

## **A brief outlook; The Diocese of Batticaloa, Sri Lanka**

Sri Lanka, which was known as Ceylon, is a small but beautiful island in the Indian Ocean. It is also named as the pearl of the Indian Ocean. It is a Buddhist country with two languages, three ethnic groups and four religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Christianity was introduced to Sri Lanka in 1505 by the Portuguese. At present Christians are minority of 7% of the total population numbering almost 21 million people in Sri Lanka.

Special mention must be made emphasizing the onerous outstanding humanitarian work undertaken by the Jesuit Missionaries from USA in the fields of Education and missionary work in not distant past. Batticaloa district will rarely forget the golden era of the contributions made by the American Jesuit Priests in the years gone by and outstanding yet unbelievable sacrifices the Jesuit community made in the early stages. Batticaloa diocese for what is today is a total sacrifice of the Jesuits yesterday.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 2012, in keeping his decision, Holy Father Benedict XVI declared Batticaloa as the New Diocese, appointed Most. Rev. Joseph Ponniah as the first bishop of Batticaloa Diocese. The diocese has an area of 2,854 sq. meters with total population of 1,289,000. The diocese of Batticaloa is comprised of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Christians. Christians are a minority in Sri Lanka as well as Eastern Province. The number of Catholics in the diocese of Batticaloa diocese is 46,138 (3.5%) of total population of the two civil districts of Batticaloa viz, Batticaloa and Ampara. The Catholics have spread out of 30 parishes which is served by nearly 39 diocesan priests and 16 religious' priests. In addition, there are 93 religious sisters and brothers serving in the parishes, schools, hospitals, colleges and universities. Additionally, we have more than five hundred catechists serving in the diocese. Their role is very crucial in the diocese. Since the children are not taught Catholic religion in most of the schools, the diocese has taken different methods to provide the Catholic faith to the children at the parish levels. The diocese is offering continuous training programs for these catechists through the catechetical center.

Sri Lanka has gone through 30 years of civil war as well as natural disasters, i.e. tsunami, cyclone, floods and drought etc. The Batticaloa district is also one of the most affected by the civil war, tsunami, cyclone, floods, drought. This area is very much prone to health hazards, Dengue fever, Malaria fever and diarrhea, due to which dozens of people die every year. Due to war, many civilians are still displaced from their dwellings and many are rendered homeless. Even today hundreds of families don't have any information on their men folk, whose whereabouts cannot be traced. We still have hundreds of women-headed families living in miserable condition. Additionally, more miseries were added with the attack of the ISIS on 21<sup>st</sup> Easter Sunday, April 2019 which killed 260 people and injuring over 500 people in the country. The city of Batticaloa was also affected by this selfish religious attack.

### **Activities of the Diocese of Batticaloa**

The diocese of Batticaloa has different offices; Catechetical Centre, Social Service Centre, Social Communication Centre, Office for Youth Apostolate, Office for Pontifical Mission societies, Office for Ecumenism, Laity commission, Lay theologate Centre and Office for Evangelization. Further, it has 11 apostolic associations. In Addition, it has 10 orphanages for boys and girls very specially the diocese has "Ozanam Center" home for handicapped female children. The Siloam hospital is the diocese medical care

center offering services to many people in the district. It is especially organizing many health awareness programs on prevention practices at the village level. The diocese has also taken a special effort to serve the lepers in the district which is very much neglected by many organizations. The Social Service Center is the social arm of the diocese through which the diocese is trying to implement some projects, Supplementary classes for children education, widow's livelihood programs, healing and reconciliation programs. Through the evangelization office and Laity commission the diocese is giving formation programs for the laity. More focus is given on re-evangelization. Bible classes are given at the parish level. Further the diocese is also doing boarder village evangelization activities amid a multi-religious society. Small Christian Communities are formed through which the bible sharing is taking place. They are continually empowered through training programs. The diocese also pays more concentration to the lay catechists, who teach Sunday classes at the parish. In small parishes there are about 100 to 150 children, in larger parishes there are about more than 500 to 800 children who follow the Sunday class. Since the diocese has more village parishes, the diocese is providing breakfast or some snacks to poor children who attend Sunday classes. Due to the financial constraint the diocese is unable to pay a small stipend for the catechists those who are very poor. Further, the diocese is facing a shortage of lay catechists with the increasing number of Catholics in the diocese. The office for the Youth apostolate is training the youth to become active leaders, new-evangelizers and coworkers to take up various types of ministries within the parish and diocese.

### **Challenges**

- The diocese is receiving more vocations for the priesthood but has no means to provide food and accommodation for the new seminarians.
- The diocese needs more lay catechists and more training programs. The catechists are very poor and need some stipends for their voluntary work.
- Education of the children supplementary classes.
- OZANAM Centre, handicap children.
- Churches were destroyed by war/tsunami need to be rebuild/renovated.
- Livelihood projects for widows.
- Healing and reconciliation programs and formation programs for youth.
- More re - evangelization programs needed in border villages among multi religious people.

The diocese of Batticaloa is a new diocese and the challenges are very immense. The diocese is growing in many spheres and has started the mission Cooperative plan in US in 2016. Through the mission appeals we came to know different dioceses and their people's generosity. The donations what we have received from these appeals helped us to cover a certain part of our projects. The Mission Cooperative plan is a wonderful opportunity given by God to share our experience and difficulties which we are facing in our country. It is also giving us a great hope that we are not alone, but we are part of the universal Church. The diocese of Batticaloa would like to acknowledge and thank all of you for your spiritual and financial contribution.