

THE PASTORAL LETTERS AND PREACHING MINISTRY OF BISHOP HENRY JOULAIN, BISHOP OF JAFFNA (1893 — 1919)

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The episcopate of Bishop Henry Joulain was important in the history of the Church in north Ceylon, not only for its long period of over twenty five years (1893 — 1919), but also for the notable progress in regard to affairs of the Church. He took over the destiny of the Church in the north and guided it into the 20th century of so many technological marvels as well as the terrors of world and civil wars.

Henry Joulain was born on 24 September 1852, at Saint Romans-les-melle on the west coast of France. He was ordained priest on 22 May 1875, and was appointed an assistant pastor to the parish at Niort in the diocese of Poitiers. It was during this time that he met Bishop Christopher Bonjean, the vicar apostolic of Jaffna (1868 — 83), who encouraged young Joulain to accept a missionary vocation to work in Ceylon. Thus Joulain arrived in Jaffna on 5 December 1880¹.

In 1883 Bishop Bonjean was transferred to the Vicariate Apostolic² of Colombo. At the death of Archbishop Bonjean, Bishop Melizan of Jaffna was transferred to Colombo and Fr. Henry Joulain was appointed Bishop of Jaffna on 20 July 1893 after he had served in different places in the north of the island. He was ordained bishop at Niort in France on 24 August of the same year, before returning to Jaffna. When he arrived in Jaffna by ship on 14 December, he was received by all with great joy and enthusiasm³.

a. Instructions through the Pastoral Letters

Just five days after his episcopal ordination, he wrote his first pastoral letter⁴ to the Catholics of Jaffna from the world famous shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes, in France on 29 August 1893. He enumerated the priorities of his work in Jaffna: the formation of a good native clergy, full of zeal; importance of instruction for Catholics, and to attain this goal, he mentioned the use of retreats and missions; the Schism at Mantotte⁵ was a sad phenomenon for the diocese and through this letter, he sent an

earnest invitation that they come back to the Catholic fold; importance of preaching to non-Catholics; special care in the welfare of the priests, nuns and religious, his close associates in the ministry and concern for the suffering-forsaken and orphans.

“ From this very first pastoral letter, Joulain showed his deep awareness of the exact situation of the diocese of Jaffna - its problems, needs, priorities and the possibilities of growth. It was a welcome sign that he would get involved in the welfare of the people of all walks of life ”⁶.

Upto middle of 19th century, and even later, the Church in Jaffna had been considered an ‘ infant Church ’ and continued to be that. In 1886, Rome having seen the potentiality for growth, appointed an hierarchy of administration and workers with a division of the island into dioceses. The Bishop had the onerous task of guiding the growing Church onto maturity. Bishop Joulain accepting this challenge, moved ahead in leading his flock, through his writings, especially his pastoral letters, preaching and visitation. He wrote to the Catholics: “ Hitherto the Church has treated you as newly-born children, but now the time has come for you to be treated as Christians perfect in the faith. It is a great honour for you and we trust you will show yourselves worthy of it by your exactness in fulfilling the religious duties ”⁷.

Joulain was aware of the fact that for the growth of the Church and its members, knowledge of Christian doctrine and ways of life prescribed by the Church were essential. Therefore, he made it a point to write long pastoral letters with detailed instructions. These instructions were followed by the pastors to foster the welfare of their parishioners. During the season of Lent (a period of 40 days of penance, as preparation for the festival of the Resurrection of Christ) each year, he wrote on various topics of Christian life and these letters were called ‘ Lenten Pastorals ’.

In 1894, the year after he became bishop, he wrote about the necessity of doing penance. He called all Catholics to accept the norms of penance prescribed by the Church: “ Accept, beloved brethren, in a cheerful, humble and obedient spirit the slight penance imposed upon you by your Mother the Church during these 40 days of lent. It is not hard, do not by a culpable neglect deprive yourselves of its benefits ”. He ended this letter, dated 25th January 1894, giving the regulations concerning fasting and abstinence.

“ The diocese of Jaffna was made smaller in extent in 1895, as the North Western Province was attached to the Archdiocese of Colombo and the Eastern Province was annexed to the new diocese of Galle. The new Diocese of Jaffna had only the Northern Province and North Central Province, excluding the district of Tambankadduwa ”⁸. In the pastoral letter written for

the Lent of 1895, dated 6 February, Bishop Joulain makes reference to the immense tasks accomplished by the earlier pastors in the diocese of Jaffna, which had been very extensive. Having told the faithful the need to accept the decision made by the Pope in all matters related to the Catholic Church, Bishop Joulain explained the doctrines regarding the authority of the Pope in the Catholic Church. The following doctrines of the Church were given and explained in detail: Church received from Jesus the power to enact laws; only the Roman Catholic Church was founded by Jesus; Pope has the plenitude of power on earth, and, all Catholics were bound to obey the decrees and orders of the Pope.

He concluded his explanations thus: "As no one can deny the authority of the Roman Pontiff, as to the changes to be effected in the different dioceses of Catholic world, evidently it is right and expedient that his decisions regarding the demarcation of the diocese be accepted". The Schism of Mantotte and the Protestants' opposition to the leadership of the Pope were in his mind, when the Bishop took pains to explain these doctrines in detail.

The building of churches in villages, small and big, was the sign of the presence of Catholics in that village and the church was the centre of their lives. Catholics of each village contributed in every way possible towards the building of the church. Bishop Joulain in his Lenten Pastoral dated 10 February 1896, instructed the people on the need to build churches, which are called the 'houses of God'. After giving the biblical and doctrinal explanations, he encouraged them to complete their churches as 'neat and beautiful places of prayer are a help and an incentive to piety'. On his part, the Bishop, according to the resources available, promised to assist each village to this 'commendable enterprise'.

The whole purpose of the pastoral activity of the bishop was to improve the state of the diocese, both spiritually and temporally. The Bishop in his Lenten Pastoral of 1898, dated 2 February, instructed the faithful on the need and importance of prayer in their life of faith.

"It is with heart overflowing with joy that we announce to you that the stray sheep have returned to the Fold and are once more united in faith and charity with their brethren", wrote Bishop Joulain in his pastoral letter of 30 May 1902. He was writing about the independent Catholics of Mantotte coming back into the official Catholic Church on 19 May 1902, thus ending the "Schism of Mantotte". This was a glad event for the diocese of Jaffna.

"Any writing contrary either to faith or to morality is poison to the mind; and the reading of it naturally leads to the loss of faith and of grace which is the life of the soul", wrote the Bishop in his pastoral letter of 7 March 1904. He wrote this to instruct the people on the adverse influence of bad literature

on Christian life. He admonished followers against those who write, print, publish, sell, keep in their possession and read such dangerous books or papers", and encouraged them to read the diocesan paper, **The Jaffne Catholic Guardian** started by Bishop Bonjean for the 'temporal and spiritual welfare of all'.

This preaching role of the Church is shared by the parents too. They are the most important teachers of their children. Bishop Joulain expressed the importance of religious instruction of children of all ages and he insisted on the role of the parents in this teaching ministry. "We cannot but command Catholic parents, in God's name, to be mindful of their little ones' souls, from their very infancy.... As they grow up, teach them the principal prayers and get them to recite them every morning and evening. As soon as the children are able to read a little, the diocesan catechism must be placed in their hands and easy explanations should be given to them by their parents". These are words of the Bishop in his pastoral letter of 22 June 1905.

Various new directives like participation in the mid - night Holy Mass on Christmas day, possibility of receiving Holy Communion during mid - night and morning masses⁹, allowing children of about seven years to receive Holy Communion¹⁰, gradually made the people to get more involved in Church activities and pastors had the opportunity to meet their people frequently thereby giving them occasions to instruct and worship together.

Another important consideration is that Bishop Joulain made Catholics aware of the teachings of the Popes on various occasions, which made the Church in Jaffna feel to be part of the Universal Catholic Church. One such occasion was the Holy Year celebration of 1900 — 1901. Having given the salient points of the Encyclical of the Pope¹¹, for that occasion, the Bishop in his pastoral of 11 May 1901 explains the laws governing the Universal Church in regard to the Jubilee year. Then he further gives the guidelines on the preparation and celebration of the same in the diocese of Jaffna.

Through these pastorals, he was able to reach out to every Catholic in the diocese. These pastorals were read to the people and explained by the parish priests. Thus the Bishop was able to give direction to the whole diocesan ministry.

b. Preaching Mission of Bishop Joulain

Apart from writing these long pastorals, Bishop Joulain was a great preacher, with an unbounded faith in the efficacy of the Word of God. Soon after his arrival in Jaffna, he himself preached Lenten sermons at the Cathedral, alternating with parish priest, Fr. Joseph Aloysious¹². Till the time of Joulain, no time limit had been fixed for the Easter duties to be performed

in Jaffna as was the practice in the whole Church. But the Bishop, in view of the great progress made in the diocese in the recent past, decreed that the time for fulfilling the Easter duties should be limited to between Ash Wednesday (the first day of the annual season of penance) and Pentecost Sunday, fiftieth day after the celebration of Easter¹³. To facilitate the observance of this precept, retreats were held in all the parishes of Jaffna, priests helping one another in the preaching. This practice is continued even today.

As a Bishop, Joulain not only officiated in important ceremonies like Confirmation¹⁴, but also taught catechism and preached for days continuously; for example, from 14 August 1909, together with Frs. S. Gnana Prakasar, A. Marcellin and A. Daurat, Bishop went to Naranthanai, for a Mission¹⁵ of four weeks¹⁶. During these long missions, elaborate sermons were given in the mornings and evenings, together with religious ceremonies like Holy Mass and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The bishop and priests not only met different groups of people in the parish, but also tackled various problems in the villages. The priests took time to visit all the families in the village, encouraging those who took part in parish activities and also looked into the difficulties of those who did not practice religion. Family disputes were discussed and opportunity given to resolve them with the help of the priests. Thus the mission gave an occasion for the parish population to receive their faith and religious fervour.

The family is the basic unit in a parish. The faith and practices, have to be inculcated into the minds of the children and the parents. The parish priest and parish organization should help in building a proper Christian environment in the family. Thus these missions reached the grass root level of the diocese, the family, to revitalize its members to live according to Christian teachings. This type of missions which were successfully organized through the length and breath of the diocese, brought in new fervour to the whole diocese. After the missions, growth was evident in an increase in the number of persons attending various religious services in the Church and receiving Sacraments.

Bishop Joulain not only took a leading role in preaching in the parishes, but also willingly preached retreats to the priests and nuns¹⁷.

The missions held in various parts of the diocese, took the chief pastor to the flock. He covered all important areas like Mullaitivu, Mantotte-Mannar, Wannai and upto 1895, North Central Province (Puttlam, Kurunagala, Chilaw and Wennapuwa)¹⁸, practically every year. More than spending time in Jaffna with the administrative work, he preferred to be with the people, preaching to them and guiding them, personally experiencing the hardships the priests encountered in their missions. Administrative work was attended to by the vicar general. The pastors, mostly Europeans, did not find life easy in various god-forsaken areas in the Wannai, Mantotte and Mullaitivu, which were virtually jungle covered then, malaria stricken, and with only the bare essential comforts.

Bishop's visit to various areas in the Jaffna peninsula usually lasted about ten to twenty days¹⁹, and visitations to distant areas like Mullaitivu²⁰, Mannar - Mantotte and the Wannai would keep him out of Jaffna from one week to three months²¹. Often he visited various districts one after another, as he did in 1903, when he visited Mullaitivu, Vavuniya, Anuradhapura, Mantotte and various villages in the **Valimeesam**²²; the Bishop returned to Jaffna after an absence of three months. During these visits, he not only administered the Sacrament of Confirmation, but also found time to instruct the recipients of the sacrament. **The Jaffna Catholic Guardian** testifies that the bishop himself, assisted by Fr. Marcellin, prepared some boys and workers of the Orphanage at Mullaitivu for Confirmation²³.

The same paper gives us a vivid description of the bishop's visit to Pachilaipalli from 17 May 1899 which lasted for three weeks. The first place visited was Manatkadu where the people accorded a welcome to their chief pastor and on 21 May he Confirmed 24 persons in that village. From Manatkadu the bishop proceeded by catamaran to Chempianpattu, on the east coast of the Jaffna peninsula, the church being dedicated to St. Philip Neri. On the feast day, 26 May confirmed 52 persons in the presence of many hundred pilgrims. During his stay at Chempianpattu, he paid a visit to Kudappu, a fishing hamlet about three miles away. From Chempianpattu the bishop went by canoe to Tulukaitiddal where he Confirmed 40 persons. At night on 30 May he started by canoe for Kattaikadu, another fishing village, and was on the way drenched by the waves. The church at Kattaikadu was very poor one, built mainly with cadjans. The bishop visited Pullaveli, a pilgrimage centre, near Elephant Pass, on his return journey and arrived in Jaffna at midnight of 6 June²⁴.

Bishop Joulain made every opportunity presented to visit various parishes and villages. Whenever he went to an important centre, he found the time to visit adjoining villages. He was annually present at Madhu for festivals and his subsequent extended stay there always presented opportunities to visit the villages in the district of Mannar²⁵.

The diocese of Jaffna was so large that in spite of such a lot of travelling the Bishop was able to visit some missions only after many years. His visit to Anaicottai in April 1905 was after a lapse of nine years²⁶.

These visitations often brought the chief pastor close to his flock and inspired newly converted Catholics, as at St. Benedict's Church at Nallur where he confirmed 125 of them on 21 April 1912²⁷. The Bishop met the Hindus too in the villages he visited, and at Tholagatty in 1899 he told them that he had come 'to bring the light of truth to all'²⁸. He was aware of his mission towards the non-Catholics; this prompted him to encourage and support the ministry of Fr S. Gnana Prakasar²⁹. In various places like Jaffna, Nallur, Ilavalai, Mallakam,

Atchuveley, and especially at Madhu lectures were organized for the benefit of non-Catholics. They were well attended and helped to weaken the prejudices of non-Catholics and strengthen the faith of Catholics³⁰.

The more the pastors know their flock, the stronger the dedication would be to their ministry. Joulain had known the diocese and people of Jaffna well before assuming office as bishop. He continued to visit them, know them and serve them closely; he was more out than in Jaffna and Fr. Gnana Prakasar thus sums up the impact of Bishop Joulain's preaching and visitations: "The bishop's personal example, as a preacher and his many and regular pastoral visits made, sometimes, as in the Vanni and Mantotte, under most trying circumstances, inclemencies of the weather, primitive mode of travelling through sand and mud, lack of adequate lodging, food, etc, gave a fresh impulse to the spiritual work of the entire diocese"³¹.

An evaluation

Bishop Joulain's period of episcopacy was marked by tremendous growth in all fields. When he was appointed bishop, he found the Church in Jaffna 'a baby plant' and at his death, he left it a grown tree, wrote **The Jaffna Catholic Guardian** at his death in February 1919³². The silver jubilee of the episcopal ministry was celebrated in a grand scale on 24 August 1918. All the parishes of the diocese and people of all walks of life participated, indicating the appreciation shown for all the growth seen in various fields of the diocese, because of the efforts of the great missionary bishop.

At the death of Bishop Joulain, **The Hindu Organ** too expressed its sympathy: "His Lordship was popular with all sections of the community and his death is very much regretted throughout Jaffna, with sympathy with the Catholic Church at the great loss it has sustained"³³.

A. J. B. Antoninus thus sums up the achievements of Bishop Joulain: "Numerous pious confraternities began to spring up during the episcopate of the venerable prelate. The month of May devotions in the Cathedral and the neighbouring parishes, the opening of a new shrine at Saravanai, now known as Sinnamadu, with a feast begun on 4 August 1895, the impetus given to devotional exercises and the reading of Catholic literature particularly by the formation of the 'family library', the establishment of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul in 1905, the formation of the Catholic unions in Jaffna, Anuradhapura and in Mannar, opening of St. Joseph's School at Anuradhapura in 1898, another in Mathagal in 1896, and St. Henry's College, Ilavalai in 1910 along with the Sacred Heart College at Vathiry in 1913, the remarkable increase in the number of vernacular schools and his foresight in purchasing plots of land along main roads which in course of time became centres of conversion work, particularly in the Naifur 'Pagan Mission' and the introduction of the '**Tharkka pirasangam**',

one of the most attractive and effective forms of instructions to non-Catholics; all these have contributed to make Jaffna one of the most flourishing diocese in Ceylon during the quarter century of episcopate of Dr. Joulain"³⁴.

"It is indeed remarkable that the priorities enumerated by Joulain in his pastoral letter of 29 August 1893, at the beginning of his episcopate, had been fulfilled to a great extent. He followed his programme with all assistance from all religious and laity, and he placed the Church of Jaffna on a solid foundation, beaming the message of Christ to all living within the diocese"³⁵.

Notes

1. *The Jaffna Catholic Guardian*, (JCG), 11 Feb. 1919
2. It is the ecclesiastical territory, which is lesser than a diocese in importance. A new missionary territory is made into a Vicariate Apostolic, before being made into a diocese.
3. Gnana Prakasar, S., *XXV Years of Catholic Progress*, (Jaffna 1925), p. 3
4. An official letter of instructions that a bishop writes to the Catholics of his diocese.
5. When the Catholic Church in Ceylon was separated from the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Cochin in 1834, some Goanese priests, gathering a section of Catholics of Mantotte, specially from Pallimunai and Parapankandal, rebelled against the leadership appointed by Rome. They called themselves 'independent Catholics'.
For further reading, Gnana Prakasar, S., *op. cit.*, p. 20-24
6. Matthias, Anton, *The Catholic Church in Jaffna: 1875-1925*, (Jaffna 1992), p. 33
7. *JCG*, 12 Dec. 1901
8. Matthias, Anton, *ibid.*
9. Pastoral letter of 18 Nov. 1909
10. Pastoral letter of 22 Jan. 1911
11. Encyclical is the official letter of instruction written by the Pope to the Universal Catholic Church.
12. Gnana Prakasar, S., *op. cit.*, p. 10, 16
13. Antoninus, A. J. B., *The Chronicle of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Madhu*, (Jaffna 1975), p. 214

14. It is a Sacrament, usually administered by a bishop, in which the power of the Holy Spirit is given to the recipient. See also *Acts of the Apostles* (Bible), chapter 2.
15. It is the long retreat conducted in a parish in order to bring about personal and communitary renewal in Christian life.
16. *Jaffna Diocesan Archives (JDA)*, A-48
17. *Ibid.*; Bishop preached to sisters in Jan. 1914, when the preacher, Fr. Perrussel fell ill.
18. Gnana Prakasar, S., *op. cit.*, p. 13-14
19. His visit to Pachilapalli, the Eastern coast of the Jaffna peninsula, lasted from 18 May to 6 June in 1899.
20. In 1905, bishop was in that area for three weeks, from 4 Sept.
21. When the Bishop went for Confirmation to Parapandandal, in Mantotte, In Aug. 1905, he was out of Jaffna for ten days. He spent three months in Mannar - Mantotte in 1903.
22. Literally it means 'parish on the way': the missions on the road from Poonakari to Vidathaltivu, on the western coast, were denoted by this name.
23. *JCG*, 27 Sept. 1902, p. 4
24. *JCG*, 10 June 1899, p. 86
25. *JCG*, 12 July 1902, p. 3
26. *JCG*, 8 Ap. 1905, p. 4
27. *JCG*, 27 Ap. 1912, p. 3
28. *JCG*, 13 May 1899, p. 71
29. Matthias, Anton, *op. cit.*, p. 149 — 50
30. Gnana Prakasar, S., *op. cit.*, p. 18
31. *Ibid.*, p. 11
32. *JCG*, 15 Feb. 1919, p. 2
33. Quoted in *JCG*, 15 Feb. 1919, p. 2
34. Antoninus, A. J. B., *op. cit.*, p. 218
35. Matthias, Anton, *op. cit.*, p. 34