

The relevance of Blessed Joseph Vaz to the evangelization of Asia today

Sua Eccellenza Monsignor Henry D'Souza

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The reunion of Oratorians in Rome is a beautiful occasion to recall Bd. Joseph Vaz, himself an Oratorian of the 17th century.

I would like to talk about this great saint because of the very special missionary thrust for which his life and work offer inspiration.

Bd. Joseph Vaz was born in Goa and became a priest in Goa. He however volunteered to be a missionary in the island of Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon. The island was under severe religious persecution from the Dutch who at that time ruled the country. Catholic priests were forbidden to preach; it would mean imprisonment and even death if they were caught.

Bd. Joseph Vaz went to Ceylon disguised as a laborer. He walked the rural paths through the tea-gardens, searching for Catholics, ministering to their needs, instructing them in the faith, regularizing their marriages, baptizing their children, and celebrating Holy Mass in their homes and villages. He was a veritable apostle for the Sri Lankan Church and he renewed the faith which had been badly affected by the persecution. He also converted over 30,000 persons who revered him and embraced the faith.

It was in 1693 that the Bd. Joseph Vaz worked a miracle of rain during a drought and the King of Kandy offered him protection and freedom to preach the Gospel in the Kingdom of Kandy. He used the missionary method of inculturation. He composed a para-liturgy in Tamil and Sinhala. He educated his servant John to be a priest. John belonged to the Kumbi tribe which at that time was not accepted for priesthood. During a small epidemic in Kandy, the king and other nobles fled; but Bd. Joseph Vaz remained ministering to the dying and abandoned victims for almost 2 years. Bd. Joseph Vaz finally died in 1711 after 23 years of arduous missionary work in Sri Lanka. In 1713 his cause for beatification was started.

If the glories of the altar were denied to this intrepid apostle of the faith for almost 3 centuries, this must be attributed to the colonial mentality of that period. There is little use to lament over the injustice done. Perhaps in God's providence, this millennium is the appropriate time for Bd. Joseph Vaz to emerge as a model of missionary effort in the face of opposition and persecution. Bd. Joseph Vaz was beatified by Pope John Paul II in Sri Lanka when he paid a visit to that island.

There does seem to be a special role for Bd. Joseph Vaz to play at this moment of history.

His life and ministry becomes very relevant. Persecution against Christians in several countries in Asia is being evidenced. During the past 2/3 years Christians in India have

experienced atrocities from fundamentalist forces which have become frequent enough to draw governmental attention. Several times the Christian leaders are told that this is provided by the Christian missionary activities of preaching the Gospel and converting people. Yet freedom to practice, preach and propagate one's faith is enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

Here there is the modern missionary challenge. The unambiguous missionary mandate of "Go, preach the Gospel" is being questioned. At this junctur it gives the Church and its missionaries renewed courage and and zeal to look at the life and work of that pioneer missionary of Sri Lanka, Bd. Joseph Vaz.

He did not hesitate to face any persecution and even risked his life so that Christ might be preached. His commitment to the people was evidenced by having his homeland and dying among his flock in Kandy, far away from his kith and kin. His adaptation of life-style, dressing himself even as a labourer, so that he could be with his flock and his effort for inculturation in those colonial days are outstanding examples for emulation and inspiration.

The involvement of the Oratorians in the Cause of the Bd. Joseph Vaz seems very important.

Bd. Joseph Vaz founded the first Oratorian Congregation in the 3th world. (The Papal Bull confirming the Goa Oratory was sent to India in 1709). Bd. Joseph Vaz had heard of the Portuguese Oratory led by Bartholomew de Quental and after correspondence with the Lisbon Oratory, he sought and obtained affiliation with the Oratory of St. Philip Neri.

Bd. Joseph Vaz has the distinction of founding a missionary Oratory - priests who would be available for frontier missionary work. And in so far as all these priests were natives, the venture is even more creditable when missionary enterprise was linked with colonial expansion.

I am here in Rome to meet the Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints in the hope that he would forward the Sainthood of Bd. Joseph Vaz as a victim of the colonial period. Under any other conditions Bd. Joseph Vaz would long since have received the glories of the altar. Neither his cause nor his devotion was professed during the 2 centuries of colonial rule when the devotion to saints from Europe were eagerly propagated.

Perhaps God has his own plan; he has set the hour and the occasion. At this moment of history in the face of anti-Christian events, the example and zeal of Bd. Joseph Vaz have emerged as inspiring models for emulation by modern missionaries in Asia. May they be so at time the observation is heard about the flagging efforts for proclamation of Jesus and his message. Bd. Joseph Vaz as a native missionary using inculturation as an approach can serve as a role-model, besides assisting the work of evangelization by his powerful intercession.

We are told that an attested miracle is required so that Bd. Joseph Vaz may be canonized. It will be our task to foster a more popular devotion to Bd. Joseph Vaz in all the areas where evangelization is in progress. This is surely the call that is made to us who have been inspired by his life and example. May the Oratorians join in wholeheartedly, is our prayer and appeal.

A petition to canonize Bd. Joseph Vaz even without the miracle has been by Fr. Giorgio Finotti. You are invited to sign the same.

The process of proving miracles is not an easy one made more difficult for the Sri Lanken Church which is under great pastoral stress and with the small funds available in our mission situations. May be the petition will help the Holy Father to dispense with the requirement of a miracle. This too would be our prayer and hope.