

Churches of Colombo

Posted on

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Dominating the geographical scene in the city of Colombo are these hillocks in the northern part of the metropolis and atop these hillocks are three Christian places of worship which constitute prominent features of Colombo's skyline. By a very significant coincidence, this trio of churches represents the three denominations of Christianity that the three European powers which ruled over Sri Lanka in turn introduced when they came here as conquerors.

The Cathedral of St. Lucia, on the hill of Kotahena, is the seat of the Catholic Archbishop of Colombo, representing the religion that the Portuguese, the first of the Western invaders of the maritime provinces of the island, brought with them. On the eminence of Wolwendhal is the church that the Dutch, the second of the invaders built as their premier place of worship. The soaring needle-thin spire of All Saints' Church tops the hillock of Hulftsdorp, symbolizing the Anglican Communion. ·which was the official religion of the British, the third and last of the invaders.

For the hundreds of ships that call at the Port of Colombo, the first sight of the city could very well be the beautiful silvered dome of St. Lucia's with its four attendant cupolas, standing out against the blue sky. The earliest records show that by 1760 there was a small Catholic church at this site, built by the Oratorian missionaries. By the beginning of the 19th Century this building must have been substantial for it had been raised to the status of a cathedral. But by the middle of the century the building was found to be structurally weakening, and the decision was taken to build the present edifice, which last year celebrated the centenary of its consecration. The building itself, with its vaulted nave and magnificent dome, is a significant piece of architecture and is the largest place of Christian worship in Colombo.

The church on Wolvendhal hill was the official site of the Dutch Reformed Church and is an impressive, solid, red-roofed structure first dedicated for worship on the

6th of March, 1757. The original official church of the Dutch was located in the Fort of Colombo, but this building was falling into decay and Dutch Governor Stein Van Gollennesse decided to construct the present church on which work was begun in 1749.

A history on the subject states that the choice of the venue on the hill was probably due to the fact that from the early days of the Dutch occupation of Colombo a small school-room and church had been maintained for the native Christians there, and Wolvendhal had always been regarded as a parish of the Church in Colombo. The hill site, moreover, commanded the finest view of the surrounding area and the sea.

Several Dutch and native families belonging to the Dutch Reformed Communion had their family vaults in this church and the tombstones within have many an interesting story to tell.

All Saints' Church on Hulftsdorp hill also has an interesting history. After the British took over Colombo, the Wolvendhal Church was a centre of worship for both the descendants of the Dutch and Sinhalese Christians belonging to the Anglican Church. But at a meeting of the Sinhalese members of the Church of England, held in 1853, it was decided to build a separate church for themselves. By their own efforts, they raised £1,600 and the Government contributed £1,500. The Government also made a free grant of a plot of land adjoining the present law courts of Hulftsdorp.

The church, which took five years to build, is cruciform with large Gothic “-windows and the style is described as early English. The roof is steep and of commanding height and the spire soars into the sky. The church was consecrated on All Saints' Day, 1865.

Before we leave the north of Colombo, over which these three churches on the hills cast their benevolence, there is one shrine of pilgrimage that must not be missed. This is the Church of St. Anthony of Padua, sitting on the Colombo waterfront and actually jutting into the port, at Kochchikade. Thousands come here, especially on Tuesdays, to plead their cause before the saint known as the miracle-worker. They are of every race and every religion and the fervour exhibited is an extraordinary phenomenon, reminding one of what was said of Lourdes: “To those who believe, no explanation is necessary; to those who don't, no explanation is possible.”

In the heart of the commercial district of Colombo, the Fort, is another place of

Christian worship with much history surrounding it. Sandwiched between Hotel Taprobane and the Police Headquarters, this is the Church of St. Peter. A history of the building states that this church is one of the few buildings, if not the only one, originally intended for a secular purpose that is still being used as a church. It formed part of the residence of the Dutch Governors, in which all council meetings took place. It did not serve the same purpose in early British times but was used as an audience hall on important occasions, and as the scene of merriment when British society needed relaxation. It was not at first the intention of the British to set apart the building for religious services. But the troops stationed in the Fort had to march all the way to Wolvendhal in the north of the city to attend church and so, in 1804, the building was converted for divine service and came to be known as the Garrison Church. The church walls carry a fascinating array of commemorative tablets, among them being those of Sir John D'Oyly, one of the best-known members of the Ceylon Civil Service of British times; William Tolfrey, who translated the scriptures into Sinhalese; Sir William Coke, Puisne Justice, whose tablet is supposed to be Dutch Governor Hulft's tombstone, reversed; and Bishop Heber. A distinguished Ceylonese remembered in stone is Charles Ambrose Lorenz, an early fighter for national independence. St. Peter's also possesses a silver gilt Communion set, large salver and candlesticks, presented by King George III. A church of significance in the eastern part of Colombo is that of All Saints, Borella, which draws large crowds of devotees of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in her appellation of Mother of Perpetual Help, every Wednesday evening. The church is also a very popular venue among Catholics for their weddings. The building carries some fine stained glass and boasts of the only carillon in Colombo, with extremely sweet-sounding bells.

Moving south, we come to the Cathedral of Christ, the living Saviour, the seat of the Anglican Bishop of Colombo. Situated on Baudddhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 7, next to the Bandaranaike International Conference Hall, the building is new and a landmark in its successful attempt to give pride of place to indigenous art and architecture. It replaced Christ Church Cathedral in the north of Colombo, affectionately known in Sinhalese as the "Gal Palliya" (the church of stone) because the entire structure is of granite. The granite used for the foundation came from England, brought as ships' ballast, and the tiles and slates for the roof are also of English origin.

St. Paul's Church, Milagiriya, is the Anglican descendant of an early Portuguese Catholic church that stood somewhere in this area. The name Milagiriya is derived from this old Portuguese church dedicated to Our lady of Miracles. Nearby had been

a well whose water was reputed to possess healing properties – hence the word milagre, meaning miracle.

The first church was built on a big plot of land granted by the Government in 1848 and opened for worship in 1852. As the population of the area grew and with it the Christian congregation, the old building was found inadequate and it was decided to sell a part of the land to obtain funds for a new church. The present structure, in the style of a Greek basilica, and dedicated in 1903, continues the traditions of St. Paul's, of the area of miracles. Among more than a hundred places of Christian worship in and around the metropolitan area of Colombo, these are a few of the shrines with particular religious and historical interest.



St. Anthony's Church at Kochchikade draws many devotees on Tuesdays. (Suresh de Silva}



The spacious interior of St. Lucia's Cathedral, Kotahena.