An account of the Devotion to St. Anthony during the Portuguese and Dutch occupation in Sri Lanka

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Even today his cult is a popular phenomenon in the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka. That there are many church buildings dedicated to St. Anthony all over Sri Lanka clearly indicate the popularity of the saint. The objective of this paper is to comprehend the progress of the devotion to St. Anthony in Sri Lanka during Portuguese and Dutch occupation in 16th-18th centuries, under different temporal and spiritual conquests.

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choice might oblige the Saint not to forget the Portuguese. (p.404)

On another occasion, several decades later, the Portuguese were in grave danger within the enemy territory, "seeing that there was no other recourse, they made an act of contrition, taking St Anthony for a guide; to whom they prayed to save them from utter destruction. As soon as they started, there fell such heavy rain that it gave the foe no room to follow them, though they knew of their departure and meant to kill them, which they attributed to a miracle of the Saint." (Queyroz, p.789)

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It can be perceived that the Portuguese’s devotion to St Anthony is also portrayed in the history of the fortifications in Sri Lanka. The Fort at Galle was originally constructed by the Portuguese at the location of a Franciscan chapel and named it Santa Cruz. Subsequently it was extended to include a watch tower and three bastions. One bastion was named as Sao Antonia is dedicated to St. Anthony. Later this fortress was captured by the Dutch in 1640 and rebuilt with strengthened fortifications around the town.

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Further, a map (1655) gives an image of the Colombo Fort in the Portuguese era. It was fortified by a ring of twelve bastions with intervening ramparts supported by moats, flanked to the east by a lake and to the west
by a boulder. Following the tradition, these twelve bastions were dedicated to saints one of whom St. Anthony.

**Church of St. Anthony in Kotte**

The introduction of Christianity to the kingdom of Kotte coincided with the rule of King Buvenakabhahu (1521-1531) and that of his grandson and successor King Dharmapala (1551-1597). With the death of Buvenakabhahu the newly crowned Dharmapala was converted to Christianity and was baptized as Dom Joao in the year 1557. Several historical records indicate that these new developments prompted the Franciscan missionaries at the time to take unfair political advantage making their conduct at this time quite unreasonable. One such act was the conversion of a Buddhist temple at Kotte into a church (Perniola, PP VI 1989, p.351) and as another testimony they dedicated this to St. Anthony.

In a chapter of his chronicle “Conquista Spiritual Do Oriente” concerning the baptism of Don Joao Dharmapala, Paulo da Trindade, describes “besides the king, they converted and baptized his father and all courtiers, also the queen his wife, who was the daughter of the king of Candia with all the ladies of her court. And since they lacked a church where they could hear the word of God and assist at Mass and other divine services, the servants of God made the famous temple which was there. In this church they taught and they dedicated it to St. Anthony”. (p.51) It is recorded that in 1565 when city of Kotte was abandoned and with the withdrawal of Franciscans, the Portuguese demolished the church. (Perniola, PP VI 1989, p.434)

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When the Franciscans came to Sri Lanka they built a monastery and church in honor of St. Anthony in Colombo. (Perniola, PP VI 1989, p.234) It became the headquarters for their missionary work. This monastery and church has a unique history as it played a significant dogmatic and pedagogical role in the political affairs of the era.

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The Franciscans had more access to the propagation of their faith when Portuguese seized the kingdoms of Kotte in 1597 and Jaffna 1618. It is reported that the Franciscan missionaries built a number of churches in
these two kingdoms which also included some churches named after St. Anthony. These churches were built in villages of Bambarella and Aluthgama in the kingdom of Kotte and of Kachchel in the kingdom of Jaffna. (W. L. Peter, 1994, p.57)

The monastery church of St. Anthony in the fort of Colombo is not mentioned in the Trindade’s list of Franciscans missionary churches since it was in the care of secular clergy. Franciscan accounts of 1599 on the payments for the maintenance of the friars in charge of the native Christians mention another church of St. Anthony built in the village of Panchena (Pallansena) in the kingdom of Kotte. (Perniola, PP VII 2006, p.173) In addition to that the Franciscans correspondences of 1602 regarding the Christian community administration indicate another two churches of St. Anthony in the villages of Caynel (Kammala) and Belliga (Weligama). (Perniola, PP VII 2006, p.221)

Iconography of St. Anthony

Apart from the Franciscan initiation of importing European Catholic icons to Sri Lanka since their arrival, the Society of Jesus also provided an important conduit for European sacred art after founding their permanent mission in 1602. As Gauvin Alexander remarks: “just as their practice in Protestant Europe, the Jesuits placed prints, paintings and sculptures in the vanguard of their global enterprise of conversion and indoctrination.” It is implicit that these forms of art believed to be an effective means of conversion and a practical way of communicating across linguistic barriers. They are now perceived as works of enormous historical artistic signature.

The close observation of lasting “Sinhalese-Portuguese” religious icons in Portugal confirms that after the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, among the saints St. Anthony was the most often portrayed character. Therefore the available collection of ivory statues of St. Anthony can be presented as another material evidence for the profound devotion of St. Anthony in Sri Lanka.

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Statue of St. Anthony at Wahakotte

It is presented by the records belonging to the later period of Portuguese occupation in Sri Lanka that the devotion to St. Anthony did not diminish in spite of the fact that the Dutch had taken over the administration after they had defeated the Portuguese in the middle of 17th century. It is a fact that even though the Dutch promulgated a rule to ban Catholicism in Dutch controlled areas, the devotion to St. Anthony was not getting mitigated among the Catholics in the island. During the time of the massacres by the Dutch, the Catholics fled the Dutch controlled areas searching for refuge under the patronage of King Rajasinghe II (1655-1687) of the Kandyan Kingdom. The village of Wahakotte was one such locality where they sought refuge.
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Ivory statue of St. Anthony
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During the period of the Oratorian Mission when Fr. Joseph Vaz made Kandy the centre of his apostolic work, he gradually won the favour of the King of Kandy, Wimaladharmanaduwa II (1687-1707). With the King’s patronage in his favour, Fr. Vaz spared no time in organizing the largest and most grand celebration of St. Anthony’s feast at the church built by him, consecrated to Our Lady. The most astounding matter in this regard was that the celebrations were held in public, without fear of the oppressors. In his annual letter to Goa, Pedro De Saldanha has written a long and elaborate account of the ceremony. The celebration is said to have been consistent of three “chorulas”; colourful and vibrant processions carrying statues and venerating the saints, a practice popular up to date. They were in honour of Our Lady, St. Anthony and Saints Peter & Paul respectively. It is noted that they were able to hold the celebrations without any disruptions from adverse weather, even though it was rainy season and torrential rains fell throughout the rest of the week. This miracle too he attributes to the great intercessory power of St. Anthony, the ‘wonder- worker’. (Perniola, DP V1, p. 279-80)

King Weera Narendrasinghe (1707-1739) ascended to the throne, following the demise of his father King Wimaladharmanaduwa II in 1706. Like his predecessor, he too provided royal patronage to Vaz and the Catholics of the hill country. Thus devotion to the saint propagated even to the Royal Family. It is recorded that there was installed in the treasury a statue of saint, which the King sort to venerate in times of theft. He is said to have installed the statue at the church of Kandy having understood the extent of its power. (Perniola, DP V11 1983, p.113) The living epitome of faith and devotion towards St. Anthony in Kandy is the magnificent church consecrated to the saint, situated at the heart of the town. The saint also bears the title of Patron of the diocese of Kandy, the only diocese to have its central church devoted to his name.
The “Miracle of Anthony” in Colombo

Towards the end of the Dutch occupation, as the numbers of Catholics kept increasing in Colombo, Jacome Gonzalvez, the Superior of the Oratorians of Ceylon realized the need for a priest permanently residing there. An Oratorian called Anthony from Cochin, volunteered and left for Colombo. According to a popular legend Anthony performed his duties thus for about a year until, the Dutch raided him on a tip off. Anthony escaped, and left for Mutwal which was predominantly a Catholic area.

During this time, sea erosion had narrowed the beach to an extent. The fishermen were anxious for a solution when they met Anthony who was on his way to escape. As a desperate last resort they invited him to offer his prayers to prevent sea erosion. They assured Anthony that should he succeed, they would give him protection from Dutch soldiers. Then Anthony having planted a crucifix in the sand knelt and started praying. While he was praying, the waves began to recede and created a retaining sand bank which formed a dam. The amazed fishermen flocked around him while the Dutch soldiers had to retreat.

St. Anthony’s church and the dawn of religious freedom

The Dutch Governor Willem Maurits Bruyninck’s (1739-1742) appointment was significant as it occurred soon after the “Miracle of Anthony”. His liberal attitude towards the Catholics made him give the plot of land where the “Miracle” took place to Anthony in order to exercise his ministry. It is significant that this was the first time since year 1656 freedom for the Catholics to perform religious activities within the city of Colombo was granted. Anthony built a small chapel in this plot.
Image 10
Miraculous statue of St. Anthony / St. Anthony’s Church, Colombo.
of land and to show his gratitude and dedicated same to his patron saint St. Anthony. Later, this plot of land was officially handed over to the church by the Dutch East India Company on the 20th of January 1790, by deed no. 31 which contains the VOC monogram. The miraculous statue of St. Anthony that is presently reposed in the church is one that had been brought to Sri Lanka from Goa in the year 1822. The work of building a new church was inaugurated in 1834. In the course of time this church developed into a great shrine and today has become the greatest shrine of St. Anthony in Sri Lanka.

> Concluding remarks

The devotion to St. Anthony is a unique religious practice in Portugal and in other countries of Portuguese evangelization. It is understood that being one of Portugal’s own saints, the zeal of his secular and mystical background was much fitted to the different temporal and spiritual discoveries of the Portuguese during their expansions. Equally the Franciscans’ distinct fervor to St. Anthony also can be described in similar way: Firstly, St. Anthony being their first own missionary
saint from their own soil and secondly, he was one of the pioneer missionaries of their own order.

As it was discussed the Portuguese Franciscans played a vital role in the overseas expansions which initiated the conversion of inhabitants to the Catholic faith. In the middle of the 16th century, during which time the Portuguese introduced Catholicism to Sri Lanka, Franciscans were the only missionaries in the country for about sixty years. Even when subsequently missionaries of other orders arrived, they remained the more numerous and the leading missionaries in the country. With this historical background in focus, it is difficult to present appropriate literature regarding the propagation of devotion to St. Anthony by the other religious orders during that period. Thus it is certain that Franciscans were the missionaries who presented and popularized the devotion to St. Anthony in Sri Lanka. Accordingly this practice acquired an illustrated account in the history of Portuguese occupation in Sri Lanka. And it is also evident that the devotion to St Anthony remained deeply rooted among the Catholics in the country even during the period of Dutch occupation.

Thus it is revealed by the writings and the remains which belong to the 16th-18th centuries that St. Anthony became the most popular saint among the inhabitants of the Sri Lanka. Even after 500 years from Portuguese arrival, it can clearly be observed that the devotion to St. Anthony still quietly and surely exists in the country.

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ABSTRACT

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A devoção a santos é uma prática distintiva do Catolicismo, que remonta à época primordial cristã. Consiste em preces, gestos e rituais especiais, e pode ser pública ou privada; esta devoção pretende venerar santos que viveram em alturas muito diferentes. Santo António de Lisboa (1195-1231), português de nascimento, é um alvo popular deste fervor religioso. O seu culto é um fenômeno popular na Igreja Católica. Para além de celebrações regulares no calendário da igreja, as suas imagens estão em muitos altares de oração e são alvo de cultos festivos. Os missionários portugueses introduziram o catolicismo no Sri Lanka em meados do século XVI. Pode, portanto, presumir-se que a devoção a Santo António de Lisboa neste país foi introduzida juntamente com os missionários portugueses. Esta suposição é supor- tada pelas crónicas do período da expansão portuguesa, onde Santo António é identificado como o «Santo de Lisboa» e o «Santo português».

Há muitas igrejas no Sri Lanka contemporâneo dedicadas a Santo António de Lisboa, o que revela claramente a popularidade deste santo no país. Este estudo pretende traçar os factores históricos adaptados para espalhar a devoção a Santo António de Lisboa, no Sri Lanka, durante os séculos XVI e XVII, o período durante o qual os portugueses evangelizaram as Provinças Marítimas do país, e também tentar compreender o progresso da devoção ao longo das diferentes conquistas temporais e espirituais.
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On another occasion, several decades later, the Portuguese were in grave danger within the enemy territory, “seeing that there was no other recourse, they made an act of contrition, taking St Anthony for a guide; to whom they prayed to save them from utter destruction. As soon as they started, there fell such heavy rain that it gave the foe no room to follow them, though they knew of their departure and meant to kill them, which they attributed to a miracle of the Saint.” (Queyroz, p.789)

St. Anthony and Portuguese fortifications

It can be perceived that the Portuguese’s devotion to St Anthony is also portrayed in the history of the fortifications in Sri Lanka. The Fort at Galle was originally constructed by the Portuguese at the location of a Franciscan chapel and named it Santa Cruz. Subsequently it was extended to include a watch tower and three bastions. One bastion was named as Sao Antonio is dedicated to St. Anthony. Later this fortress was captured by the Dutch in 1640 and rebuilt with strengthened fortifications around the town.

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Colombo in 1636
the monastery &
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Apart from the Franciscan initiative of importing European Catholic icons to Sri Lanka since their arrival, the Society of Jesus also provided an important conduit for European sacred art after founding their permanent mission in 1602. As Gauvin Alexander remarks: “just as their practice in Protestant Europe, the Jesuits placed prints, paintings and sculptures in the vanguard of their global enterprise of conversion and indoctrination.” It is implicit that these forms of art believed to be an effective means of conversion and a practical way of communicating across linguistic barriers. They are now perceived as works of enormous historical artistic signature.

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As it was discussed the Portuguese Franciscans played a vital role in the overseas expansions which initiated the conversion of inhabitants to the Catholic faith. In the middle of the 16th century, during which time the Portuguese introduced Catholicism to Sri Lanka, Franciscans were the only missionaries in the country for about sixty years. Even when subsequently missionaries of other orders arrived, they remained the more numerous and the leading missionaries in the country. With this historical background in focus, it is difficult to present appropriate literature regarding the propagation of devotion to St. Anthony by the other religious orders during that period. Thus it is certain that Franciscans were the missionaries who presented and popularized the devotion to St. Anthony in Sri Lanka. Accordingly this practice acquired an illustrated account in the history of Portuguese occupation in Sri Lanka. And it is also evident that the devotion to St Anthony remained deeply rooted among the Catholics in the country even during the period of Dutch occupation.

Thus it is revealed by the writings and the remains which belong to the 16th-18th centuries that St. Anthony became the most popular saint among the inhabitants of the Sri Lanka. Even after 500 years from Portuguese arrival, it can clearly be observed that the devotion to St. Anthony still quietly and surely exists in the country.

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Even today his cult is a popular phenomenon in the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka. That there are many church buildings dedicated to St. Anthony all over Sri Lanka clearly indicates the popularity of the saint. The objective of this paper is to comprehend the progress of the devotion to St. Anthony in Sri Lanka during Portuguese and Dutch occupation in 16th-18th centuries, under different temporal and spiritual conquests.

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According to the records the Portuguese soldiers that set out to conquer Sri Lanka had implicit faith in St. Anthony. The chronicle of Fernão de Queiroz, “The Temporal and spiritual Conquest of Ceylon”, mentions the several incidents which reveal the devotion the Portuguese had for St. Anthony. It is said that in 1564 a military expedition commenced on the eve of 13th June - the saint’s feast day, it consisted of Four companies of Portuguese soldiers, each headed by a captain who bore the name Anthony (Antonio). “...100 Portuguese and some Lascars for the exploit. Lacerda immediately gave up his place at Perea Cota (Kotte) to Antonio Chaimbo de Castro and set out at night, formed into four companies, of which the other Captains were Antonio Dias do. Lomba, Antonio Morro and Antonio Guerreira, because Guedes chose all of the same name. They set out from Cota (Kotte) on the 12th June 1564, the eve of the feast of St. Antony, so that this

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Statue of St. Anthony at Wahakotte

It is presented by the records belonging to the later period of Portuguese occupation in Sri Lanka that the devotion to St. Anthony did not diminish in spite of the fact that the Dutch had taken over the administration after they had defeated the Portuguese in the middle of 17th century. It is a fact that even though the Dutch promulgated a rule to ban Catholicism in Dutch controlled areas, the devotion to St. Anthony was not getting mitigated among the Catholics in the island. During the time of the massacres by the Dutch, the Catholics fled the Dutch controlled areas searching for refuge under the patronage of King Rajasinghe II (1655-1687) of the Kandy Kingdom. The village of Wahakotte was one such locality where they sought refuge.
Image 5
Ivory statue of St. Anthony
Sinhalese-
Portuguese,
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Height 12.5 mm, Mercado de Arte, Portugal
(Source: Pedro Dias, Portugal e Células da Arte, Masfim e Pedranie, p. 256)
A brief description about Wahakotte village is mentioned in the accounts of A. C. Lawrie, who wrote about the island's North central region in his volume, ‘A Gazeteer of the Central Province of Ceylon’. It is mentioned that the only religious icon of the people who came and settled thus was a small statue of St. Anthony. He describes that "They possessed a small image of St. Anthony, for which they have a great devotion and which they worshipped in secret". This statement seems to support the view that the statue of St. Anthony was with the people who settled in Wahakotte before the freedom of worship was given by the Kandyan king. (Fernando n.d. p. 10) There is a popular legend that once the statue was hidden in a boiling pot of rice in order to save it from the Dutch persecutors. This statue can be seen today at St. Anthony’s church in Wahakotte, one of the most popular shrines of St. Anthony in the island.

In times of tribulation and persecution the people of Wahakotte sought St. Anthony’s help. They assembled in secret around the statue to pray and made a “Novena” (9 days of prayer). They carried the statue in
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Devotion to St. Anthony in the Kandyam kingdom

During the period of the Oratorian Mission when Fr. Joseph Vaz made Kandy the centre of his apostolic work, he gradually won the favour of the King of Kandy, Wimaladharmsooriya II (1687-1707). With the King’s patronage in his favour, Fr. Vaz spared no time in organizing the largest and most grand celebration of St. Anthony’s feast at the church built by him, consecrated to Our Lady. The most astounding matter in this regard was that the celebrations were held in public, without fear of the oppressors. In his annual letter to Goa, Pedro De Saldanha has written a long and elaborate account of the ceremony. The celebration is said to have been consistent of three “chorolus”; colourful and vibrant processions carrying statues and venerating the saints, a practice popular up to date. They were in honour of Our Lady, St. Anthony and Saints Peter & Paul respectively. It is noted that they were able to hold the celebrations without any disruptions from adverse weather, even though it was rainy season and torrential rains fell throughout the rest of the week. This miracle too he attributes to the great intercessory power of St. Anthony, the ‘wonder- worker’. (Perniola, DP VI, p. 279-80)

King Weera Narendrasinghe (1707-1739) ascended to the throne, following the demise of his father King Wimaladharmsooriya II in 1706. Like his predecessor, he too provided royal patronage to Vaz and the Catholics of the hill country. Thus devotion to the saint propagated even to the Royal Family. It is recorded that there was installed in the treasury a statue of saint, which the King sort to venerate in times of theft. He is said to have installed the statue at the church of Kandy having understood the extent of its power. (Perniola, DP VI 1983, p.113) The living epitome of faith and devotion towards St. Anthony in Kandy is the magnificent church consecrated to the saint, situated at the heart of the town. The saint also bears the title of Patron of the diocese of Kandy, the only diocese to have its central church devoted to his name.
The “Miracle of Anthony” in Colombo

Towards the end of the Dutch occupation, as the numbers of Catholics kept increasing in Colombo Jacob Gonsalvez, the Superior of the Oratorians of Ceylon realized the need for a priest permanently residing there. An Oratorian called Anthony from Cochin, volunteered and left for Colombo. According to a popular legend Anthony performed his duties thus for about a year until, the Dutch raided him on a tip off. Anthony escaped, and left for Mutwal which was predominantly a Catholic area.

During this time, sea erosion had narrowed the beach to an extent. The fishermen were anxious for a solution when they met Anthony who was on his way to escape. As a desperate last resort they invited him to offer his prayers to prevent sea erosion. They assured Anthony that should he succeed, they would give him protection from Dutch soldiers. Then Anthony having planted a crucifix in the sand knelt and started praying. While he was praying, the waves began to recede and created a retaining sand bank which formed a dam. The amazed fishermen flocked around him while the Dutch soldiers had to retreat.

St. Anthony’s church and the dawn of religious freedom

The Dutch Governor Willem Maurits Bruyninck’s (1739-1742) appointment was significant as it occurred soon after the “Miracle of Anthony”. His liberal attitude towards the Catholics made him to give the plot of land where the “Miracle” took place to Anthony in order to exercise his ministry. It is significant that this was the first time since year 1656 freedom for the Catholics to perform religious activities within the city of Colombo was granted. Anthony built a small chapel in this plot.
Image 10
Miraculous statue of St. Anthony / St. Anthony’s Church, Colombo.
of land and to show his gratitude and dedicated same to his patron saint St. Anthony. Later, this plot of land was officially handed over to the church by the Dutch East India Company on the 20th of January 1790, by deed no. 31 which contains the VOC monogram. The miraculous statue of St. Anthony that is presently reposed in the church is one that had been brought to Sri Lanka from Goa in the year 1822. The work of building a new church was inaugurated in 1834. In the course of time this church developed into a great shrine and today has become the greatest shrine of St. Anthony in Sri Lanka.

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The monastery church of St. Anthony in the fort of Colombo is not mentioned in the Trindade’s list of Franciscans missionary churches since it was in the care of secular clergy. Franciscan accounts of 1599 on the payments for the maintenance of the friars in charge of the native Christians mention another church of St. Anthony built in the village of Palanchena (Pallansena) in the kingdom of Kotte. (Perniola, PP VII 2006, p.173) In addition to that the Franciscans correspondences of 1602 regarding the Christian community administration indicate another two churches of St. Anthony in the villages of Caryn (Kammala) and Bellagao (Weligama). (Perniola, PP VII 2006, p.221)

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procession in times of drought and plagues. A popular legend says that at the turn of century, there was a severe drought in a neighboring village with all lakes dried. Having had recourse to their religious practices, the neighbors requested the Catholics of Wahacotte to invoke help from “their God”. According to folklore, for three days the Catholics community fasted and prayed to St. Anthony. It is said that at the conclusion of these prayers the drought ended with a torrential rain, astonishing and pleasing everyone. (Fernandao n.d. p.11)

Devotion to St. Anthony in the Kandyian kingdom

During the period of the Oratorian Mission when Fr. Joseph Vaz made Kandy the centre of his apostolic work, he gradually won the favour of the King of Kandy, Wimaladharmasooriya II (1687-1707). With the King’s patronage in his favour, Fr. Vaz spared no time in organizing the largest and most grand celebration of St. Anthony’s feast at the church built by him, consecrated to Our Lady. The most astounding matter in this regard was that the celebrations were held in public, without fear of the oppressors. In his annual letter to Goa, Pedro De Saldanha has written a long and elaborate account of the ceremony. The celebration is said to have been consistent of three “chorlas”; colourful and vibrant processions carrying statues and venerating the saints, a practice popular up to date. They were in honour of Our Lady, St. Anthony and Saints Peter & Paul respectively. It is noted that they were able to hold the celebrations without any disruptions from adverse weather, even though it was rainy season and torrential rains fell throughout the rest of the week. This miracle too he attributes to the great intercessory power of St. Anthony, the ‘wonder- worker’. (Perniola, DP VI, p. 279-80)

King Weera Narendrasinghe (1707-1739) ascended to the throne, following the demise of his father King Wimaladharmasooriya II in 1706. Like his predecessor, he too provided royal patronage to Vaz and the Catholics of the hill country. Thus devotion to the saint propagated even to the Royal Family. It is recorded that there was installed in the treasury a statue of saint, which the King sort to venerate in times of theft. He is said to have installed the statue at the church of Kandy having understood the extent of its power. (Perniola, DP VI, 1983, p.113) The living epitome of faith and devotion towards St. Anthony in Kandy is the magnificent church consecrated to the saint, situated at the heart of the town. The saint also bears the title of Patron of the diocese of Kandy, the only diocese to have its central church devoted to his name.
The “Miracle of Anthony” in Colombo

Towards the end of the Dutch occupation, as the numbers of Catholics kept increasing in Colombo Jacome Gonzalvez, the Superior of the Oratorians of Ceylon realized the need for a priest permanently residing there. An Oratorian called Anthony from Cochin, volunteered and left for Colombo. According to a popular legend Anthony performed his duties thus for about a year until, the Dutch raided him on a tip off. Anthony escaped, and left for Mutwal which was predominantly a Catholic area.

During this time, sea erosion had narrowed the beach to an extent. The fishermen were anxious for a solution when they met Anthony who was on his way to escape. As a desperate last resort they invited him to offer his prayers to prevent sea erosion. They assured Anthony that should he succeed, they would give him protection from Dutch soldiers. Then Anthony having planted a crucifix in the sand knelt and started praying. While he was praying, the waves began to recede and created a retaining sand bank which formed a dam. The amazed fishermen flocked around him while the Dutch soldiers had to retreat.

St. Anthony’s church and the dawn of religious freedom

The Dutch Governor Willem Maurits Bruyninck’s (1739-1742) appointment was significant as it occurred soon after the “Miracle of Anthony”. His liberal attitude towards the Catholics made him to give the plot of land where the “Miracle” took place to Anthony in order to exercise his ministry. It is significant that this was the first time since year 1656 freedom for the Catholics to perform religious activities within the city of Colombo was granted. Anthony built a small chapel in this plot.
Image 10
Miraculous statue of St. Anthony / St. Anthony’s Church, Colombo.
of land and to show his gratitude and dedicated same to his patron saint St. Anthony. Later, this plot of land was officially handed over to the church by the Dutch East India Company on the 20th of January 1790, by deed no. 31 which contains the VOC monogram. The miraculous statue of St. Anthony that is presently reposed in the church is one that had been brought to Sri Lanka from Goa in the year 1822. The work of building a new church was inaugurated in 1834. In the course of time this church developed into a great shrine and today has become the greatest shrine of St. Anthony in Sri Lanka.

> **Concluding remarks**

The devotion to St. Anthony is a unique religious practice in Portugal and in other countries of Portuguese evangelization. It is understood that being one of Portugal’s own saints, the zeal of his secular and mystical background was much fitted to the different temporal and spiritual discoveries of the Portuguese during their expansions. Equally the Franciscans’ distinct fervor to St. Anthony also can be described in similar way: Firstly, St. Anthony being their first own missionary
saint from their own soil and secondly, he was one of pioneer missionaries of their own order.

As it was discussed the Portuguese Franciscans played a vital role in the overseas expansions which initiated the conversion of inhabitants to the Catholic faith. In the middle of the 16th century, during which time the Portuguese introduced Catholicism to Sri Lanka, Franciscans were the only missionaries in the country for about sixty years. Even when subsequently missionaries of other orders arrived, they remained the more numerous and the leading missionaries in the country. With this historical background in focus, it is difficult to present appropriate literature regarding the propagation of devotion to St. Anthony by the other religious orders during that period. Thus it is certain that Franciscans were the missionaries who presented and popularized the devotion to St. Anthony in Sri Lanka. Accordingly this practice acquired an illustrated account in the history of Portuguese occupation in Sri Lanka. And it is also evident that the devotion to St Anthony remained deeply rooted among the Catholics in the country even during the period of Dutch occupation.

Thus it is revealed by the writings and the remains which belong to the 16th-18th centuries that St. Anthony became the most popular saint among the inhabitants of the Sri Lanka. Even after 500 years from Portuguese arrival, it can clearly be observed that the devotion to St. Anthony still quietly and surely exists in the country.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


