Jungle Shrine Awaits First Papal Visit: Miracle Church Of Our Lady Of Madhu

Posted on



Far from the madding crowd, set deep in the midst of the Mannar jungle and ringed in wild isolation, a shrine dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mother Mary has been long considered the holiest place of Roman Catholic worship in Sri Lanka. And this month, the Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu becomes once more the sacred tabernacle of faith, as His Holiness Pope Francis sets foot on this hallowed soil, revered by many as the dwelling place of divine presence on Sri Lankan soil.

Words And Photography Manu Gunasena

After arriving in Colombo on January 13th for a brief 48 hour visit, The Pope will celebrate the Holy Eucharist on the 14th morning by canonising Blessed Joseph Vaz, raising the 17th century missionary to Sri Lanka to the level of a saint. This is mainly due to the missionary's valiant efforts to end Dutch persecution of the Roman Catholics in the Madhu area in the north.

Pope Francis will then be flown to the 450 year old sacred Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu, 300km from Colombo. At 3.30pm, he will conduct a special one hour prayer service, 'Marian Prayer' at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of the Rosary. Thereafter, at 4.45pm, he will be flown back to Colombo and is scheduled to depart on the 15th at 9am to the Philippines.

This is the first time a Pope will be gracing the church of Madhu and the third visit of a Pope to the island. The first time a Pope visited Sri Lanka was when Pope Paul VI visited in December 1970. The second visit was in January, 1995 when Pope John Paul II visited to beatify Father Vaz.

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To the one million Roman Catholics of Sri Lanka, the Holy Father will personally be bringing the joy of the Gospels to them, "It becomes," in the words of His Eminence Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, Archbishop of Colombo, "a singular grace and honour to all of us Sri Lankans and a special blessing to us Catholics."

The Pope's visit to Madhu will also mark another milestone in the history of the church. Though shrouded in the mists of time, it is considered to be over 450 years old and its chequered history has been long, arduous and often lashed with the whip of persecution. In the 16th century, Portuguese missionaries acting under the authority of Saint Francis Xavier introduced the Roman Catholic religion to Jaffna.

The newly converted Catholics soon became the subjects of religious persecution by the Jaffna kings, and this was later followed in the Maritime Provinces by persecution by the Dutch invaders there. Roman Catholics soon formed a church in Mantai, a village six miles from Mannar and installed a statue of Our Lady of Good Health in the shrine. This church was in existence in 1583. Yet they were not safe

and were unable to bear the Dutch crackdown.

Far into the night of endless despair had they searched for the star of heaven to free them from the inquisitors' scourge. And when it shone, it was to lead 20 families from Mantai in 1620 on an unknown path in the hope it would take them to the Kandyan Kingdom where they intended to seek refuge. They carried with them the sacred statue, then known as Our Lady of the Rosary.

They braved the dangers of the elephant ridden jungles and had travelled over 30km from Mannar when they chanced upon a hamlet next to an ancient tank. The hamlet was called Marutha-madhu. And an inner voice bade them stop. Though not far removed from the reach of the persecuting Dutch, though still in the middle of the wilderness, fraught with all its many perils, they decided this was the place Providence had prepared for them for the task ahead.

> They come in their thousands, from all walks of life, the old and the young, the sinners and the saintly, the rich and the poor, the healthy and the ill. Many come to pray for health, to seek the succour of the Blessed Mother for a miracle cure to banish even terminal illnesses

Here they would plant the cross of Christ, establish their church on the rock of faith and enshrine the statue of Our Lady of the Rosary as the presiding icon of their worship. Here, their faith would be tested with every bead of rosary prayer; their souls' anguish bared with every brimming tear they would shed, but the Psalms of Praise sung to the Blessed Virgin would see them through to that Elysian field of faith in the morn.

Around the same time 700 Catholics accompanied by seven priests were also fleeing persecution in the north. They sought refuge in the Wanni. Wandering for days on end and not
knowing where the jungle paths led them, they stumbled upon Marutha-madhu. The new settlers, brought together by a common cause, were now determined to forge their future. This foremost miracle of Madhu was not made in heaven but was wrought by the faith and prayer of those on earth.

The statue's origins are lost in the mist of time. But it is thought that the two and a half foot statue was found in the sea off the Mannar shoreline. Made of an unknown

kind of wood, for 450 years, it has weathered the tempests of time and has shown no signs of any decay. As the Father Administrator of the Madhu Church, Rev Father Emilianuspillai, says, “There is no record that the statue has been repainted or touched up. It still bears the original paint. And it seems to belong to the Portuguese period.”

One of the Catholics who arrived was the daughter of a Portuguese captain. Her name was Helena and she married the officer in charge of the nearby custom house belonging to the Kandyan kings in Madhu. She gave leadership to fellow Catholics and built the first church dedicated to Our Lady of Madhu. Even today, one of the names—“Silena-Marutha Madhu” by which the Holy Sanctuary is called, is in grateful remembrance of her pioneering efforts.

With the arrival of the British, the persecutions ceased. An atmosphere to pray freely and practise their faith without fear dawned. Madhu was gradually established as a pilgrimage centre. In 1823, to accommodate more devotees, the church was enlarged and a new mud chapel was built.

Then in 1870, 200 years after the original 20 families fled Mantai, the first stone of the present church was laid by Bishop Bonjean. In 1924, the statue of Our Lady of Madhu was officially crowned by a Papal Legate, Pope Pius XI. The coronation ceremony witnessed two gem studded golden crowns adorning the brow of Mother Mary and the head of Infant Jesus. In 1944 the formal consecration ceremony took place.

The Madhu Church celebrates many feasts. The two most important ones are the Feast of Visitation, which falls on July 2nd and the Feast of Assumption which is held on August 15th, and is also the biggest event in Sri Lanka’s Roman Catholic calendar. It draws hundreds of thousands of the faith from all parts of the island, to this 450-acre Shrine in the Jungle.

They come in their thousands, from all walks of life, the old and the young, the sinners and the saintly, the rich and the poor, the healthy and the ill. Many come to pray for health, to seek the succour of the Blessed Mother for a miracle cure to banish even terminal illnesses; for the Madhu Church is also known for its miraculous healing powers and many are the miracles duly recorded.

At a corner inside the church is a pit containing the blessed soil of Madhu, known as Madhu-man. Many take lumps of this dark soil home, for it is believed that applying

it to the affected areas of the body, will cure the afflicted of their maladies. It is held that not even 100m away from the church, the Blessed Vaz had arrived and planted the cross and blessed the soil. The place is known as Siluy Sumantha Velli and it is from here that the soil is taken and placed in the pit.

