

"As the Father sent me, so I also sent you..."

They bloomed where they were planted....

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Former General Councillor,

"Yes, the Associates of the Holy Family, dispersed throughout the world and appearing in one form or another on all the ways trod by poor travellers, may be likened to the flower of the desert, to the flower that grows at the end of an abyss or at the foot of ruins and tombs" (Preface of the 1851 Rules)

When the Founder wrote these inspiring yet enigmatic words in 1851, the Sisters were only in France and in Spain. In the light of what existed, his words "dispersed throughout the world" were certainly prophetic: Did he have a vision of his daughters cresting the high seas with "the Good News" as their treasure and getting implanted in Asia and Africa as "flowers of the desert" in 1862, almost immediately after his death? Can we conclude too that he dreamt of his future daughters of these distant Sands, who would in their turn become evangelisers, would "go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15) in the last quarter of the 20th century? I dare to think he did and I believe he addressed these words to all of us in a very powerful way "Go forward, increase in numbers and virtues, and may your hands Scatter on all sides the divine seed of good works and good example." v (Preface of the 1851 Rules)

The spirit that he bequeathed as patrimony to his family incarnated itself in the missionaries, "the flowers of the desert" who braved the rigours of winter, droughts of summer and the monsoon storms and torrents! How did all this happen? In this article I will share with you the circumstances that led to this missionary expansion and some of the wonderful works undertaken by those valiant women, which have become the solid foundation of the Holy Family in Asia today.

It is important to situate this event - the coming of the sisters to Ceylon - in its historical context. In the height of the Portuguese colonial expansion their conquests extended to the west, the Americas, to the South, Africa and to the East, Asia-all with a threefold objective - namely economic, political and religious. It was Ceylon's turn in 1505! The Portuguese seized the commerce in spices from the Arabs and established their political supremacy over the coastal regions of Ceylon. They believed that their conquest had also a divine mission - spreading the Gospel, wresting the people from idolatry, paganism and from the control of the devil. Catholic missionaries, first the Franciscans and then the Jesuits, learnt the local languages Sinhala and Tamil and began their missionary activity with much success especially along the coast.

From the 16th-19th centuries, the East was an arena of rival western colonial powers. To 1658, the Dutch dealt a strong blow to the Portuguese and subsequently, became masters of several of their colonies, including the Ceylon Maritime Provinces. The two major objectives of the Dutch rule seemed to be, trade in spices and ivory, and the establishment of the Dutch Reformed Religion, which they achieved by means of churches and schools - conversion being their main purpose. In 1798, the country passed over from the Dutch to the British and in 1804 became a crown colony.

Economic development became an important priority for the British and the Colebrooke - Cameron Commission of 1829, among other changes, advocated a complete reform of education modelled on the British Education System. English was the Language of civil administration and commerce and thus became the medium of instruction. Christian missionaries handled education efficiently and founded schools which were a powerful means of "conversion". Competent foreign personnel and financial resources contributed to the prestige and the success of these Christian institutions. It took a few decades for the Catholic Church to get involved in this educational system. In the meantime, Catholics who were 75% of the Christians in the country and peoples of other religions i.e. Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims found themselves barred from an active participation in the public life of the country.

The great pioneer in the field of Catholic education during this period was Bishop Bettachini who became Co-adjutor to the Vicar Apostolic in 1845. The northern part of the Vicariate was entrusted to him and, being a man of vision, he realized that Catholic higher education was a priority and established two English schools in Jaffna, one for boys and another for girls, in the hope that missionaries would take over this task some day soon.

In God's plan it was Fr. Etienne Semeria, O.M.I. who was destined to play the key role in the history of the Holy Family in Ceylon. In 1856 he was named Bishop of Olympia and Co-adjutor to Bishop Bettachini, who retired to Bolawatte. The same year, Bishop Semeria left for Europe for his consecration. While in his country he contacted several religious Congregations with the hope of getting them primarily for education in his Vicariate, but only his own Oblate congregation responded. Protestant education and with it conversions gained ground. However, he waited anxiously for God's time, which was not too far away on the horizon. The great event of the affiliation of the Association of the Holy Family with the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate revived his hopes.

In 1860, he is said to have written a personal letter to our Good Father asking for three sisters and even when there was no response from the Founder he had gone ahead already with his plans to welcome the Sisters. This particular letter and the contents of the dialogue between Bishop Semeria and Pierre Bienvenu Noailles (if there was any) would have thrown light on the subject but we do not have any document on this unfortunately. However, that this project was a cherished dream of our Founder is attested by the following extract from the Holy Family Archives: "The Directress General's report mentions the foreign missions that have been accepted recently, **in conformity with our Good Father's own intentions**. These latter were expressed clearly by the fact that **he himself accepted the Ceylon Mission**. The very Reverend Pro-Director points out that he will not submit this matter for the approval of the General Council since it has received that of the Founder. He does, however, consider it as being of particular importance to him. The members of the General Council made the most of this piece of information to express their satisfaction; they felt that a thought so cherished by our dear Founder should become a reality." (Report of the Directress General 1863)

God called his worthy servant, our Good Father to his reward on the 8th of February

1861. We have reason to believe that the Sisters who were administrators of the Holy Family with the Founder, in fidelity to his desires, got busy on the project proposed by Bishop Semeria. The months that followed were certainly for the Holy Family Superiors, months of prayerful search, of earnest supplication to the Holy Spirit for guidance and counsel on the choice of missionaries to respond to the needs of a difficult mission. For the Bishop, the Priests and the people of Jaffna, they were months of eager expectation and joyful hope.

The missionaries were selected; Srs. Marie Xavier Marchand, Marie Stanislaus Quinn, Marie Helen Winter, Marie Liguori Rojer, Marie Therese Van Meurs and Marie Joseph Maroille. These generous and valiant women said their humble “yes” to their Divine Master and to their superiors. They began their preparations- some of them to study the English Language. They spent most of their time in “La Solitude”. We can imagine that these months of waiting were looked upon by them as a precious God-given time to deepen their ties with their religious family, to strengthen their Own spiritual forces through their frequent visits to the chapel of Our Lady of All graces, to the places which spoke of the Founder and of the Family.

The Bishop received with joy the news that Sisters were already named for his mission and he wrote to them on 8th June 1861. I quote here some extracts which will help us to understand and appreciate the beginnings.

“May God be a thousand times blessed; after a long wait I received at last the assurance that our prayers have been heard, and that Divine goodness has inspired your worthy superiors to choose you to come to our assistance in the work of the spiritual regeneration, which, during many years, we have begun in this distant Isle.

From the time we came to Ceylon, we have been living in great sorrow over the desolate state in which our Christians find themselves, and we have easily realized that to do some real good it is necessary to start instructing the young and looking after them with special care. But what can the poor Missionaries do, scattered as they are and often entrusted with the care of 20 or 30 groups of Catholics living far apart? For many years we have been trying to call to our assistance some religious women, to whom we may entrust the instruction and education of girls.

So then, dear Sisters, here you are chosen for a work of which it is difficult to gauge all the good results; of these I can assure you of one: that is, you will find here what you have looked for above all things, namely, much merit before God because of the immense good which the grace of God will enable you to do in spite of the difficulties to be faced in the work.”

In the postscript, he added an interesting request: the sisters were to bring with them crucifixes, rosaries agnus dei to make the people, especially the women happy. He warned them that if they should start distributing these holy objects in Galle or Colombo they would have nothing left for Jaffna.

The great departure fixed for the fall of 1861 was delayed. The saintly Founder of the Oblates, Bishop Eugene de Mazenod died on May 21. A general Chapter was convened in December to elect his successor... Bishop Semeria came to France for this event and

the sisters were to travel back with him in September 1862. The delay was providential as there was an outbreak of cholera in Jaffna during those months. Besides the news of the Sisters' arrival caused some fear and consternation in Protestant circles. The Lord knew that it was too premature to expose our missionaries to the difficulties that awaited them.

In August 1862, they left for Marseilles accompanied by Mother Rita Bonnat and Mother Hardy Moisan, Directress General. They had hoped to remain with the little band until they embarked but circumstances demanded their return to Bordeaux and the sisters felt their sacrifice was total when they bade adieu to their much loved Superiors. From Marseilles they went to Toulon. In both places the sisters were surrounded with many marks of affection from all their sisters. The departure was fixed for 6 September, as an immediate preparation. they spent three days in retreat, preached by Bishop Semeria, and then the party consisting of the sisters, two Oblate Fathers, three Oblate Brothers and the Bishop went on board the "Canada" which was bound for Port Alexandria. As the shores of France receded the sisters knew that this was the final break with the last ties with family and country, that the Master was calling them to launch out into the deep, into the unknown.

On 14 September, the "Canada" entered the Port of Alexandria. After the celebration of the Eucharist on board, the party disembarked. The missionary Community composed of the Bishop, Priests, Brothers and sisters were brought to the pier in the captain's barge. What an honour! They spent two days in Alexandria where the sisters enjoyed the hospitality of the Daughters of Charity. On September 16, they travelled to Cairo by boat -a journey of 168 miles down the Nile. In Cairo, the Good Shepherd Sisters were their hosts. An unexpected delay provided them with the privilege of visiting the holy places associated with the Holy Family exiled in Egypt. Can I believe that, in this experience accorded to our sisters on their first missionary journey, a special grace was also imparted to them, by the Holy Family, to be communicated to the people they would serve, to the religious who would follow them? Their account surely will find an echo in our hearts:

"We have not wasted our time since we came to Cairo. I would like to tell you something about our two pilgrimages-one to the- House of the Holy Family and the other to the Tree of the Madonna where Jesus, Mary and Joseph halted on their way to Egypt. We set out for the Holy House at 5.30 am. as we had hoped to assist at mass there. In our group were His Lordship, our priest and Brothers; Good Shepherd Sisters, a few of their pupils and your own daughters. We mounted on donkeys (mules) but these animals were so lively and high-spirited that I thought an accident would occur at any moment. The Good Lord protected us; only one of our sisters fell off but she did not hurt herself.

It would be impossible, my Good Mother, to describe our feelings when we were in this holy place. We prayed in silence; we kissed the sacred walls several times; I prayed for you, for our priests, our Mothers and for the whole Society. I collected a few grains of dust near a pool where, we were told the Blessed Virgin washed the clothes of the Divine child. I am sending some of this to you as I feel that it will give you great pleasure.

After dinner, we went on our Second pilgrimage and travelled by a horse-drawn vehicle. We had to cross a desert and the road was rough. The horses of Mons'gnor's coach in which I was travelling refused to move forward.

We were obliged to walk through part of the desert on the burning sand this made us very tired but the fact that the Holy Family had previously undertaken this arduous journey was a great source of consolation for us. At last, we arrived at the foot of the holy tree. Three broad branches emerged from the trunk which is enormous; they sloped in the form of a cradle. The trunk which appears withered is encircled with beautiful greenery. We recited the Litanies and the Petition of the Holy Family; we prayed for all those who are dear to us. Then each one wrote her/his name on the tree.

I wrote your name, my Good Mother, the name of our Father General and the names of our Mothers. After that, we approached a well of fresh water; this is the only one in the region. It is recorded that the child Jesus when stamping His foot, caused the water to spring up. We drank some of this water which has an excellent taste; it is much nicer than the water of the Nile which people usually drink I am enclosing in this letter a few leaves of this august tree” (Cairo, 2nd September 1862).

Eventually, news arrived that the ship "Echo" would sail on 18th October. The Sisters accompanied by the Bishop, Priests and Brothers headed for Suez where they embark for the last lap of their long journey. The passage through the Red Sea was truly memorable. Bishop Semeraia who had done this trip a number of times gave them an account of the sacred places, which evoked the Exodus event of God's people. The missionaries filled their hearts and minds with God's marvels...Mt Sinai... the waters which spoke of His mighty deeds. Were they not experiencing His marvels? Wasn't God's eternal love being made manifest to them ever since they left their tent their people, to go to the land, to the people He would show them?

"The **Echo**" arrived in Aden, anchored there for the night and set sail for Ceylon the following day. This part of the voyage would last ten days in favourable weather but the Captain was in a predicament. The ship had a supply of coal for eight days only! Bishop Semeria, a man of Faith, assured the Captain that there was no cause for anxiety and the travellers united in prayer as an expression of their Faith. The ship sailed out of Aden and in seven days, 19th October, they got their first glimpse of the palm fringed coast of Ceylon. Forty-three days since they left France! A thanksgiving Mass was celebrated on board the ship before the missionaries disembarked in Galle. They were guests of a Catholic family whose members considered their stay with them a blessing from God.

On 22nd October, they left Galle and arrived in Colombo on the 23rd. Bishop Semeria called on the Governor of Ceylon who received them courteously and placed at their disposal the steamship "Pearl" to bring them to Jaffna. In Colombo the news of the arrival of the missionaries spread fast and people flocked to meet them. Some went on their knees before them and acknowledged feeling a special reverence for them. The Sisters stayed with an English lady. The next day they attended an ordination ceremony in the Cathedral. A Priest presented some young girls who desired to become religious to Mother Xavier Marchand who regretted that this request could not be considered immediately. However, their zeal was certainly encouraged when they saw these young

people so eager to follow the Lord Jesus and waiting to be guided in the way of discipleship. The "Pearl" left Colombo on 31st October, with the precious load of missionaries bringing them to their destination. The Divine Master awaited them on the clear sandy shore of the Jaffna Lagoon as He once waited for His tired disciples on the shores of Galilee. On 1 November, feast of All Saints, at 8 p.m. the ship reached the pier. Two priests came on board to welcome the party with great joy. The Bishop felt that it would be better for the travellers to spend the night on the boat. The next morning, after mass, a boat-gaily decorated-came, towed by men who sang and danced with delight. A crowd of small boats carried musicians with drums and trumpets and other men with fire-works. The Sisters were at first taken aback by the noisy demonstration but profoundly moved when a few minutes later they stepped ashore. This was their destination the land of their adoption!!! Jaffna was a riot of colours, practically the entire population of the town seemed to be out to welcome the missionaries. The Oblate Fathers were on the pier with the Cross and banners. A platform had been erected with a colourful canopy overhead for the visitors. The Bishop and the missionaries went on to the dais to receive the complimentary greetings of the people, including that of Mrs. O'Flanagan. Fr Bonjean thanked us in the name of the Bishop and then, all proceeded to the Cathedral in carriages along streets draped with garlands. Triumphal arches and aerial canopies added colour and decoration to the scene. The sisters were filled with wonder and fascination. In the Cathedral with hearts glowing with profound gratitude all joined in the TE DEUM and the missionaries retired to the Bishop's house for dinner which was a family feast. Mother Xavier Marchand concludes her letter with these words...

"What a happy day, the day we arrived here'...If you but knew, my Good Mother, what good the affectionate welcome of our Fathers and Brothers did me! We felt that we had left our families behind only to find another. Your daughters are not alone in this distant isle. Without doubt we shall never be that, because God is everywhere."

The First years

On their arrival in November 1862 the Sisters entered into an apostolic field that was already mapped out for them. Bishop Semeria in his first letter wrote: *"On your arrival you will find here (I) fifteen to twenty young persons' Europeans or descendants of Europeans; (II) fifty native girls; (III) half a score of young pagans who thanks to the allocation of Holy Childhood Work we have collected to make them Christians; (IV) some young persons to be trained to the religious life."* (8th) June 1861)

With generosity, zeal and trust in God, the sisters accepted these tasks and certainly, the vision and guidance of Bishop Semeria and Fr. Bonjsan were their invaluable support in these first years.

The English school had progressed under the able direction of Mrs. Mary Anne Flanagan, wife of an Irish Military officer. She had taken charge of the school in 1850. Her dedicated service to catholic education in Jaffna deserves our gratitude. She handed over the school to Sr. Helen Winter and went to Trincomalee to take over the Catholics there.

Soon Protestant parents voluntarily sent their children to the convent school when they heard and read in the papers about the high standard of education imparted by the

sisters. On the other hand, they had to face much criticism and resentment from Protestant Ministers who feared that these Christian children would lose their faith under the influence of the catholic “nuns”. As early as 14 December 1862 - five weeks after their arrival - an official Inspection of the school took place and the Inspector showed he was well disposed towards the sisters. In January 1863, the Government sold the steamship that served as a means of transport and this discouraged parents in Colombo from sending their children to Jaffna as the journey now would take 8 days!

Around this time there was also an invitation to start an English school in Colombo. A tempting offer in need; However, our missionaries were more keen on consolidating the first foundation and keeping together as a community until they got more members. Quite rapidly the English school progressed and became a leading educational institution in the North, under Sr. Helen Winter's efficient guidance.

The second work - the formation of young native girls and the care of orphaned children. These children lived under the care of the sisters and were taught to read and write Tamil for which they employed lay teachers. The sisters opened a workshop to introduce them to skills such as sewing and handcraft. Most of these orphans desired Baptism and were instructed. They responded beautifully. In her letters Mother Xavier said that these orphans were her consolation, her beautiful bouquet to God; In their simplicity they prayed and made novenas so that their Mothers would master Tamil in order to speak to them about God. When those girls reached the age of marriage, the Oblate Fathers found them young Catholic men as husbands and thus promoted catholic families in the Vicariate. At the beginning, the sisters, the boarders and the orphans were all cramped in one house, but as the works expanded they spread themselves out in three houses rented out for this purpose. On May 24 1864, the foundation stone for the new convent was laid by Bishop Semeria. It took six long years to complete this edifice as fund raising wasn't very easy in those days. Much of the help came from the Propagation of the faith and from another surprising source, the Pondicherry mission in India.

Those were tough beginnings. They had to face the drab day to day life in a poor underdeveloped country. Mother Xavier's letters describe the many hazards they experienced. Their sense of propriety and cleanliness came under rude shocks with the poverty that surrounded them. The creepy crawlies instilled horror in them. It was not uncommon that they spent sleepless nights, with hair on end, listening to the battles between squealing rats and hissing serpents on the ceiling above their heads! The heat was most trying and get-ling acclimatized to the country was hard. They could not communicate without the Tamil language. Besides, epidemics of cholera and typhoid ravaged the population. Their orphans were not spared. In 1867, Srs. Liguori and Marie Joseph risked their lives and took turns to nurse their dear orphans. They experienced the pinch of poverty especially in their works. Divine Providence looked after them in a touching way as it did in the time of our Founder.

Those trials and sufferings assuredly moulded them in the image of Jesus - our Divine Master. Some months after their arrival in Jaffna Mother wrote: *“It is from the heart of Jesus that we will draw the strength to support a new trials”* (June 1863)

“The crosses that weigh on us do not lessen my confidence. The Divine Mother has

protected us so much until now that we cannot but abandon ourselves blindly into the arms of such a tender Father.” (August 1863)

Their slow dying had its resurrection in the new life that came into being, with the many conversions to the faith; in the two Novitiates (1864), one for the Holy Family Sisters and the new congregation of the sisters of St. Peter. In 1868 two more missionaries — Sr. M. Eustelle Seqin and Sr. M. Trinity Stephen from France joined the community — and in 1870 the second foundation in Kurunegala, capital of North Western Province was accepted. The Holy Family under this new impulsion of the Holy Spirit began to spread in the South and it increased in “numbers and virtues” thanks to the missionaries.

Today and Tomorrow

The life of a missionary is anything but romantic or sensational in any age. Our first missionaries were undoubtedly wonderful women of their time. In the first place they were women of faith, women of God, who shared the Good News as best they could. They left home and country without any thought of getting back. Their sacrifices were great. “The footprints they have left behind on the sands of time have attracted many hundreds of young Ceylonese girls to follow the Master's call in the *Holy Family*. The seeds they sowed have sprouted into other “flowers of the desert”. The zeal and the charity they passed on have become enfolded in those who gift in total service to their brothers and sisters both in the country and abroad. We have over 40 missionaries from Sri Lanka (Ceylon) serving in the missions of Africa, Latin America and Asia. Many more will come forward to become ‘sisters’ to all, partners in solidarity with those who suffer, seekers of truth and sharers of love. With humility and courage they will go to the ends of the earth bringing the Good News that all human beings are God's Children, brothers and sisters of one another in Jesus Christ. This commitment presupposes that we become in the first place.