

The Village With The Light Mist

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Reminiscent of the hymn 'On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross', the symbol of salvation stands tall at the Calvary Shrine

Hiniduma, the symbol of salvation stands out from among the trees as a sentinel of triumph.

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As the furious flames of a wild fire engulfed the vegetation upon a picturesque mountain one day, in the Holy Week of 1948, a lone figure gazed at the pitiful sight from below. The birth of a new day with its verdant rays of light pervaded the ravaged site of the mountain; it was heartbreaking for Father Cyril Wickremasinghe.

He surveyed the desolate ground of withered plantation and its sullied earth; a solitary pillar of a burnt tree trunk at the hilltop caught his eye. Like a beacon in the midst of the barrenness of the landscape stood a rugged tree in the shape of a cross, burnt and bruised. Everything else had crumpled; the burnt tree was holding its ground while being torn down by the fire. And, today the site of that lone rugged tree in Hiniduma is drawing multitudes of devout Christians in remembrance of that great day performed thousands of years ago on a cross on the mountain of Calvary.

Hiniduma, 'the village with light mist' is a scenic hamlet at least 50 km from the township of Galle in the southern province and is nothing like the sun-soaked beaches and tourist hub of the southern shoreline. It is in contrast, a quaint village set amidst mountains and lush plantations of tea, rubber and cinnamon. Saint Anne's Church in Hiniduma is situated across the Ging Ganga, flowing at the foot of the once fire-ravaged mountain where the famous Calvary Shrine stands today. Father Cyril Wickremasinghe was the priest in charge of this small church at that time. Inspired by the lone figure atop the mountain that reminded him of the cross of Jesus, Father Cyril, together with a few parishioners had scaled the wrecked mountain to accomplish his mission to transform the site into a place of worship.

The Calvary Shrine in Hiniduma is a much-visited place of pilgrimage among Catholics in Sri

Lanka. It comes alive every year during the holy season of Lent, a time to recollect the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. The pilgrims' journey begins across the river, a journey that takes believers through 12 stations that reminisces Jesus' arduous trek up a steep hill, weighed down by a plank on his shoulder. And, so the climb to Hiniduma is marked with the most important events that Jesus encountered and endured during his journey to face death on a cross. What makes the pilgrimage to the Calvary Shrine in Hiniduma significant is the pious practice of making the 'Way of the Cross' on rugged ground strewn with plenty of rocks and stones.

As we followed the devotees, their religious fervour was passionate and genuine. In spite of the arduousness of the climb, their faces reflected the joy of walking in the light of their Saviour

Thousands of devotees from predominantly Catholic areas of Negombo, Wennappuwa and Chilaw had gathered at the shrine that weekend. Despite the mountains and the mist in the distance, the heat was unbearable and many expected a downpour soon. Undeterred by the circumstances, men and women, some unable to walk, some aided by kith and kin and infants suckling at their mothers' breasts were making the uphill journey to the summit. Led by a priest, the journey was slow as the crowd stopped at intervals where life-sized statues of the main characters in the drama of the crucifixion had been displayed. People sang, praised, lamented and prayed, before proceeding onwards. There were many taking turns to carry a cross along the long trek. As we followed the devotees, their religious fervour was obviously passionate and genuine. In spite of the arduousness of the climb, their faces reflected the joy of walking in the light of their Saviour.

People were ambling their way up to the 12th station of the Cross at the top of the mountain, where today a wooden cross stands in place of the burnt tree trunk. A small open-structure with an altar had been prepared to celebrate Mass. It was about five o'clock in the evening. A thin layer of smoke was fast pervading the skies across the mountains and threatening to obliterate the view of the surroundings. Standing at the foot of the cross atop the mountain, the mist in the distant background was gaining force in the twilight of the day. This however, did not dissuade thousands of pilgrims who had gathered at the summit of the Calvary Shrine from continuing their prayerful veneration of the cross. The celebration of the Mass brought out alleluias and hosannas from people with arms stretched out heavenwards in grateful worship to a man born of flesh, lived and died, so that multitudes may be saved from eternal damnation. From an altitude of over 500 metres, the view of the church across the river resembled a beautiful countryside landscape, a diminutive white

structure soaring immaculately amidst the vastness of the surrounding greenery.

As we made our way down the rugged path, we met small groups of devotees chanting prayers and singing praises, making the upward journey. They seemed unhurried, although the day was turning to dusk. Pilgrims were discouraged from staying on the mountain after 6:30 in the evening and several announcements were being made over the amplifier, requesting people to return to safer ground.

The weariness of the pilgrimage was soon pacified with an ice-cold drink from a nearby booth. Numerous stalls managed by locals had sweets, fruits, juices, ice cream, toys and more and of course there was no scarcity of customers. It was a weekend and it was the season of Lent. According to the Administrator of the Calvary Shrine, generally, nearly 6,000 devotees turn up for the weekend during this special season. Some of them spend the night in the quarters built by the church or hire a nearby house belonging to a villager. Not only is the church equipped to cope with the hordes of people that flock this famous shrine, the villagers too are geared to provide for the many needs of the people, who at Hiniduma are cut-off from key townships.

The end of the Lenten season, brings to a close the 'peak season' for this hallowed ground, that otherwise remains a small church with a membership of just 136 families. As we turned our eyes to the mountain for the last time, the view of that symbol of salvation stood out from among the trees as a sentinel of triumph. After all, this was the image that inspired Father Cyril many years ago.

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