

Those Exemplary Men of Preachers

Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India

A personal testimony by Victor Karunairajan

The pen-portrait on Sinnathamby Upethesiar has been warmly welcomed by folks who had known him during their youthful years when this humble priest was quite elderly. A typical reaction came from the Rev Manopavan in Melbourne who grew up in Jaffna in a very much church-oriented family and served the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India (JDCSI) for some years. He observed:

“People like Sinnathamby Upethesiar touched the hearts of many. There were many 'Upethesiars' like him who, I will remember for their honesty, openness and above all for their humility. Some of the names would be Kanagaratnam, William Thevathason, and J Vinayagam. I must say that I was quite touched by them even though I was quite young to get to know them well. They led exemplary lives which seems somewhat a rare commodity these days.”

What I wrote about Sinnathamby Upethesiar was entirely from the memory bank within me and my own concept of this elder during the time of our childhood, youthful and adult years. The impact such people made on us can never be gauged with sufficient justice except to acknowledge with gratitude they were healthy, wholesome and human. Sinnathamby Upethesiar simply walked miles to visit folks on his mission trails and won their hearts.

We need to remember the total dedication of these second line of preachers to remind ourselves that the church and its mission are not for people who seek personal glories and material gains and also covet sources, both local and international, that make available vast sums of funds for the common good to be diverted by devious methods towards gratifying their own greed and their personal enrichment.

What mattered entirely to the catechists were the best interests of the community they served with the largeness of their hearts and utmost faith. Their very much challenged economic circumstances did not in anyway affect their call to service. They survived with great grace and utter humility which itself was a good example to the community.

They were committed men, called in faith and became learned and enriched in wisdom, and that was good Christian wisdom, through the many campuses of Hardknocks, their learning background. They were good examples of people who were tended from the Cradle of our Culture learning the ethics and morals that are rooted in the Hindu faith and Tamil culture and to which the Christian faith was a richly enhancing superstructure; indeed a redeeming superstructure.

The Rev Manopavan has referred to some of them whom I knew very well. There was also Kathiravelu Pirasangiar who later became a deacon. He was a kind of one-man elder, preacher, friend and even more, a Panchayat. Many individuals and families with problems sought his help to bring about peace especially couples with marital problems.

These workers served the community bonding families, meeting their spiritual and social needs and in the process, developing the sense of a family under the JDCSI. Morally, ethically and spiritually, he was a man of great character. He stood tall in the community and his loyalty to the bishop was unquestionable.

This was also the hallmark of the leadership of the Rev R C P Welch who presided over the South India United Church (SIUC), and even more, the humility, scholarship, dynamism and the sound spiritual sense Bishop Sabapathy Kulendran brought to the SIUC and later the JDCSI when it was launched in 1947.

The mark of Bishop Kulendran's leadership could be symbolized to Jesus washing the feet of his disciples and it was in that spirit he led his pastors and pirasangiars (preachers). They were all very comfortable with him. I know this because I have seen it myself and this is what endeared Bishop Kulendran in my heart. His scholarship was an inspiration to me and his spirituality, the driving force of faith that impacted me considerably.

The catechists whom we affectionately called Upethesiars and Pirasangiars, often served in areas from which it was difficult to send their children to good schools and in some areas like Pungudutivu, good water was scarce and many other facilities too; imagine serving such outposts like Kudathanai-Varany and even to some extent Delft which involves a long journey by frail craft and crossing the waters of the seven currents divide.

Today's jet-set priests would hardly know, or even want to know the work of the humble catechists like Sinnathamby, J C Kanagaratnam, William Thevathasan, J Vinayagam, the Rev Kathiravelu, G Y Navaratnam, Subramaniam, the two Canagasingams and several others who were much loved by their parishioners and even the non-Christians of the neighbourhood of their stations like Changanai, Sandilipay, Moolai, the two Earlalais, Kudathanai-Varany, Pungudutivu, Anaicottai, Nunavil, Alaveddy, Kankesanturai and Usan. Their loyalty to the church was immaculate and impeccable.

I am very much tempted to recognize the commitment of these people in the context of the current conflict in our community. When I read through the list of names on the forefront of Rev Jeyanesan's disruptive campaign, I gathered the impression they may not have come from the roots that nourished the SIUC and later the JDCSI, and the avenues they have sought for themselves in our community may be for sheer opportunistic purposes and not as an act of commitment to serve.

This so-called Church of the American Ceylon Mission has no creed or doctrine whatsoever not even an acknowledgement of the Kingship of Redeemer Christ. There is no denying the fact it was formed because the Rev Jeyanesan did not become the bishop and now wants to set up his own church coveting the material assets of the American Ceylon Mission.

This is unacceptable and if he has some followers, then he must have become the hero of a kind of dissidents who are not concerned of any creed or doctrine of faith but must have other interests that negate the Christian faith.

What is remarkable is that the second rung of preachers like Sinnathamby Upethesiar understood the doctrines, creeds and faith of the church and served the community most honourably. Have we lost the likes of these pirasangiars and deacons such as Kathiravelu, Navaratnam, Kanagaratnam, Thevathasan, Subramaniam, Vinayagam, the two Canagasingams and several others from our community?

These are the people who tended the grass roots with caring affection and we have been blessed because of them to a considerable extent from our childhood years.