

Sylvestro-Benedictine Churches in Sri Lanka: As an alternative Tropical Model

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ABSTRACT: The advent of the Benedictine monks of Sylvestrine congregation in Sri Lanka is a historically significant event since it is their first mission extension outside Europe in the mid-19th century. The influx of these Italian monks set the beginning of a new architectural tradition in the country. Therefore, the Sylvestro-Benedictine churches in Sri Lanka can be considered as the original Italian influenced masterpieces. It is observed that these churches mainly follow the unique Italian precedents which were later intermingled with the preceding ecclesiastic architectural traditions of the country. Literature survey on colonial influenced architecture in Sri Lanka reveals that this trajectory of church architecture is scarce; and that no systematic study has yet been done on the subject. Thus, this paper explores the development of Sylvestro-Benedictines church models and its variations, created as a substitute to the tropical Sri Lankan church which shaped Catholic church architecture of the country till the reforms of second Vatican.

1 INTRODUCTION

The church architecture in Sri Lanka had its beginning in the 16th century with the arrival of missionaries of the Portuguese Padroado. Subsequently during the period of Dutch occupation from the mid-17th century to the end of the 18th century the Catholic communities were subject to long persecution by the Dutch. However, during this period Catholicism thrived clandestinely with the help of “Portuguese-modelled”- Goan Oratorian missionaries, who entered incognito to Sri Lanka at the end of 17th century (Jayasinghe, 2016b, p.269). Later, by the beginning of the 19th century with the advent of the British occupation, the Catholic communities of the island were relieved of all restrictions previously imposed on them. “For political reasons the new rulers showed great benevolence towards the Catholic population” (Baracatta, 1995a, p.04). Thereupon, the Roman Catholic mission in Sri Lanka came under new political and social influences. Moreover, throughout the first four decades of the 19th century the Catholic Church went through a period of transition: from days of active persecution into a state of comparative peace (Hyde, 2010, p.12).

At the same time, Rome slowly become more sensitive to the demands of the Catholics but found difficult to meet the demands for European missionaries willing to offer their services for Sri Lankan mission. However, in 1842 the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide) in Rome was able to send the first apostolic missionary Orazio Bettacchini, an Italian Oratorian to Sri Lanka.

It can be noted that Bettacchini was not pleased with the prevailing architectural style of the Sri Lankan church buildings. For instance, in his letter dated 16 September 1844, to Propaganda Fide, he requested an architectural drawing for the church of St. Philip Neri’s in Pettah¹, striking a pessimistic note on the existing Oratorian church, thus “since this church is old, the people want to it rebuilt, but they desire to have a plan from Rome, since the churches here are not artistic.

The church ought to be 80 feet and 30 broad, with three beautiful altars. (...) it should have five doors: three main doors in front and two lateral ones. (...) Everything ought to be symmetrical and artistic” (Perniola, 2012, p.475). This set up an urge for a new architectural trajectory for Sri Lankan church buildings.

2 ADVENT OF SYLVESTRO-BENEDICTINES IN SRI LANKA

With the passage of time, Bettacchini opened up the southern Vicariate of Colomboⁱⁱ to the next fleet of European missionaries, i.e. Italian monks of Sylvestro-Benedictines. The Sylvestrines are a congregation of monks founded in Italy around 1231. Till the end of the 17th century the congregation was confined to central Italy. The 19th century was a very critical period for all religious communities in Europe including the Sylvestro-Benedictines since the Italian society was disturbed by the new liberal values brought about by the French Revolution (Baracatta, 1995a, p.11). During this critical period, their advent in Sri Lanka was a significant since they undertook the pastoral care of the vicariate of Colombo as their first missionary involvement outside Europe. Hence, the first Benedictine monk of Sylvestrine congregation, Maria Bravi set foot in Sri Lanka in 1845. However, at the time of Bravi’s arrival the Sri Lankan Church was not a fertile land for such an initiative. In fact, the Lankan Church had survived 150 years of harsh persecution of Calvinist Dutch through the tireless work of the Oratorians of Goa. Even though their apostolate in the first half of the 19th century did not respond to the increasing demands of the Catholic population, and remained hostile to any interference of outside help (Baracatta, 1995b, p.80). However, at the beginning of second half of 19th century, the administrative jurisdiction of the Catholic Church was shifted certainly from the Portuguese Padroado to Propaganda Fide. In other words, a shift from Portuguese Crown to Vatican Sovereignty.

3 CHURCH ARCHITECTURE IN TRANSITION

The context of church architecture in transition is well attested in the architectural programme of the Church of St. John the Baptist in Mutwalⁱⁱⁱ. The letter of 1846 sent to Pope Gregory XVI by Catholics of Mutwal requesting the financial support for the building of the church, presents a gloomy picture of the progress of construction, as “they have almost completed the brick work and part of the wood work and now are left for want of finances to complete this pious edifice” (Perniola, 1995a, p.115). Conferring to the above letter it can be presumed that the present building had been started before 1846 by the Oratorians, and according to the Sylvestro-Benedictine records it was completed in 1870. Since the construction of the church took many years to complete this building can be presumed as an example of an architectural model forced between two ecclesiastical regimes. Even though the structure, particularly the nave interior is saturated with Italianized architectural motifs and sculptural establishments, the overall architectural dimensions and proportions of the church relate significantly to the characteristics of last decades of Oratorian Church architecture.

3.1 *St. John the Baptist Church in Mutwal*

The nave of the church is oriented in the east west direction. The aisle-less nave is provided with a slightly vaulted ceiling and its lofty arched doors and windows open onto side verandahs with fine colonnades of Dutch architectural character. The verandahs are perceived as a transitional space between indoor and outdoor, in response to many factors mainly the prevention from the direct radiation and diverse effects of the annual monsoons. Next to the main façade is a high choir – built as a timber deck supported on two columns. The clerestory windows of the nave allow more light into the interior while allowing the hot indoor air to be pushed out creating a stack effect. The three arched windows which are used to light the choir floor produce an appealing façade composition. (Jayasinghe, 2016a, p.298).

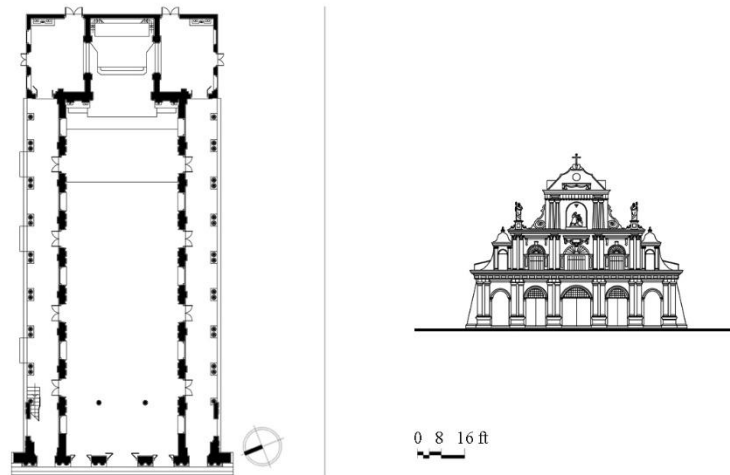


Figure 1. Floor plan and main façade of St. John the Baptist Church, Mutwal

From the typological point of view, the design of the main façade can be characterized as three floors and five spans with the respective five openings: two of them enable the façade to be linked to the side verandahs as they lead directly into them. It is noteworthy to state that the architectural details of the main façade and the sanctuary tended to be more weighted on the aspect of Indo-Portuguese influence on church architecture displaying evident parallel to those of Southern India.

4 THE FIRST CHURCHES OF SYLVESTRO-BENEDICTINES

It is significant that Sylvestro-Benedictines commenced construction of a large number of massive churches in the Vicariate of Colombo during the first two decades of their arrival in Sri Lanka. The historical correspondences of the Sylvestro-Benedictines exchanged between Colombo and Rome reveal that from the beginning of the mission they had commissioned to build the monumental churches, more or less favoring the ecclesiastical architectural models that were in vogue in their ‘mother land’. Baracatta (1995a) quotes “the church in Sri Lanka had begun to think big, and the Italian missionaries went in for monumental churches, in keeping with the magnificent churches of their own land”. Indeed, this architectural approach was appropriate to the prevailing situation of Catholic Church of Sri Lanka. The relief from the persecution against Catholicism and the establishment of several Protestant denominations by the British, encouraged the Catholics of the deep-rooted missions of the southern vicariate to rebuilt their churches in this splendid style as an external manifestation of their faith.

It is apparent that by this time, the religious space of the Roman Catholic Church hitherto occupied by the Oratorians with their decidedly Indo-Portuguese influenced had transformed to an Italian missionary influence, with a distinct preference for Renaissance architectural vocabulary. Two distinct types of spatial characteristics can be seen in first churches of Sylvestro-Benedictines. First type: the church of St. Philip Neri’s in Pettah where the rectangular ground plan was articulated by a broad nave, vestibule (or narthex), two tall square towers at either side of the vestibule and the two lateral chapels at the head of the nave. The second type was developed as a perfect model for the fairly larger churches. The adopted architectural model was characterized a cruciform ground-plan with three-aisled nave and domed transept. The clearest examples of this type include the churches of St. Lucia’s in Kotahena and St. Mary’s in Negombo.

4.1 *St. Philip Neri’s Church, Pettah*

As already mentioned, one of the new European Mission’s ecclesial priorities had been the rebuilding of the old Oratorian church of St. Philip Neri’s at Pettah into a large and beautiful place of worship in a style more appropriate to the capital of the island. However, historical records show that it becomes a reality only under the Sylvestro-Benedictines. Therefore, St. Philip Neri’s Church in Pettah is the first ever church built by Sylvestro-Benedictines in Sri Lanka, and also

served as an important paradigm for latter church builders. The letter sent by Maria Bravi to the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda Fide, on November 26, 1853 requesting an architectural drawing for a new church, gives an idea of the architectural quality of the church he proposed to construct as “Your eminence has assured me that an expert architect will give me a plan for a church. I would wish that he keeps in mind that here churches cannot be built as high as they are built in Italy. (...) I would like the plan to be like that of ancient Basilicas with only two side chapels” (Perniola, 1995b, p.188).

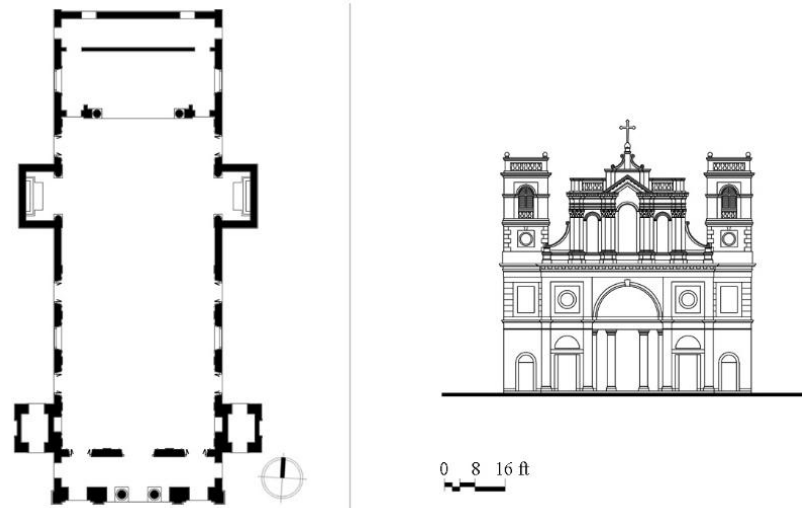


Figure 2. Floor plan and main façade of St. Philip Neri’s Church, Pettah

The spatial organization of the church is mainly comprised of the vestibule, nave, square towers, lateral chapels and an elevated choir above the vestibule. The main portal of the vestibule is formed by a lintel and supported by two simple Doric columns and topped by filled-in semi-circular arch in imitation of a triumphal arch. The elevated choir is lit by two oculus. According to the typological classifications; the main façade is a modulation of three floors and five spans: of which three spans correspond the central nave and other two to the towers. This façade typology would become a common module in later churches.

Although, the original architectural details of the nave interior are well preserved up to date, it seems that particularly, the sanctuary was subject to a major liturgical overhaul under the current ecclesiastical administration. By following the available historical images, it can be supposed that original sanctuary space was a semi-circular form with an ambulatory type path. It is further noticed that the façade and the exterior have been exposed to consequential modifications over many decades.

4.2 *St. Lucia’s Cathedral, Kotahena*

At the time of British occupation Kotahena^{iv} was the headquarters of the Oratorians and the principle Catholic church of Colombo. With the installation of first Vicar Apostolic of Sri Lanka in 1838 the church was elevated to a Cathedral status. Subsequently, after the transformation of the authority from Goanese to European regime the title of “Cathedral” was formally given to the church of St. Lucia, and the St. Lucia’s Cathedral presumably become the first church, outside the old Portuguese dioceses, to be decorated with such honorific title (Baracatta, 1995a, p.40). According to the Sylvestrine chronicles, Hilarion Sillani then Vicar Apostolic begun the construction of the present cathedral in 1872, fitting to new designation. An Italian of the Order of St. Jerome, Stanislaus Tabarrani^v, who was accredited as” a great brain for these kind of things” (Baracatta, 1995a, p.63) and “skilled in the restoration of churches” (Hyde, 2010, p.114). was chosen as the designer and the builder. As a matter of fact, during the regime of Sillani “in the interval of few years many churches were rebuilt” in the vicinity of Kotahena, “as St. Joseph’s at Grandpass, St. Mary’s at Mattakkuliya, St. Andrew’s Mutwal and (...) St. James the Major also at Mutwal” (Baracatta, 1995a, p.63).

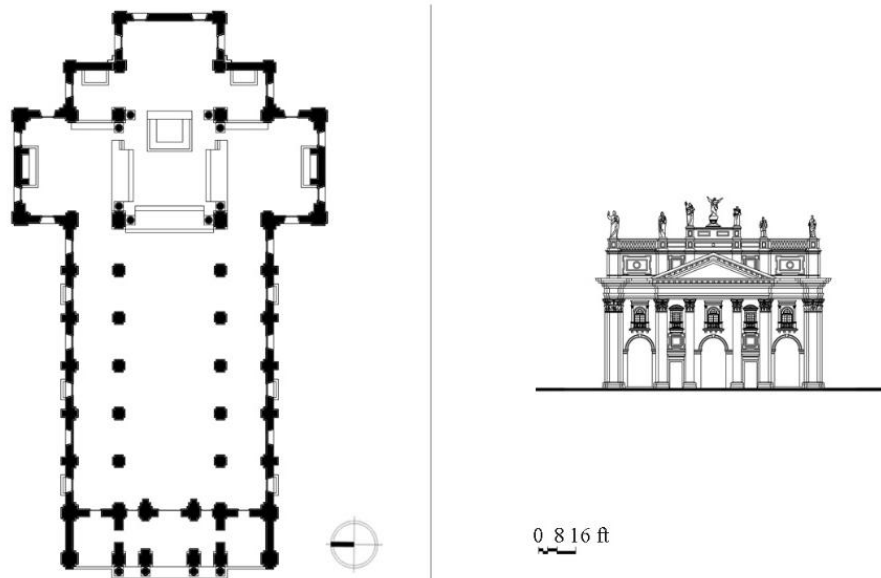


Figure 3. Floor plan and main façade of St. Lucia's Cathedral, Kotahene

Today, the Cathedral of St. Lucia's can be presented as the closest replication of an Italian edifice in the Sylvestro-Benedictine architectural programme. Particularly, the façade of the cathedral was reported in their chronicles as a replica of St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. It is further confirmed by the letter of 11th January 1874, which was written by Sillani to the Sylvestrine Abbot in Rome, as "I began the building of the cathedral. I would be grateful to you if I could have an accurate photo of the façade of St. Peter. Secondly: can you ask Mr. Vincent Petrini how to build the small lantern on top of the dome" (Baracatta, 1995a, p.64).

The floor plan of the cathedral appears as a much simpler and minor version of a traditional cruciform basilica plan in Europe. The spatial organization of the cathedral in Kotahena is mainly consisted by a vestibule, elongated three-aisled nave, domed transept and two lateral chapels. The four large piers in the center of transept mark the crossing which bears the great dome and four surrounding smaller counterparts. Although the number of doors in a façade usually corresponds to the number of aisles inside, it has an additional two small square-top doors at the either sides of the central round-headed door. It seems that the five portals and respective balconies at the vestibule also corresponds to the same exception. In addition, the vestibule features an order of four Corinthian columns which are topped by a triangular pediment. Further the seven statues of saints adorn the balustrade of the façade. Therefore, it can be understood that the builders of St. Lucia's have made an effort to imitate many elements of St Peter's in a smaller scale.

5 SUCCEEDING SYLVESTRO-BENEDICTINE CHURCHES

Subsequently, during the latter phase of Sylvestro-Benedictines mission, the established Italianized models also saw several indigenous and tropical architectural elements being successfully integrated in to their architectural model such as side verandahs and their low roof, (Jayasinghe, 2016a, p.299) viz, it is observed that preceding Oratorian period architectural characteristics were re-emerged in Sylvestro-Benedictine churches as a hybrid form of architecture by means of response to stipulated cultural and environmental factors. This attempt triggered off a renewal that gave rise to a new architectural typology that spread in the country during the rest of the 19th century and so on, till the implementation of Vatican II liturgical reforms in the 1970s. The finest of examples of this attempt were the church of St. Sebastian's in Moratuwa^{vi} and the present Cathedral of St. Mary's in Galle^{vii}.

5.1 *St. Sebastian's Church, Moratuwa*

The present church of St. Sebastian's in Moratuwa is an excellent instance for the Sylvestro-Benedictines adopted building tradition. The builder of the church was the Sylvestro-Benedictine, Bondoni Benedict who is yet remembered as "the Apostle of Moratuwa" (Hyde, 2010, p.84). Although the basic architectural form of the church is reminiscent of St. Philip Neri's in Pettah with its broader nave, vestibule and taller towers, it goes a step further, and efforts to recast the Italian forms to suit the local context.

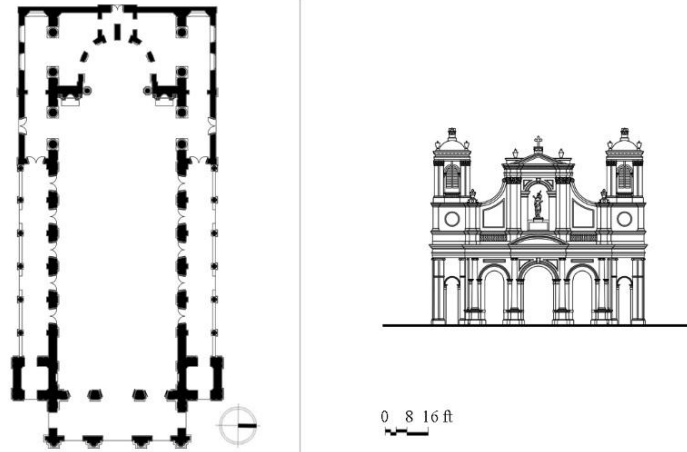


Figure 4. Floor plan and main façade of St. Sebastian's Church, Moratuwa

It is significant that at St. Sebastian's, the preceding linear sequence from vestibule to sanctuary has been altered. The nave is articulated by the integration of two verandahs that run along the length of the side walls between the lateral chapels and the towers. Thereupon it has been made a noteworthy revolution with regard to the entrance to lateral chapels where it can be accessed from the nave, the verandah and from the outside. The integration of two verandahs not only acted as an important part of the processional way but also contributed to integrate the building as a simpler rectangular church form. The sanctuary is semi-circular in plan with an ambulatory path around. This setting may help one to understand how the sanctuary of St. Philip Neri's was originally built. The façade modulation remains as that of St. Philip Neri's.

5.2 *St. Mary's Cathedral, Galle*

The apex of evolution of the Sylvestro-Benedictine architectural programme can be viewed at the St. Mary's in Galle which is an ideal model for tropical church. The church was the aspiration of Martin Benito, a Spanish Benedictine who envisaged it to be an ideal Port Church.

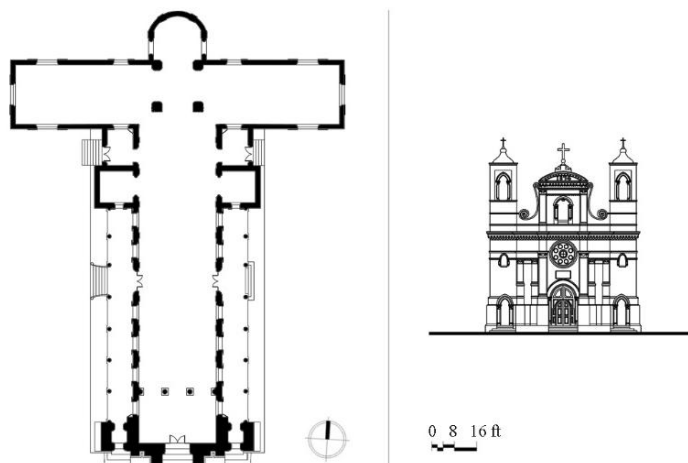


Figure 5. Floor plan and main façade of St. Mary's Cathedral, Galle

The nave of church is again characterized by the two tall square towers and the two lateral chapels at the head of the nave as can be seen at St. Philip Neri's in Pettah. But the sanctuary is incorporated with a large dome. The nave is articulated by two verandahs between the lateral chapels and the towers and thereby acquired spatial advancement. The entrances placed at the tall towers provide the direct access to the side verandahs. Unlike the other Sylvestro-Benedictine churches of the era, the nave door of St. Mary's opens directly to the outside without a vestibule under the elevated choir. The elevated choir is simply supported on two granite columns and is lit by Wagon wheel type large oculus, enabling to create a facade that has a highly-individualized design. In terms of façade modulation, it can be classified as three floors and three spans: of which one correspond the nave and other two to the towers.

The original church was constructed between 1873 -1876 and two transepts have been added in 1911 to accommodate the growing congregation, forming the shape of a typical Latin cross.

6 CONCLUSION

In the context of creating a native expression of the universal Christian faith within the modalities of church architecture, the historical significance of the Sylvestro-Benedictine churches in Sri Lanka needs to be understood within two different settings.

Their first attempt emerged as a replication of Italian precedent. This was an obvious and first-hand solution for the demands of new political and social influences. These encompassed not only the reforms of the British administration but also the changes of values of the local Catholic community subsequent to the freedom from Dutch persecution. The available documents evidenced that at the beginning of Sylvestro-Benedictine mission they have erected a number of monumental churches according to the drawings sent by the Propaganda Fide in Rome. The principal question arising at this point is how much they had owed to the vocabulary and the principles of Italian tradition before the local influences which subsequently appeared in the missionary architecture of the country. This question will remain as a future research topic for a systematic study.

The backdrop for their second attempt was the preceding Oratorian church model of integrated side verandahs. This created a building that is far closer to the oriental outlook and the environmental constraints. Thus, the Sylvestro-Benedictine typology emerged as a hybrid form of architecture made up by integrating Oratorian period architectural characteristics and the contemporary Sylvestro-Benedictine building practices.

In sum, during the very first spell of Sylvestro-Benedictine mission, i.e. the first three decades of second half of the 19th century, religious space of the Roman Catholic Church of Sri Lanka was swiftly, transformed from the universal precedents to local variants. Therefore, the evolution of Sylvestro-Benedictines Church Architecture in Sri Lanka has provoked a significant cross-cultural synthesis which resulted an ideal tropical church model which is closer to the cultural references of the native flock and the universal superiority of Catholic Church.

ⁱ St. Philip Neri's in Pettah was called the prime church of the vicariate as that church was at the centre of the city and was the parish church of the European soldiers and of the aristocracy both European and native. Pettah is literally used to indicate a suburb outside the fort. At present, Colombo's biggest and most congested region and known as Colombo 11

ⁱⁱ In 1834 Sri Lanka was detached from the Diocese of Cochin and constituted into an autonomous Vicariate Apostolic. In 1838 Oratorian Vincent do Rosario was appointed as the first Vicar Apostolic of Sri Lanka and he was succeeded by Oratorian Antonio Caetano who was the last missionary from the Oratory of Goa in 1843. Subsequently, in 1847, Sri Lanka was divided into two Vicariates, the northern Vicariate of Jaffna and southern Vicariate of Colombo

ⁱⁱⁱ Mutwal also known as Modara, is one of the northern suburbs of Colombo. One of the oldest and major missionary centers with a larger number of Catholic inhabitants from Portuguese era and presently known as Colombo 15

^{iv} Kotahena is a northern suburb of Colombo. Most of Catholic populace of the city have been resident therein from Portuguese time and presently known as Colombo 13

^v Tabarrani was also the architect of several other churches, amongst which are the Abbey Church of St. Anthony at Kandy and the chapel of the convent of Good Shepherd at Kotahena. After his return to Italy in

1880, Baldoni Bonfil, specialist for “decorum of the churches”, succeeded Tabarrani in the building of the cathedral

^{vi} Moratuwa is a dense suburb situated 18 km from south of Colombo. One of the oldest missionary centers from the Portuguese time with great Catholic populace

^{vii} Galle is a main city situated 120 km away from Colombo on the southwest coast of Sri Lanka. It is known for its natural harbor and adjacent fortified city which was founded by the Portuguese in 16th century and established mainly by the Dutch and the British subsequently during 17th – 19th centuries

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