

Sinhalese and Tamil Catholics, different paths to reconciliation

Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict has been characterized by the growing distance that separates Sinhalese Buddhists from Tamil Hindus. A look at the Catholic Church of the island nation shows that a similar lack of communication and indifference exists within a community united by religious faith but separated by politics, language and culture.

Bernardo Brown

ON JANUARY 8TH 2011, Rev. Rayappu Joseph, the Catholic Bishop of the Sri Lankan Province of Mannar, testified before the 'Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission' (LLRC) appointed by President Mahinda Rajapaksa after the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. The aim of this commission was to inquire into the origins and consequences of the armed conflict that had confronted the Sri Lankan army and Tamil separatists since 1983. More specifically, the commission was set up to address the period between the years of 2002, when the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE signed a ceasefire brokered by Norway, and 2009, when the army delivered the decisive military blow against the LTTE in the northeastern district of Mullaitivu.

Despite the skepticism with which the commission was received by Tamils in the north and east of the country – and the widespread criticism it received from the international community for its lack of independence to investigate accusations of war crimes – Bishop Joseph and other members of the Catholic clergy offered their depositions in Mannar. Amongst the many grievances expressed by the Tamil population of Sri Lanka, which Bishop Joseph enumerated to the LLRC, he declared that 146,679 people remained unaccounted for from the last stages of the war (during the first half of 2009). This statement incensed the government in Colombo and led the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) of the Sri Lankan Police to pay Bishop Joseph a visit and to question him over his sources of information.

A year later, briefly after the LLRC report was published, Bishop Joseph sent a letter addressed to President Rajapaksa and to the UN Human Rights Council in which he demanded the appointment of an independent investigation as it would be the only reliable approach to seek justice for Sri Lankan Tamils. The letter was endorsed by thirty Catholic priests from the Northern Province. Bishop Joseph wrote, "The LLRC has quite rightly identified abuses by the LTTE and also came up with some positive recommendations that have potential for reconciliation. But it has failed to address critical issues of truth-seeking and accountability, despite strong evidence and testimony presented before it. The record of various domestic bodies whose recommendations successive governments have ignored [...] have made us lose confidence that our concerns will be addressed through the LLRC."

On February 18th 2013, another letter was sent to the President and the UNHRC, this time signed by a staggering 133 members of the clergy, not only Catholics, but also Anglicans and Methodists, as well as 54 Catholic nuns working in different parts of the country. With this new letter, a broad inter-denominational Christian solidarity movement started to take shape and garnered support for Bishop Joseph's demands for justice and accountability. In this strongly worded and widely distributed public appeal, the signatories stated that, "In the last year, those criticizing and challenging the government in peaceful ways, including by engagement with the UN, have been assaulted, questioned, arrested, threatened, discredited and intimidated by government ministers, officials, military and police."

Sinhalese Catholic response

While Bishop Joseph's concern for the humanitarian needs and civil rights of the people of Mannar received the support of many in the country and across the international community, it also generated cautious reactions amongst some Sri Lankan Christians who were anxious to publicly assert their allegiance to the victorious government forces. As Sri Lanka polarized over matters of human rights and terrorism, the ethnic



Above: *Our Lady of the Seas* in Negombo during its annual festival. Photo by author.

conflict continued to reconfigure identities, seeping through religious communities and nurturing antagonisms amongst the Christians of the country. This phenomenon was particularly significant amongst the multi-ethnic Catholic communities, as they are the only religious denomination that cuts across the linguistic and ethnic cleavages of Sri Lanka.

Many Sinhalese-speaking Catholics in the southern parts of the country sided with the Buddhist majority and were staunch supporters of the military push against the LTTE. Even amongst Catholic clergy, many Sinhalese priests were wary of supporting Bishop Joseph and considered that his outspoken stance was detrimental to the future of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka. This lack of solidarity towards clergy in the dioceses of Mannar and Jaffna was even more disquieting considering that many Sinhalese and Tamil members of the clergy had spent long years living and studying side by side at institutions like the National Seminary in Ampitiya.

A Catholic activist in Colombo, whose work focuses on bridging the cultural, linguistic and political gulf that separates Sinhalese and Tamil Catholics, referred to the deep difficulties faced by his project of generating spaces for dialogue. A Sinhalese Catholic himself, who attends a parish in southern Colombo, he said, "Take, for instance, this parish. In the last stages of the war, the local priest would pray at every Sunday mass for the end of the war, for peace, he would even pray for the safety of the soldiers, but he not once mentioned the innocent civilians who were being bombed and displaced from their homes. It shouldn't make a difference, but the people being killed were Catholics just like us, and we wouldn't even pray for them."

The culminating event that alienated Catholics in the north from their Sinhalese counterparts took place in late 2008, when only five bishops agreed to sign a petition for a ceasefire that would last seven days between Christmas and New Year to evacuate civilians from the Vanni, where the Sri Lankan army was engaged in open combat with the retreating LTTE. Two of the signatories were Anglican, so only three Catholic bishops – out of fourteen in the entire country – were willing to petition the government for a ceasefire at Christmas that would play a fundamental humanitarian mission. This was interpreted by Tamil Catholics as a profound lack of compassion and solidarity on the part of Sinhalese Catholic clergy and laity.

In a conversation I had with Bishop Joseph in September 2013, he observed that Catholics in the south had shown very little concern for the plight of Tamil Catholics. The only exception to this situation that he could think of was provided by Sinhalese and Tamil seminarists who developed a genuine concern for the hardships of their brethren from other parts of the country during their years as students. But he also argued that this effort to cross ethnic and linguistic boundaries was not sustained beyond the seminary and as soon as young priests completed their training and were appointed to their own parishes, that compassionate sense of community seemed to disappear.

Ethnicity and religion

That Catholics in the south consider themselves Sinhalese first and Catholics second is a widespread perception that started to take shape after the 1960s, when the historically privileged Catholic communities of Sri Lanka felt pressured to acquiesce to the demands imposed by the rising Sinhalese nationalism. After more than two decades of conflict over the administration of educational resources in independent Sri Lanka, Catholics finally ceded to nationalist pressures and many grew openly critical of Tamil political demands. If Catholics had been able to give up their positions of privilege and adapt to the new reality of the country – the argument went – Tamils should follow suit and find ways to adjust to life in a Sinhala dominated nation. As a Sinhalese Catholic teacher explained, "Catholics in the south do not want to 'strike' the Tamils as hard as the Buddhists do, they are more compassionate, but they will consistently stand on the side of Buddhists. They see themselves much closer to Buddhists than to Tamil Catholics, even though they practice the same religion."

In recent years, sectors of the Catholic Church that have endorsed the work of the government have indeed received a number of material benefits. These are especially concentrated in improved educational facilities and larger financial resources for reconstruction. Rev. Joseph Ponniah – Catholic Bishop of Batticaloa – praised President Rajapaksa as a "bridge builder" during a visit to the town of Vakara for the opening ceremony of the new St. Peter's Church in September 2013. By adopting a less confrontational attitude than Bishop Joseph, his diocese has not only been favored with support from the government but has also been commended for its efforts towards reconciliation. For the inauguration of the new church that was partially built with the labor of army personnel, Bishop Ponniah wrote to President Rajapaksa, "We want to show our gratitude and to honor you by inviting you for the solemn opening of this new Church [...] People of Vakara and my entire diocese will be ever grateful for your generous act."

Adopting a similar approach, the overwhelming majority of Sinhalese Catholics firmly supports the Archbishop of Colombo, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, who cultivates a cordial relationship with President Rajapaksa – allegedly facilitating Catholic alignment with the Sinhalese Buddhist majority of the country. From their perspective, Bishop Joseph does little for the benefit of Catholics, and is only mindful of "the fishermen of Mannar and human rights activists in Colombo."

Those who approve of the Archbishop's stance consider that his proximity with the President is instrumental to avoid the troubles currently faced by other minorities in the country. Recent attacks by radical Buddhist organizations like the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) on Sri Lankan Muslims have had deadly consequences – at least three men were killed in anti-Muslim riots last June in the coastal town of Aluthgama. These episodes have lent credibility to the anxieties of Catholics who cultivate a low profile and seek to further censor the declarations of Catholic activists and the activities of Christian humanitarian NGOs in the north of the country. In early August of this year, some of these fears materialized when a group of monks, followed by several dozen civilians, broke into a meeting of families of the disappeared in Colombo at the Center for Society and Religion (CSR). Although violence was kept at bay, it provided a disquieting reminder of the meager levels of tolerance that prevail in postwar Sri Lanka.

As political discrimination and the stigmatization of minorities have continued to characterize the country since the end of the armed conflict, the hope of peace and reconciliation harbored by many in Sri Lanka after 2009 is still a long way from reality. As a consequence of this lack of visible improvement, religious minorities have not only become increasingly weary of voicing dissent that can bring them unwelcome attention, but now also have strong evidence as to what responses they can expect to actions that attempt to question the government's human rights record.

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