

Missionary Option during Crisis in Sri Lanka

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I expressed my desire to our Prior Provincial in 1996 to go for mission work when I was about to be ordained for the presbyterate. However, my Prior Provincial placed me in the formation apostolate. I was in the formation apostolate from 1996 to 2006. I realized that it was the best preparation I could have had when I look back on my intensified desire to go for mission. I also realized that the Dominican Order where I became a member was indeed an order in the Catholic Church that was primarily founded for missionary work, and it has mission as its dynamic element. I understood through formation, the reason I accompanied the brothers in formation in community, prayer, and study was for us to spring into mission and that eventually our mission as preaching would be informed by our community living, praying and studying. My nine years in the formation apostolate galvanized my desire to go for mission *ad gentes*. One day, when I was in the novitiate assignment, Father Vincente Cajilig, OP (now deceased), who was the superior for the Sri Lankan mission, was looking for volunteers to go for mission. It was there that I found my chance to respond to mission *ad gentes*.

It was in 2006 that I joined the new community established in our mission in Sri Lanka. The community was still new. The Saint Dominic's House in Sri Lanka was established in 2001 though Sri Lankans who were already in the Dominican Order belonged to the Indian Dominicans under the Irish Province. The first Sri Lankan who transfiliated (a process of transfer from one province to another) to the Dominican Province of the Philippines did so in the 1990s. Sri Lankan candidates started joining the Philippine Province in 1995 to 2003. However, only two brothers persevered in this group. The community was small: three Filipinos and one student-brother. Before we arrived in Sri Lanka, the community there stopped promoting vocations in 2003. There were two Sri Lankan Dominican priests left in that community in that year. One member took a leave of absence after 2003 and the remaining Sri Lankan Dominican also took a leave of absence when we arrived in 2006. I was with two other Filipino Dominicans and a newly professed Sri Lankan student-brother, who was about to finish his four-year theology in the National Seminary of Our Lady of Lanka.





The difficulty we had that time was so much on “image building.” In that island nation, image or perception is very important in the culture. Many Sri Lankans saw that we had no strong community life (there was only one member who stayed in the community when we arrived; the other Sri Lankan was on leave). The remaining Sri Lankan member of the community eventually took a leave, because of the nature of work he had in the government’s examination board. It was difficult for Sri Lankans to understand the host of complex realities our Sri Lankan Dominicans were facing when our new community established its presence in Sri Lanka.

What compounded the situation when we went to Sri Lanka was the fact that it was during the heightened war by the government forces against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or simply “Tamil Tigers.” There were many reasons for the genesis of the war. It all started when Sri Lanka got its liberation from England in 1948 and power was given to the majority who were the Sinhalese. The Tamils were mostly benefited by the presence of the British. What triggered the war after all the preceding discriminations against the Tamils was the event in July 1983 after the Tamil Tigers ambushed thirteen military soldiers in the northern part of the country, where mostly Tamils live. It sprouted the war where many Tamils were gathered, tortured and killed in the country. When we arrived in 2006, some parts of the north and the east of the country were under the Tamil Tigers. Though the government forces recaptured many of the areas in the North and the East, many

sporadic bombings by suicide Tamil Tiger bombers were done in the south of the country. I remember my superior telling me not to proceed to Sri Lanka because of the war; I spontaneously responded to my superior that I did not enter the Dominican Order for security but for mission. We proceeded to Sri Lanka in 2006 within this context.

My first experience of war was in Sri Lanka. Though we live in a relatively peaceful place in the Sinhalese majority area, we were not spared by the effect of war in terms of possible victims caught up in the bombings in our area. Many of our friends in the seminary area both Sinhalese and Tamil civilians, priests, seminarians and even authorities in the Church were very vocal to express which side they supported. During the heightened war which ended in 2009, I saw how divided the country was. It was not only outside us that the division was seen; it was also true inside us in our community. Some brothers were also having arguments on how to proceed with our mission presence in Sri Lanka. In as much as we started our new community in 2006, one member of our community convinced our Chapter and requested our Provincial to assign the remaining two Sri Lankans to the Philippines, so as to allow the new members of the community to start with a fresh beginning. Thus, the Prior Provincial called the two brothers who were on leave to go to Philippines. It was not heeded by one Sri Lankan, for he requested to take an extended leave of absence. The other Sri Lankan heeded the call of the prior Provincial and went to Philippines in 2007.

I realized that the suggestion to assign the old Sri Lankan members to Philippines was not the solution for a new community to start afresh in Sri Lanka. Many Sri Lankans were commenting about the situation of our brother who took a leave instead of being integrated into the community in Sri Lanka. If we had listened to what people said at that time, we could have ended up living in the mercy of what they said. Our superior took the more difficult decision: to recall our two Sri Lankans, one from the Philippines and the other who was on leave in Sri Lanka. The result was that one of our Filipinos who adamantly suggested that the Sri Lankans to be out of our community requested the Provincial to be reassigned to Philippines.

While the country experienced the relative peace at the end of the war in 2009, our community also experienced a relative peace, for we started our community with all our Sri Lankans as part of the community. From one community we had in Kandy, which was located in the Central Province and the holiest city because of the tooth relic of Buddha, we had our new community in a very Catholic area in Negombo at Katana. With the opening of the new community our Sri Lankans started to help us rebuild our community life. We were not successful in terms of our first beginnings in the country in 2006, and we learned from that experience. We decided to discern together on how we should proceed with our mission. We recognized that many of our brothers were so very gifted, thus, some of them were teaching in the National Seminary and other universities.

It was in 2009 that I took up the leadership of the community. I was the only Filipino left in the batch that came to Sri Lanka in 2006. However, this was the beautiful time that I started to immerse myself in the realities of our mission. I decided to journey with my fellow Sri Lankan Dominicans. In my experience of formation, I accompanied the only candidate we had who was studying theology. With our Sri Lankan Dominicans, I journeyed with them in terms of discerning how to lay down the foundation for our presence in the Sri Lankan Church and in the religious life of the country. The problem of having no candidates was accompanied by the lack of a building

for the first stage of formation for the Dominicans in Sri Lanka. Thus, we embarked on establishing our first stage of formation in Katana. The Prior Provincial was cognizant that I was alone as a Filipino in Sri Lanka; he sent a new cooperator brother to assist me in our apostolate; thus, in 2009 a new brother was sent. When the new formation house was half finished, we started accepting candidates. A new candidate who was already mature joined us and he studied philosophy. I understood that my leadership in the community had the possible extension to represent our community to the religious leadership in Sri Lanka.

It was in 2007 when the all-out war was raging that I was sent by my superior to join the Human Rights Group in Kandy. This group was mostly composed of religious and priests in Sri Lanka. I continued my membership in the group even after the war and until I left the country. After the end the war, it took a new face for many of those who were suspected as former Tamil Tigers and their supporters, or even if one was a Tamil civilian. They were either imprisoned or continually checked by military forces (the worst scenario was that some disappeared and we did not know to which prisons they were taken). Many of the supporters of the Tamil Tigers who expressed anything against the government at that time were victims of harassment or disappearance or even death. The people looked up to religious leadership from the four major religious groups for solutions: Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians.

In 2009, I joined as a representative of our Prior Provincial to the Conference for Major Religious Superiors in Sri Lanka (CMRS). I was given the task to organize ten programs for religious priests, sisters and brothers in Sri Lanka. I held the office from 2009 to 2015. It was the time that I discerned with our religious in the country on how to go about reconciliation between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils as well as all the people involved in the post-war situation. We conducted ten programs every year. We reached out to many different religious and priests in order to become catalysts for creating areas for reconciliation and justice so that peace could be generated. I remember that one resource person finally realized that the only way to bring about

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reconciliation in the country was that people from all walks of life and different faith persuasions sit down together and contemplate and be in touch with the sacred in their lives. Once this happened, when people were connected to the sacred in their lives, everyone would be connected to one another. The path to reconciliation was still a long road!

On my part, I had also my responsibility in my leadership in my community. It was like a kind of multi-tasking: as I took up my role in the community, I helped in the promotion of vocations to the Order, and in planning and carrying out our common projects in the community. We slowly discerned to accept the challenge of the bishop in Kandy for us to plan on how to bring the educational apostolate of the Dominicans in terms of tertiary education and to transfer to a new location for our religious house. The concrete projects were relatively easy to handle, but the more difficult to handle was the personal conflicts that ensued among some of our brothers. I suppose it all started in terms of miscommunication from the start which prolonged personal conflicts. The Prior Provincial would intervene, sending a formal precept. A formal precept is a call for a brother to obedience or else a process of dismissal will take place for him to leave the Dominican Order.



I eventually made use of our regular monthly chapter for us to discuss common projects and even the personal conflicts of some of our brothers. I advocated that the venue for us to resolve the issue was our Chapter meeting. I asserted that “no one speaks against another outside the Chapter.” If they have differences, the regular Chapter was for us the place to resolve them. When I left Sri Lanka in 2015, the process was not yet 100 percent effective. But, I was able to start the reconciliation process in the community.

As I look back on my experience in Sri Lanka. I could not help but thank the Lord for the tangible blessings I received. I realized that I was given ample preparation when I was in my formation apostolate in the Philippines. I may not have stabilized our community, but I understand that to be in mission one must not opt for stabilization but for one to be at home with crisis. It was in that crisis that I was asked to choose between life and death. I opted for what was life-giving, both for our community and for my religious leadership role in the country. The small contribution I had in the reconciliation was like a ripple in the midst of the ocean of the Sri Lankan reality. I believe it has had its effect.

I returned to Philippines in 2015 enriched by my experience of mission in Sri Lanka. I may not have offered a long-lasting solution for my community and for Sri Lanka. But, the process of reconciliation and finding solutions was already generated.

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