
CBF Newsletter

Catholic Biblical Federation
May 2004



Dear Friends of the Catholic Biblical Federation:

You know the saying: "Ignorance is bliss". It is often all too easy to simply close our eyes to what we don't like, to something that could force us to question our actions, our way of life. And we do this, in spite of all the curiosity - healthy or unhealthy - that represents a kind of natural antidote to this tendency to look away from the unpleasant.

The media world also occasionally follows this pattern. On the one hand, it pushes the limits of decency in a variety of ways in order to satisfy the curiosity of the public; on the other hand the media can be selectively silent or simply look the other way. A looking away from realities that are not politically opportune, or that are no longer "hot", because they are short on reader-appeal, fail to mesmerize a radio or TV audience or no longer guarantee ratings. Alongside many other countries and regions of the world, the case of Sri Lanka could serve as a good example of such forgetfulness. In the past few months news related to this small country has occasionally found its way into the Western media, particularly in connection with the elections of a few weeks ago. But for the most part the life conditions of this island off the southeast coast of India have received virtually no attention. Yet Sri Lanka, once known as Ceylon, is not only the land of tea, the land of temples and the land of elephants, but is also a place of profound ethnic discord, religious tensions and a very fragile peace following a twenty-year civil war. This is why the president of Caritas Sri Lanka (a charitable institution) recently called on the international press to devote greater attention to this country.

It would be well for us, too, insofar as we are able, to turn our attention every now and then to this country. So I am happy to take the occasion of my brief stay in Sri Lanka, following an invitation by the Bishops' Conference there, to turn my attention to this island with you in this newsletter. Very much in the sense of the above-cited saying, amended to read: "knowledge is bliss."

I extend to you my sincere thanks for your interest and for your support in our many tasks.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Alexander M. Schweitzer". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid and personal.

Alexander M. Schweitzer
General Secretary

Biblical Pastoral Ministry as a Recipe against Religious Fundamentalism – the Situation in Sri Lanka

The Country

Sri Lanka is part of the Indian subcontinent, with a surface area of over 65,000 sq. km, as large as the Netherlands and Belgium combined. An important trait of the country is its ethnical, religious and cultural diversity. Of its present 20 million inhabitants three fourths are Sinhalese, exactly 13 % Ceylon-Tamils (who reside predominantly in the northern and eastern parts of the island) and a good 5% are highland Tamils (who for the most part live in the plantations of the central highland). The so-called Moors, who are also called Muslims because of their religious affiliation, constitute ca. 7% of the total population. The great majority of the inhabitants are Buddhists (about 70%), 15% are Hindus, 8% Christians (of which 95% are Catholics), and 7% are Moslems.



The Population

Almost all of the present population are descendants of immigrants from India. The Sinhalese claim to stem from the north of India, the Ceylon and the highland Tamils belong to the group of Dravidians from southern India, and even the ancestors of most of the Moors migrated from India in the course of the last centuries. The question of which population group was first to settle on the island is still debated among many Sinhalese and Tamils. The issue has often led to heavy disputes and has had a very damaging effect on the relations between the two major populations. The past decades have in fact been marked by civil war, terror and the division of the island-state.

The Political Situation

Since the end of February 2002 a cease-fire has existed between the two parties in conflict. This

has improved the situation of many people (for example some restrictions have been lifted). Even the capital Colombo, which in recent years was frequently targeted by the suicide bombings of the "Tamil Tigers", has recovered the flair of a normal Asiatic capital. The present optimism that the long enduring conflict can indeed finally be peacefully resolved can, however, not wish away the fact that the most difficult times for the country still lie ahead: a long-term political solution must be found. The twenty-year civil war has caused profound divisions and destruction in the population. A balance must be sought between the demands of the Tamils for more independence and self-reliance and the limited concessions the government and the Sinhalese majority are ready to accept.

Religious Fundamentalism

Reconciliation work must also be done in the realm of relations between the religions. For some time now there has been escalation in the use of violence by Buddhists against the Christians, which was occasioned - in the opinion of many, even Christian observers - by the conduct of certain Christian groups. For example, the Catholic news agency Fides, under the title "Buddhist fanaticism escalates - and that of Christians as well" recently reported on regular arsenal attacks on Catholic churches in Sri Lanka.

Already since the beginning of this year a number of attacks have been made in a wave of violence on Catholic churches. The human rights organization Christian Solidarity Worldwide in its most recent report has documented as many as 20 attacks on Christians, which have resulted in the deaths of 15 people. A Buddhist party of monks, which is represented in the parliament, is at the present time insisting that all Christian institutions should be driven out of Kandy, the city in central Sri Lanka that is holy to Buddhists. Archbishop Gomis of Colombo comments as follows on this development: "The reason for the



The Dalada Maligawa Temple in Kandy

violence is the procedure of a number of Evangelical sects which are conducting conversion campaigns that are not appreciated by the Buddhists. Non-Christians often do not distinguish between the Evangelical sects and Catholics... The objection made by the Buddhists to false proselytism is in my opinion on point. We have tried to speak with the representatives of the Evangelical churches, but they don't want to listen to us. The Catholic faithful now fear a significant escalation of violence". The president of Caritas Sri Lanka, Fr. Fernando, complains that work in the social sphere also stands under fire. "The claim is made that we are making fraudulent conversions through infection or that we are taking advantage of people, and it is assumed that our involvement in the social sphere has ulterior motives. But all the people we care for in our institutions - and among these above all the non-Christians - know that this is not at all true and they value our work very highly." In order to isolate the Christian fundamentalist groups, the Catholics are striving above all, according to the Caritas Sri Lanka president, to strengthen the longstanding good relations with the Buddhists at a grass roots level and to inform people through enlightenment campaigns about the real state of things.

The Catholic Church's Efforts

In December 2003 the General Secretary of the CBF accepted an invitation of the Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka to visit the country. At the meeting in the capital, Colombo, a number of the country's bishops took part, as did the superiors of the religious communities active in Sri Lanka. The Bishops' Conference joined the Catholic Biblical Federation already in 1972 and thus numbers as one of its oldest members.

The participants at the meeting reflected primarily on the role of the Bible and of biblical pastoral ministry against the background of the present situation in Sri Lanka. It became clear how urgent it is for priests and catechists to continue their training, what a central role in the life of the Sri Lanka Church the so-called "small Christian communities" play and how absolutely essential is the training and ongoing education of their leaders. Moreover, deep thought was given to the question of what a meaningful pastoral approach with the Bible should look like, so that biblical pastoral work can become at once a remedy for fundamentalism and a point of departure for dialogue among Christians and with other religions. In the course of this exchange it became clear for one thing that the Bible already holds an important place in the lives of Christians, particularly in the "small Christian communities". After all, Bible groups and various Bible-reading methods, which insure a life-relevant use of the Bible, have long been practiced in many places.

On the other hand, one could not overlook the challenges that still face the Church of Sri Lanka, both with regard to the training of its priests and faithful, and in light of the religious tensions and the necessary dialogue in the religious, as well as in the socio-political realms.



The meeting with the bishops and superiors

The General Secretary of the CBF agreed with the Bishop of Kandy, Bishop Vianney Fernando, on a number of concrete measures for the upcoming year:

1. The Bible in Sinhalese, the language of the majority of the inhabitants of Sri Lanka, should finally be made available at an affordable price. The present cost is unaffordable for many Sinhalese-speaking Christians.
2. In the year 2004 a Bible Sunday or a Bible Weekend should be established, first of all in the diocese of Kandy; later, this event should serve as a model for other dioceses of Sri Lanka.
3. A pastoral commentary on the Sinhalese Bible should be written, taking into account the cultural and socio-political context of Sri Lanka. This should first be published separately and later, with a planned new edition of the Bible, together with the biblical text as a pastoral Bible.
4. The Bible Study Resources Centre in Kandy, an Associate Member of the CBF, should continue to be built. The mid-term goal is to create similar centers in other dioceses of Sri Lanka and a countrywide network.

So the meeting with the bishops and religious superiors contributed not only to increasing an awareness of the importance of responsible biblical apostolate ministry but also produced concrete results. Recently all the bishops of the

country made a common public statement condemning the aggressive missionary tactics of the Evangelical sects and underscoring the fact that every human being must be allowed to make

a free and personal choice in the matter of religious affiliation.

Education, the only antidote to fundamentalism - the Bible Study Resources Centre in Kandy

An Associate Member of the CBF, the Bible Study Resources Centre in Kandy, is also engaged in the battle against Christian fundamentalism. It does this by giving interested Christians - above all those in leadership roles - ready access to various materials on the Bible and on biblical pastoral ministry and it also creates the framework of conditions for their use. The center keeps on store among other things various Bible editions, biblical reference works, Bible atlases, scientific and pastoral commentaries, Bible concordances, posters, software for Bible studies, audio and video tapes, slides and films. At the present time five computers are available at the center for on-the-spot use of Bible software and in addition to these video-recorders and a presentation room for training courses. All the materials can also be hired out. An Internet Bible Course in Sinhalese was launched a few weeks ago, and a similar course in Tamil is in preparation, in collaboration with the coordinator of the CBF south Asian subregion. In addition, the center will offer training sessions for groups upon request.



Staff members of the Bible Study Resources Centre

A central preoccupation of the Bible Study Resources Centre is the ongoing education of people in positions of responsibility in the Church. Beyond these it appeals to all interested Christians and even non-Christians as well. So it numbers among its regular customers not only professors and seminarians of the National Catholic Seminary located nearby, but also representatives of the "small Christian communities." As the first and thus far the only center of its kind in Sri Lanka, the Bible Study Resources Centre also appeals to interested Christians from the whole country. And in recent months the first non-Christians have begun to find their way into the Center.

Bible and Dialogue

The Bible is a fundamental document of our faith. It embodies the faith witness of many generations, in different literary forms, with dates of origin that cover a span of over a thousand years. Only a responsible use of Holy Scripture, which also takes its historical character into account, can help its faith witness become for us today the Word of God. Concrete knowledge of the Bible and tested methods of Bible-reading are therefore indispensable. A responsible use of the Bible is also an important presupposition for an attitude of openness and dialogue with other religions.

Holy Scripture constitutes an outstanding foundation for this dialogue, but it is itself also steeped in this dialogue. For it tells the story of the people of God, who time and time again established contacts with new cultures and new thought-worlds, influenced them or was influenced by them. An attitude of respect and a grounding in one's own faith are the indispensable biblical presuppositions for the dialogue that Sri Lanka so urgently needs.