1864), and women (on 27 January 1865) to undertake

teaching in vernacular schools. The nuns of the Holy Family took charge of the formation of the Sri Lankan Sisters (the Sisters of St. Peter), while the Oblate Fathers themselves assumed the direction of the community Sri Lankan Brothers (the Brothers of St. Joseph).

Bishop Semeria, in 1859, opened the first catholic parish library in Jaffna. This library had two sections: one with English books and the other with Tamil books. Its purpose was to satisfy the great desire for reading English books manifested by the natives and at the same time to prevent the reading of heretical books published and spread by the Protestant societies. In 1861, he established the Orphanage of St. Joseph with the help of the Society of the Holy Childhood, for the benefit of the orphan children of Catholic and non-catholic.

At the end of the Grand Mission preached at Jaffna in 1859, there were many non-Catholics, moved by the grace of God, wanted to join the Catholic Church. Among them were many young boys and girls. The Society of the Holy Childhood became the mother of these poor children. In April 1860, Fr. Bonjean took charge of those boys, while Mrs. O'Flannagan took charge of those girls. Thus an orphanage for boys and another for girls were opened in Jaffna to cater to the need of these poor children. The beginning was a humble one: small huts made out of coconut leaves. The children themselves, with the help of some elders, put up the huts. Prayer, study, work and recreation were the main programme for the day. Then Fr. Christophe Bonjean introduced little, little trades, such as rolling cigars, making rosaries, making candles, binding books, gardening etc. These industries brought regular income for the maintenance of the orphans. Very soon there were noticeable changes in the manners, conduct, morality and life of these children. The happiest days for Fr. Bonjean were the days when these children received Baptism and First Communion. As the number of the children in the orphanage increased daily, Fr. Bonjean with the help of the Society of the Holy Childhood bought a beautiful property of 14 acres at Colombuthurai (Colombogam), along the seashore. The girls were taken by the Holy Family Sisters to their Convent and the boys were taken to Colombuthurai in 1863. Thus Fr. Bonjean became the Founder-Director of the Colombuthurai Orphanage. It was placed under the management of the Brothers of St. Joseph. When Fr. Bonjean was in charge of the orphanage, he took Bro. Patrick O'Flannagan, o.m.i., with him at Colombuthurai. Fr. O'Flannagan was later ordained on 19 December 1871. Then in 1874 he became the director of St. Joseph's Orphanage, Colombuthurai.

During the third quarter of the 19th century, a remarkable Irish family was rendering great service to the Church in the Jaffna Vicariate. Warrant Officer O'Flannagan was posted to Trincomalee in 1848, possibly with H.M. 37th Regiment of Foot. He died not long after his arrival, leaving his wife, Mary Anne, and at least two children. Later Mrs. O'Flannagan, on the invitation of Bishop Bettachini went to Jaffna and started a school for girls. Then the Holy Family Sisters took charge of this school in 1862. Meanwhile her son, Patrick O'Flannagan, had joined the Oblate Congregation in 1862, and her daughter, Catherine O'Flannagan, the Holy Family Sisters in 1863, becoming Sister Marie-Louis. When Bishop Semeria and Fr. Bonjean went to Rome to attend the General Chapter in 1867, Fr. Marie-Louis Boisseau, o.m.i., was recalled to Jaffna and sent to the Colombuthurai Orphanage to replace Fr. Bonjean on the 15 April 1867. It was under him that the first Catholic Printing Press was set up at Colombuthurai.

The mission of Jaffna also faced threats from the schismatic Goan priests during the period of 1853 – 1860. Some of the Padroadite Goan priests did not accept the transfer of the Church of Sri Lanka from the Padroado system to Propaganda by Pope Urban VIII and

establishing it as an Apostolic Vicariate, detached from Cochin and coming under the direct jurisdiction of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide. The conflict between Padroado and Propaganda developed into a Schism in Sri Lanka and did immense harm to the Catholic Church. Some of the Padroadites returned to their country but some others remained and gave endless troubles to the missionaries sent by the Propaganda. These priests made some contacts with the Catholics at St. Anthony's Church, Passaiyoor, St. James' Church Jaffna, and the church of Our Lady of Refuge, Jaffna and created immense disturbances to the mission.

According to the report sent by Bishop Semeria to Propaganda Fide on 03 September 1861 there were seven churches and thirteen chapels with 7,100 Catholics of whom many live a good Christian life. There were in Jaffna two English schools. The boys' school, which was under direction of Brothers Oblates of Mary Immaculate, had 89 boys, of whom 10 were boarders. In the girls' school there were 33 girls, of whom 12 were boarders. Beside these schools there were six vernacular schools attached to the other churches in the mission. According to the same report, to the Mission of Jaffna belonged four very small Catholic communities living close to the sea along the road from Jaffna to Mantotta. To this mission belonged also the small island of Iranaitivu, about 25 miles from Jaffna. All were Catholics in it, but were simple and good but very poor. The Catholics were about two hundreds.

In the Vicariate of Jaffna Bishop Semeria was succeeded by Bishop Ernest Bonjean in July 1868. The oblate succession continued until the time Bishop Jerome Emilianus Pillai, o.m.i., who passed away on 17 July 1972. He was the last Oblate Bishop. Hence, the presence of the Oblates still continues involving in various ministries in the diocese of Jaffna.

Jerome Velichor, o.m.i.