

The First Christmas in Colomob

Maureen Seneviratne reflects on the celebration 485 years ago



Christmas in Sri Lanka, as well as having its deep, religious significance for Christians, is an almost universal festival in the island. Except for brief periods in the 16th century, it has been celebrated here for 485 years. December 25, the day set for celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, became a festive day for Christians in the fourth century. By the time the Portuguese mariners first appeared at the ports of Galle and Colombo in November 1505, it was firmly established as a holy and sacred day in their religio-culture.

It was a violent storm that drove the Portuguese to what is now Colombo harbour. Nine baxeys (small sailing vessels) had set out from Cochin to the Maldives but were caught, mid-sea, in a storm. The leader of the expedition Lourenco de Almeyda, son of the Portuguese Viceroy at Goa, was dismayed and appealed to his chaplain, Father Fra Vicente, "a Religious of St. Francis (of Assisi) and a man of known sanctity." It was Fra Vicente's opinion that God had a purpose "in diverting their course ... God is leading us," he piously claimed, "in another direction for the greater service of God." The Portuguese had come to the East

primarily to trade with the growers and suppliers of the coveted cinnamon and other spices which in those days spelled a fortune for the monopolists. They also believed themselves to be “a nation chosen by God ... to sow the seed (of Christianity) on the most distant lands ... so that His Holy Name might be carried to nations afar off. .. ” (Paul of the Trinity: 1572).

It is natural, therefore, that the heaven-sent opportunity to do business with a king who held the monopoly over the “finest cinnamon in the world.” Upto then the Portuguese, had bought cinnamon from Moors in European ports. They tarried, therefore, in the harbour having sent word to the Viceroy of their happy landing. “In Goa the news gave general contentment and was received with many profane rejoicings as jousts, bull fights and other first thing they did upon arriving in safe harbour in Colombo - a port occupied by oor traders - was to kneel down and give thanks to God for their delivery; for having enabled them to reach the shores of “that most renowned island Taprobane” ... (the Greek name for Lanka).

Upon their arrival, which naturally caused a great stir, Lourenco de Almeyda decided to make the best use of the Divine Dispensation. He sought an embassy with the King of Kotte, Overlord of the Island. Here was a demonstrations; and on the religious side with processions, solemn masses, sermons and other thanksgiving to our Lord, who in this way opened the door for the mastery of a new Kingdom and for a large conquest of so many infidel souls ... ” (V. Perniola S.J. from Queyros).

In Colombo, on the headland called Galbokka, a small chapel was being raised. St. Lawrence, Roman martyr, patron saint of their leader, Don Lourenco, was declared the patron of Colombo. St Lawrence had been roasted to death on a gridiron in pagan Rome. The gridiron, his symbol, was placed in the coat of arm of Colombo, carved on the granite headland. Later it was to appear on Portuguese coins struck in Colombo.

On December 25, 1505, strangers though they were on this tropical shore, the Portuguese celebrated a solemn high mass in the little chapel of St Lawrence to which, according to early writers of their exploits, the Portuguese invited the people of Colombo. The people actually might not have attended the religious service, something new and alien if exotic in their experience. However, in spite of the Moors, they had rendered their assistance in many ways to these new arrivals and shown no hostility, even if the Moors were dismayed - and showed it plainly. “Don Lourenco experienced good treatment, as long as he was there, from the king and from the native Chingalas ... ” (Queyros).

The first Christmas mass m Colombo! Concelebrated by a handful of rugged sailors and their patrician Captain. The mass was said by Fra Vicente, “a virtuous man full of apostolic

zeal. .. ” according to a contemporary description of the Franciscan friar. From descriptions of later Christian festive-celebrations by the Portuguese in Sri Lanka we know they were famed for their outward show of piety. By the time they arrived in Sri Lanka with their Franciscan friars, the cult of St Francis of Assisi - that great saint of simplicity and poverty - prevailed. It was St Francis who had erected the first Crib in his church, using live animals whom he loved so dearly and people whom he called his “beloved sisters and brothers.”

Was a crib placed in the little church of St Lawrence on Colombo’s headland that first Christmas? There is no record of it but the Portuguese - especially Fra Vicente - may not have let the opportunity slip by to introduce the people of Colombo to the Holy Family and the Birth of Jesus Christ in a stable. After the rites and the hymns and the Christmas prayers - the Feast. And this in very real terms. All over Europe Christmas was celebrated with laden tables of food, festive cheer to mellow men’s minds and dispositions, the giving and receiving of presents; music, dancing and singing. Some small part of these traditional festivities must certainly have marked that first Christmas day in Colombo. Had they not already struck the people as being extraordinarily liberal? Had not this “race of people, fair of skin and comely withal, donning jackets and hats of iron ... ” not given them” ... two or three pieces of gold and silver for one fish or one lime ... “?

They would have purchased, with gold and silver, far more than “one fish or one lime” for their Christmas feast! And they had even more than Christ’s birth to celebrate: that Christmas had not the Sinhala Ruler at Kotte treated their embassy with the utmost favour and agreed, “to deliver to them 150 measures of cinnamon, the best found in the island ... then and there delivering the first tribute ... ” (from a letter of King Manoel of Portugal to Pope Julius 11).

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Was a crib placed in the little church of St. Lawrence?

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The coat of arms was carved on the granite headland. (to be seen at Gorden Gardens)

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Did the Portuguese sing and dance before they gathered to partake of their Christmas dinner?