

**DIALOGUE AS RECONCILIATION:
BEAUTIFUL LAND THAT REGAINS CONFIDENCE
(January 27 to February 4, 2017 – Visit to the Jesuit Sri Lanka Province)**

Pope Francis' visit to Sri Lanka in 2016 was a boon to the Catholics of Sri Lanka, especially at a time when the internal war was almost over and peace was slowly returning to the island. Fr. Joel Kulanayagam, who was sent on a Mission to work with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), narrated the experiences of the people in the war zone and what it was to be and to live a dedicated Jesuit in the midst of challenges and hardships, deprivations and misunderstanding. In spite of these, they could draw solace from Christ by being 'little Samaritans' among the suffering masses.

In the postwar time, though some did leave a sigh of relief saying, "War is over once and for all" there is still a mixed feeling of relief as well as dissatisfaction in the minds and hearts of people. The ethnic divide seems obvious and distinct, between the North and North-East and the South and the South-East, between the Sinhala speaking Buddhists and the Tamil speaking Hindus, Muslims.



In my conversation with Fr. Aloysius Pieris, he said that in the Constitution Buddhism is not the State Religion [as Christianity is in England] but a religion that is given the *primacy* of place [not supremacy] while other religions are equipped with equal rights. But there are those who want Buddhism to be the State Religion while others are fighting for a secular state. I find the *status quo* a middle path between two extremes.

Christians, Catholics, and particularly Jesuits, should go deep into other faiths equipped with an intellectual discipline (no short cut to excellence) and with spiritual candour (no recourse to political diplomacy). In dialogue with the Buddhists, for instance, we need to win the credibility of the Buddhists. "Buddha should be a holy person in my life. His core experience must be my core experience," says Fr. Aloy. Fr. Aloy believes that inter-religious dialogue should take place

ecumenically (along with other Christians and non-Christians) in the country's context of poverty, ethnic estrangement in the postwar period, etc. Fr. Aloy recalled the work in inter-ethnic reconciliation they had made in the last over 40 years (at least since 1977), at the risk of courting damage to life and property.

One could easily sense the meaning of dialogue in the postwar context as one travels towards Batticaloa and Trincomalee. It should be more obvious as one travels in the North to Jaffna and Mannar. The professional Counsellors of the Psychological Centre and Butterfly Peace Garden run by Fr. Paul Satkunanayagam in Batticaloa, narrated stories of stage acts of children from conflicting ethnic groups on themes like saving lives, overcoming anger, breaking barriers, serving one another in charity, etc. To my knowledge and experience, such stage acts are a lasting effort at peace education and training of the youth and the neighbourhood. They said that common people, irrespective of their religious differences, do have a feel for one another, in helping, etc. especially at times of trouble, need, like in hospitals, in times of Tsunami, etc. 'People are good. But it is politics that separate these people,' one of them said.



In my conversation with them, I highlighted the rich resources of religions themselves for healing the memory, compassion, and mercy. Along with several of their strategies, I suggested to them to prepare a chart of short readings on the above themes from Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Islamic points of view that give a push to their staggering life of loss, anxiety, and depression. People feel the loss of their children and their property. They keep asking the army "Where are our sons and daughters? Where have you kept them? Are they still alive? Will they come back to us?" These and similar questions keep haunting the Tamils. They see their own lands being occupied by the military

and their property damaged and uncared for. Some mention that they live like ‘refugees,’ internally displaced, in their own homeland!

Liaison with the Government and other officials for mediating reconciliation service is required at this crucial time, especially in the North-East regions. At the same time, it is also necessary to continue to help the Counsellors how they can help these people in skills development for sustaining their livelihood. This would certainly heal their memories of hurt and loss and engage them afresh in life and relationships. In this context, one could quickly see the relevance of “Non-violent communication” promoted by Fr. Rajendram Christlim in Trincomalee.



The training would make a great sense and become proactive for people in the midst of ethnic hurts. A contextual training in this area to all people and especially the Counselors, would enable them solve the internal feuds and problems of distancing from one another. While the prophetic texts of religious traditions on mercy and compassion, understanding and forgiveness hopefully motivate people to leave their past hurts and see what is on the way forward, engaging in peaceful communication and fostering interreligious and intercultural understanding would enhance better relationships in the future.

I could witness to this very clearly in a public meeting of interreligious assembly, called “Samathana Peravai” at St. Sebastian’s Church, Batticaloa. It was arranged with the help of the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue of the Diocese of Batticaloa. Bishop Joseph Ponniah and several other religious leaders were present in the assembly to interact with me on the crucial matter of religious relationship and harmony, and particularly in the postwar context of Sri Lanka. It was indeed tough for me to present feasible ways of building harmony as the situation in the country was ‘real’ and facing conflict from religious, political, and ethnic angles.



The metaphoric saying on Batticaloa as ‘Meen Paadum Then Naadu’ (Land of the *Singing Fish*) evokes in me the song of Peace (as the Way and as Life), not the ‘deadly’ silence of the Cemetery but a proactive engagement of clergy, religious, and the laity of all religions.

“The role of the Catholic Church has been substantial particularly in the postwar situation,” says Bishop Emmanuel of Trincomalee, “especially through organizations like Caritas in rehabilitation work, in building communities, helping people in their livelihood, providing job, shelter, etc.” Despite no formal gathering of religious leaders, the good work was carried on by the initiative of Catholic officials with the help of the Govt.



Fr. Rohan Bernard, Director of Social Communication and Youth Apostolate in the Diocese of Trincomalee, reiterated that social harmony is promoted through cultural programmes like ‘Oli Vizha’ or the Festival of Lights during Christmas season, in which non-Catholic communities like the Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus take part.

Incidentally, the one who took me to the Colombo Airport Mr. Prasanjaya, a Buddhist who intends to marry a Catholic girl, said that the Catholic majority in Negombo have a cordial give-and-take with the Buddhists especially during the celebrations on Christmas and Vesaka (Birth of Buddha), like Christians lighting the lamp, offering food and grain on Vesaka and Buddhists

decorating Christmas Trees in their homes, etc. He also mentioned that there is not a big difference among the Hindu Tamils and Sinhala Buddhists, as these celebrate and worship Hindu gods and Buddha. In fact in Kelaniya Buddhist temple, there is a Hindu shrine inside and both the Hindu and Buddhist communities offer puja and take part in rituals in both these places.



In fact, it was a deeply 'religious' Sri Lanka, like India! Kandy, where the Tooth-relic of Buddha is preserved, experiences a multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan community with a beautiful Kelaniya University campus. It is fitting that our Tertians have their spiritual rejuvenating experience of being and living as Jesuits.

Fr. Baylon Perera, one of the Tertian Instructors, arranged a talk for me with the Tertians. It was a general talk on the ministry of interreligious dialogue in South Asia, bringing to the awareness of Jesuits the contexts of fundamentalism, prejudice, provocation, hate speech, violence, and right wing politics and the new directions and proactive role Jesuits need to engage in any ministry, particularly interreligious dialogue.



This is not the time for fundamentalist forces to operate in the land. It is sad and scandalous to hear about the various divisive forces in all communities, especially among majority community with the initiative of stray clergy organizations. Even among minority communities like the Hindus, the fundamentalist groups are supported, though not openly. It is time that religious communities which believe in interreligious amity should form communities of peace in their neighbourhood, giving a public voice to the harm being done because of fundamentalist trends and acts. The youth have a special engagement in taking initiatives in this direction and the elders should encourage and sustain their activities. Religious leaders and the Govt. officials have a crucial role to play in encouraging, sustaining, and fostering dialogue and amicable relationships.

Fr. George Fernando, Treasurer of the Jesuit Sri Lanka Province, says that people would like to live in peace, do not support animosity, divisive fundamentalist trends, religious or political. Fr. George feels that conflict resolution is the best form of dialogue in contemporary Sri Lanka, apart from the intellectual side of this ministry. People look for unbiased mediators who would ensure a 'win-win' situation on both sides, Sinhala and the Tamils. People quickly identify members supporting a particular side. Fr. George contends that the Catholic Church could play this role of being the 'peace-maker', even though at one time it was seen identified with particular groups. Religious leaders need to be with their people to animate and to sustain calmness and not to be easily provoked to violence.



The three decades of past history has imparted great lessons for Jesuits to be primarily 'peace-makers' and 'reconcilers'. Jesuits need to continue to adhere and to train people especially in formation in two-language policy (Tamil & Sinhala), learn in depth the religious and cultural richness of each tradition of people, get shuffled among and working in different regions, etc., follow the mid-path between extremes with the focus and attention on reconciliation and development.

I thank the following persons for giving me time for exclusive interviews, short and long conversations: Frs. Aloysius Pieris, John Joseph Mary, Paul Satkunanayagam and his Counselors, Eustace Fernando, Joel Kulanayagam, George Fernando, Maria Antony, Milroy Fernando, Bishop Christian Noel Emmanuel and Fr. Rohan Bernard of the Diocese of Trincomalee.

I thank Fr. Maria Antony and Fr. Lawrence Thiruvarut for accompanied me most time through Negombo, Kelaniya, Kandy, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee. I thank Sch. Randika Fernando took me around the Kandy Seminary. I thank Fr. John Joseph Mary, an example of being young in heart and act, who showed me the several churches, the tsunami-affected area, and the remnants of war with non-stop narration of stories. I thank Fr. Anton Pieris, Socius to the Provincial, for planning and arranging all my journeys and for making my stay comfortable.

I was happy to be as a Guest of Honour at the Provincials' house at Negombo on the country's Day of Independence (February 4, 2017) with celebrations that included Solemn Mass, hoisting of the National Flag, and the Planting of the trees. I extend my thanks to all the Superiors and Ministers of the Jesuit houses in Negombo, Kandy, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee for their joyous welcome and generous hospitality.



When I got back to India, my friends and others asked me ‘How’s Sri Lanka?’ I just exclaimed, ‘what a beautiful country! What neatness, liter-free streets! I love it. It is ‘Religious’ Sri Lanka. All schools are engaged in compulsory Religious education. Shrines, temples, and mosques, are everywhere!’



Having stayed in Sri Lanka for a very short time, it sounded to me that the whole land of Sri Lanka is going through an important era of coming together in justice and peace with a strong faith in their own religious traditions, faith in the Buddha’s compassion, faith in Christ’s charity and love, faith in the Hindu’s tolerance, and faith in the Muslim’s brotherhood. There is also a hope in me, my mind praying that the land regains the much it had lost over the years of war.

PEACE to you, SRI LANKA!

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