

Sri Lankaâ€™s Reports Prepared After my First Visit

There was a fine Quantas air service from Singapore to Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. I was to spend two weeks there, the pearl of the Orient, in our little autonomous District of Ceylon. I was very happy to get here and have never tried to hide the fact that I am very partial to Ceylon, our men, and our work there. This time, I was more so happy, because I felt that there had been some generous help for our Novitiate. Now, I cannot help thinking that often a happy beginning maketh for a sorrowful ending.

The small District is well-organized in that it already had a little Novitiate, a Juniorate, a small house of studies, and four big schools. I started my visit at the training center at Tudella, Ja-Ela, because it is the heart of the District Our Ladyâ€™s Hermitage. The center is off the main route, north of Colombo, in a very secluded area among the coconut groves and cinnamon plantations. My stay gave me the opportunity to talk to the little group of Novices, to attend a celebration and reception held by the twenty-five juniors, and to show the assembled group the series of color slides on our Blessed Founder. Besides, I made a complete tour of the chicken farm, which had won the first prize the previous year as the best-run poultry farm of the whole island state. It is operated on a highly technical and profitable basis. Two brothers, a German and a Brazilian, who were not allowed to be salaried as teachers because they were foreigners, made more for the District with the chicks and hens than they would have made as fully paid teachers.

Everywhere in Ceylon, as in all other countries I visited, we at once started the new program of prayers, which was welcomed by all. When the new Latin-English text was made available, the changeover was shortly completed.

Marist Stella College in Negombo is our oldest school. We have been here since 1917. There are over 2,000 students in the primary and secondary sections. I was happy to see the completed wing of the secondary school, which had been under construction the previous year. It was my privilege to attend and to preside at an all-day sports meet, held in true Olympic style, where we had a perfectly adapted campus for these games. The sudden rain at the end of the day came late enough in the program not to spoil the meet, and the trophies were handed out in the auditorium.

Wennapuwa is only a short distance from Negombo. The school here, Joseph Vaz College, may be smaller as far as enrollment, but it has an equally imposing building. Here I was on the spot in a way, as I had to preside at the prize-giving day and address the gathering before handing out the prizes. It is something akin to a commencement in the U.S.A., only it ends with an entertainment by the students. The entertainment was particularly interesting as there were one-act plays in Singhalese style and a series of folk dances with very colorful costumes. The Indian and Sodian dances were most attractive, which was a credit to the devoted teacher who made the scenery and prepared both the dances and the music. Music and dancing are a Singhalese tradition.

I did not spend much time at Christ King College, as Brother Director was in the hospital when I went to visit him. When I did get to the school I found it in the hands of two very young Singhalese Brothers who had been holding the fort. I now understand the Directorâ€™s confidence in his men, for these two young Brothers ran this school of 1,000 students with the efficiency of veterans. They were tired at the end of the day, but they nevertheless did an efficient job. It was pleasant to chat and lunch with a community of two.

Bandarawela is our only school off the west coast of the island. It is up in the mountain resort area at some 6,000 feet of altitude. It regularly serves as a rest house during the vacation periods or when a Brother needs the rest. The school is a series of split-level buildings connected together and accommodates 1,000 students. It is different from our other schools in that only some 10 percent of the students are Catholics.

The government in power worried us. Since we were not sure of the political reaction to my visit, I went into hiding. It was good to be able to get away to the Redemptorist Retreat House for a bit of quiet and prayer. Their house is way up in the mountains, away from all civilization. Except for the occasional perpetual help novena pilgrims, we were alone. Before leaving Kandy I also saw the Jesuit Retreat House where our Brothers also go for their retreats. While here I watched the elephants take their daily baths. What I had first thought to be a number of rocks jutting out of the water proved to be elephants letting the swift current refresh their thick carcasses.

Back at Tudella, we organized the blessing and the laying of the cornerstone for the extension to the little Novitiate. Thanks to the help received from many quarters we were able to triple the Novitiate facilities. Here, too, it was a novelty to see the elephants clear the land and carry away large trees, and to see native workers breaking huge stones by hand and then walking barefoot on the piles of crushed stones as if it were a concrete pavement. You try it!

My leaving Ceylon was somewhat sad because of the uneasiness of the political situation. The future was unpredictable. Brothers had suffered much in the past from poverty and hardship, along with the lack of teaching certificates and salary qualifications. The District had worked hard and these two points were being remedied. Lately, the District had been making enough to live, and the studies both religious and secular had been proceeding well for the young Brothers. Now it seemed that more hardship was ahead. The elections of July 20, 1960, brought a new government into power. After less than two months it announced a takeover of the press, the insurance companies, and all the schools. It had even mentioned training centers. We were not sure if they meant religious as well. There seemed to be a definite move against the Catholics. It was also announced that the government would not renew the residence permits of any foreigners. The new regulations definitely would affect us if put into effect. Three of our schools were along the western coast, where most of the people are Catholic fisher folk. We had ten foreign Brothers and twenty-eight Singhalese Brothers in the District, and two young Singhalese Brothers made their first vows on August 15, 1960.

We called a halt to the new Novitiate and waited for the next few months to see if the regulations would go into effect. The people were poor and used to persecution, but they had had more than their share already. Fortunately for us the District was left in the hands of our Singhalese Brothers, and quite capable hands at that. We would continue to get them the help they needed. There is 100 percent perseverance among our native Brothers, and I was sure that the forthcoming trials would find them equal to the sacrifice. The next year, March 2, 1961, marked the 50th anniversary of our coming to Ceylon. The takeover of the schools reminded me of the text, "To him who has, more will be added thereunto; and to him who does not have, even the little which he thinks he has, will be taken away." And there is yet another text, very dear to all Marists, for it is that of our Blessed Founder: "There are difficulties in leading the life of a good religious, but grace makes all things easy. Jesus and Mary will aid you. Besides, remember that life is very short and Eternity will never end." One proof that our Marists in Ceylon would eventually wind up on top is that they have full confidence in Jesus and Mary, and know how to smile. They will ever keep smiling!