

Pope Francis in Sri Lanka

On January 14 Pope Francis canonized Joseph Vaz, the first Sri Lankan saint. "Constantly united with the crucified Lord in prayer, he could become for all people a living icon of God's mercy and reconciling love."

01/14/2015

*APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO SRI LANKA
AND THE PHILIPPINES*

(12-19 JANUARY 2015)

HOLY MASS AND CANONIZATION OF BLESSED JOSEPH VAZ

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Galle Face Green, Colombo

Wednesday, 14 January 2015

"All the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God" (Is 52:10)

This is the magnificent prophecy which we heard in today's first reading. Isaiah foretells the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all the ends of the earth. This prophecy has a special meaning for us, as we celebrate the canonization of a great missionary of the Gospel, Saint Joseph Vaz. Like countless other missionaries in the history of the Church, he responded

to the Risen Lord's command to make disciples of every nation (cf. *Mt 28:19*). By his words, but more importantly, by the example of his life, he led the people of this country to the faith which gives us "an inheritance among all God's holy ones" (cf. *Acts 20:32*).

In Saint Joseph we see a powerful sign of God's goodness and love for the people of Sri Lanka. But we also see in him a challenge to persevere in the paths of the Gospel, to grow in holiness ourselves, and to testify to the Gospel message of reconciliation to which he dedicated his life.

A priest of the Oratory in his native Goa, Saint Joseph Vaz came to this country inspired by missionary zeal and a great love of its people. Because of religious persecution, he dressed as a beggar, performing his priestly duties in secret meetings of the faithful, often at night. His efforts

provided spiritual and moral strength to the beleaguered Catholic population. He had a particular desire to serve the ill and suffering. His ministry to the sick was so appreciated by the king during a smallpox epidemic in Kandy that he was allowed greater freedom to minister. From Kandy, he could reach out to other parts of the island. He spent himself in missionary work and died, exhausted, at the age of fifty-nine, revered for his holiness.

Saint Joseph Vaz continues to be an example and a teacher for many reasons, but I would like to focus on three. First, he was an exemplary priest. Here today with us are many priests and religious, both men and women, who, like Joseph Vaz, are consecrated to the service of God and neighbour. I encourage each of you to look to Saint Joseph as a sure guide. He teaches us how to go out to the peripheries, to make Jesus Christ

everywhere known and loved. He is also an example of patient suffering in the cause of the Gospel, of obedience to our superiors, of loving care for the Church of God (cf. *Acts* 20:28). Like ourselves, Saint Joseph Vaz lived in a period of rapid and profound transformation; Catholics were a minority, and often divided within; there was occasional hostility, even persecution, from without. And yet, because he was constantly united with the crucified Lord in prayer, he could become for all people a living icon of God's mercy and reconciling love.

Second, Saint Joseph shows us the importance of transcending religious divisions in the service of peace. His undivided love for God opened him to love for his neighbour; he ministered to those in need, whoever and wherever they were. His example continues to inspire the Church in Sri Lanka today. She gladly

and generously serves all members of society. She makes no distinction of race, creed, tribe, status or religion in the service she provides through her schools, hospitals, clinics, and many other charitable works. All she asks in return is the freedom to carry out this mission. Religious freedom is a fundamental human right. Each individual must be free, alone or in association with others, to seek the truth, and to openly express his or her religious convictions, free from intimidation and external compulsion. As the life of Saint Joseph Vaz teaches us, genuine worship of God bears fruit not in discrimination, hatred and violence, but in respect for the sacredness of life, respect for the dignity and freedom of others, and loving commitment to the welfare of all.

Finally, Saint Joseph gives us an example of missionary zeal. Though he came to Ceylon to minister to the

Catholic community, in his evangelical charity he reached out to everyone. Leaving behind his home, his family, the comfort of his familiar surroundings, he responded to the call to go forth, to speak of Christ wherever he was led. Saint Joseph knew how to offer the truth and the beauty of the Gospel in a multi-religious context, with respect, dedication, perseverance and humility. This is also the way for the followers of Jesus today. We are called to go forth with the same zeal, the same courage, of Saint Joseph, but also with his sensitivity, his reverence for others, his desire to share with them that word of grace (cf. *Acts 20:32*) which has the power to build them up. We are called to be missionary disciples.

Dear brothers and sisters, I pray that, following the example of Saint Joseph Vaz, the Christians of this country may be confirmed in faith

and make an ever greater contribution to peace, justice and reconciliation in Sri Lankan society. This is what Christ asks of you. This is what Saint Joseph teaches you. This is what the Church needs of you. I commend all of you to the prayers of our new saint, so that, in union with the Church throughout the world, you may sing a new song to the Lord and declare his glory to all the ends of the earth. For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised (cf. *Ps 96: 1-4*)! Amen.

INTERRELIGIOUS AND ECUMENICAL GATHERING

Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall, Colombo

Tuesday, 13 January 2015

Dear Friends,

I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this meeting which brings together, among others, the four largest religious communities integral to the life of Sri Lanka: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. I thank you for your presence and for your warm welcome. I also thank those who have offered prayers and blessings, and in a particular way I express my gratitude to Bishop Cletus Chandrasiri Perera and to the Venerable Vigithasiri Niyangoda Thero for their kind words.

I have come to Sri Lanka in the footsteps of my predecessors Popes Paul VI and John Paul II to demonstrate the great love and concern which the Catholic Church has for Sri Lanka. It is a particular grace for me to visit the Catholic community here, to confirm them in their Christian faith, to pray with them and to share their joys and

sufferings. It is equally a grace to be with all of you, men and women of these great religious traditions, who share with us a desire for wisdom, truth and holiness.

At the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church declared her deep and abiding respect for other religions. She stated that she "rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for their manner of life and conduct, their precepts and doctrines" (Nostra Aetate, 2). For my part, I wish to reaffirm the Church's sincere respect for you, your traditions and beliefs.

It is in this spirit of respect that the Catholic Church desires to cooperate with you, and with all people of good will, in seeking the welfare of all Sri Lankans. I hope that my visit will help to encourage and deepen the various forms of interreligious and

ecumenical cooperation which have been undertaken in recent years.

These praiseworthy initiatives have provided opportunities for dialogue, which is essential if we are to know, understand and respect one another. But, as experience has shown, for such dialogue and encounter to be effective, it must be grounded in a full and forthright presentation of our respective convictions. Certainly, such dialogue will accentuate how varied our beliefs, traditions and practices are. But if we are honest in presenting our convictions, we will be able to see more clearly what we hold in common. New avenues will be opened for mutual esteem, cooperation and indeed friendship.

Such positive developments in interreligious and ecumenical relations take on a particular significance and urgency in Sri Lanka. For too many years the men

and women of this country have been victims of civil strife and violence. What is needed now is healing and unity, not further conflict and division. Surely the fostering of healing and unity is a noble task which is incumbent upon all who have at heart the good of the nation, and indeed the whole human family. It is my hope that interreligious and ecumenical cooperation will demonstrate that men and women do not have to forsake their identity, whether ethnic or religious, in order to live in harmony with their brothers and sisters.

How many ways there are for the followers of the different religions to carry out this service! How many are the needs that must be tended to with the healing balm of fraternal solidarity! I think in particular of the material and spiritual needs of the poor, the destitute, those who yearn

for a word of consolation and hope. Here I think too of the many families who continue to mourn the loss of their loved ones.

Above all, at this moment of your nation's history, how many people of good will are seeking to rebuild the moral foundations of society as a whole? May the growing spirit of cooperation between the leaders of the various religious communities find expression in a commitment to put reconciliation among all Sri Lankans at the heart of every effort to renew society and its institutions. For the sake of peace, religious beliefs must never be allowed to be abused in the cause of violence and war. We must be clear and unequivocal in challenging our communities to live fully the tenets of peace and coexistence found in each religion, and to denounce acts of violence when they are committed.

Dear friends, I thank you once again for your generous welcome and your attention. May this fraternal encounter confirm all of us in our efforts to live in harmony and to spread the blessings of peace.

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(01/28/2026)