

Sri Lanka's "Little Rome" Hosts Asian Bishops

Negombo, Sri Lanka: A sleepy coastal town dotted with churches, coconut trees, lagoons, beaches and fishing boats lived up to its image as Sri Lanka's "Little Rome" by hosting Catholic bishops from across Asia.

The eleventh plenary assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) is currently underway in Negombo, some 40 kilometers north of the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo.

More than 140 cardinals, archbishops and bishops from nearly 40 countries, besides Bishops, priests, lay people including representatives from Funding Partners who are engaged in helping the Asian Church in its Apostolate are meeting in Negombo for a week to seek ways to make Catholic families instrument of the Church's mission of mercy.

Welcoming them at the opening of the plenary on November 29, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka, said, Negombo "is called Little Rome not because majority of its people are Catholics, but it has become a sign of our catholic-ness".

Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians "exist, interact and live in harmony" in Negombo, the Sri Lanka's fourth largest city and the largest in Gampaha district that functions as the administrative capital of the Negombo Division.

The cardinal, who hails from Negombo, noted that the city has never experienced sectarian violence even during years of repeated race riots and civil war.

"No one was hurt here, and no property destroyed. Everyone felt safe here. It is a safe haven for all," the cardinal added.

A major credit for this tranquillity goes to the city's Catholics, who form more than 75 percent of its nearly 150,000 people. Among the others 20 percent are Hindus and Muslims. Buddhists, who are predominant majority in Sri Lanka, are only 5 percent in Negombo.

"The majority Catholic community here has always been protecting all the others who share this town with them," Cardinal Ranjith explained.

Shyami Siresena, a Catholic lay woman from Negombo currently working with the World Bank, says Negombo is not only her birth place, but a cradle of her Catholic formation on peaceful co-existence with the rest of the world.

“My father was a Buddhist, but he was my first catechist and a living witness of Christ,” said the young woman, who is proud to host the “entire Asian Church” in her city with more than 140 bishops and FABC officials from nearly 40 countries.

She said Negombo has been a Catholic fortress from the times of the Portuguese. Several churches in the city date back to colonial times. Shyami said her home town has more than 50 small or big churches now.

The Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Negombo town, Church of the Most Holy Trinity, Church of Our Lady of Remedies, Church of the Holy Spirit and the St. James Church are some prominent churches in and around Negombo that have survived from 16th century.

Leslie Fernando, a former High Court Judge in Sri Lanka who wrote a brief history of the Negombo Catholics, mentions that the Christians suffered persecution under the Dutch rule due to political reasons, but yet “nothing could shatter the faith of Catholics” there.

Under the Dutch colonists, the Catholics in Sri Lanka suffered severe oppression, victimization and humiliation, Fernando says.

Historians say the Dutch for political and sectarian reasons, proscribed Catholic religion, chased away its priests and took over Catholic churches and schools.

“Finally when in 1796, the Dutch handed over the maritime provinces to the British, it was estimated that there were only 14,000 Catholics in Negombo,” Fernando writes.

However, Negombo enjoyed patronage under the British rule and that helped the Catholic faith to flourish and mingle with other religions.

Paintings on the life of Christ by Buddhist artist N.S. Godamanne in St. Mary's Church are examples of the prevailing religious harmony, Siresena says.

According to wikipedia, Negombo is known for its huge and old fishing industry with busy fish markets and sandy beaches. Negombo is the most westernized, vibrant city and it is one of the major tourist destinations in the country.

It is just 10 kilometers from Bandaranaike International Airport, and a popular destination for people who are either starting or ending their Sri Lankan adventure.

“It is like our Jerusalem, the city of peace,” said Cardinal Ranjith who pointed out that Negombo was “the natural choice” when Sri Lanka decided to host the Asian bishops.

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[This feature was prepared by T S Thomas of Matters India (www.mattersindia.com) for FABC Office of Social Communication.]