

# DWELLINGS OF FAITH

Art & Architecture of the Catholic Churches  
in the Galle Diocese

Sagara Jayasinghe



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## PREFACE

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My involvement in the re-location project of the St. Mary's Convent Matara, which resulted in frequent visits to that area, made me inquisitive of the churches in the region which in turn paved the way to a study of the Art and Architecture of the Churches in the Galle Diocese. I would like to express my appreciation herein to Rt. Rev. Dr. Harold Anthony Perera, Bishop of Galle and Rev. Fr. Charles Hewawasam, Administrator of the Shrine of Our Lady of Matara for guiding me through out the research and providing me with relevant literature and information. The Centenary celebrations of the Shrine of our Lady of Matara that falls in the current year fixed a target for the completion of the book, for it to be launched/released on that day.

The first chapter of this book is on history of the Galle diocese. Though history of the diocese is of little importance to the Art and Architecture of the churches, the outline of the evolution of Christianity could be of interest to the reader. From the Padroado system of the Portuguese era to an independent Vicariate Apostolic thereafter and to an Apostolic Nuncio today the chronological incidents have been gathered in this chapter. The Second and Third Chapters set out the research findings.

The valuable advice given to me by Professor Nimal de Silva and Professor Rohinton Emmanuel both of University of Moratuwa is greatly appreciated.

Bishop Harold Anthony Perera  
Bishop of Galle

*Unless the LORD builds the house,  
In vain do its builders labour  
Unless the LORD guards the city,  
In vain does the guard stay awake*

*It is in vain that you rise early,  
And stay up late, putting off your rest  
Toiling for your hard-earned bread  
For he provides for His loved,  
even when they are asleep*

*Sons are a gift from the LORD,  
The fruit of the womb is a reward,  
Like arrows in the hands of a warrior,  
Are the sons of one's youth*

*Blessed is the man who has filled  
His quiver with arrows of this kind,  
For he will not be put to shame  
When he contends with his foes at the gate*

**Psalm 127**

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View in Galle Harbour during the Monsoon, c.1872  
(Source: REGENERATION / The British Council, 2000)

# HISTORICAL REVIEW

The Portuguese introduced the Catholic church in the island to the Padroado system. Thus, the church came under the ruling of Goa and Cochin for its canonical status, for its jurisdictional powers, and in fact, for its very existence. The King of Portugal supplied labour as well as the resources, for all works carried out in the island including presenting of candidates for Episcopal appointments. The success of this system waned as the Portuguese lost their hold in the East. As a result Rome decided that the diffusion of the Gospel in pagan lands should be taken away from the temporal rulers and put on a surer ecclesiastical footing. Thus on 6th January 1622 the Holy See set up a special department called "The Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith" or the "Propaganda". It was a body coordinating missionary enterprise in heathen lands that were hitherto supervised by the Catholic sovereigns and also countries which had lost their hierarchies after becoming Protestants.

Ceylon was a land once evangelised by the Catholic Portuguese but lost to the heretical Dutch. Thus, it was a heathen land still to be evangelised - an ideal destination for Propaganda. Therefore, Pope Gregory XVI took the first step towards making the island a fully fledged diocese, independent of the Padroado diocese of India by organizing the ecclesiastical constitution of the island making it an independent Vicariate Apostolic. An Indian Oratorian named Vincent Rosario was appointed as its first resident Bishop. A non-European who had worked long in the island, especially in the south, became the first Vicar Apostolic of Ceylon and was duly consecrated Bishop of Tamascene.

The second in succession as the Bishop of Colombo was also an Oratorian, Antonio Gaetano, who was the last missionary from Oratory of Goa. In response to an appeal made for other missionaries, the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and Sylvestro Benedictines obliged to work in the pro-vicariate of Jaffna and in the Vicariate Apostolic of Colombo respectively.

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He initiated the construction of the Mount Calvary at Hiniduma and in 1954 the opening ceremony took place under his purview. He retired in 1963 and died in 1969 at the Van Reeth Home for the Elders, Galle.

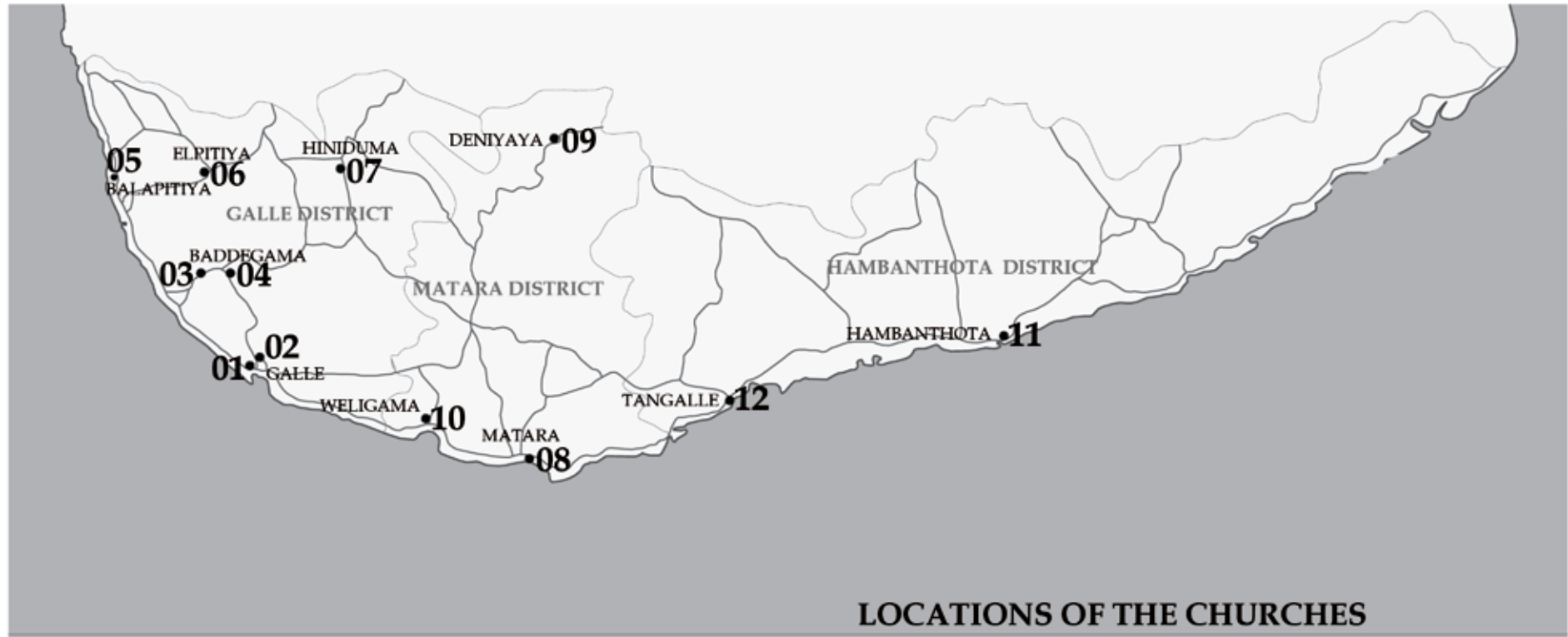
The diocese was handed over to the secular clergy subsequent to the demise of Bishop Laudadio. The first secular Bishop of Galle was Dr. Anthony de Seram who was nominated in 1964 and served the diocese for 18 years till his demise in 1982. He was succeeded by Dr. W. Don Sylvester, a secular cleric who was nominated on 15th October 1982 and consecrated as the Bishop of Galle in Colombo by His Eminence Cardinal Thomas Cooray on 11th December 1982. The new Church of Christ the Healer at Weligama was completed at this time and was solemnly blessed by Bishop Sylvester in August 1985. The construction of the Bridge across the river at Hiniduma was a remarkable venture initiated by Bishop Sylvester. He died after a brief illness on 9th November 1995.

On 6th January 1993 Dr. Elmo Joseph Perera, yet another secular was consecrated in Rome by his Holiness Pope John Paul II and nominated auxiliary to the Bishop of Galle. He was appointed as the Bishop of Galle on the 1st January 1995. During the tenure of Bishop Elmo Perera, the diocese of Ratnapura was established in November 1995 covering the administrative districts of Kegalle and Ratnapura which were originally within the Galle diocese. Thus, the diocese of Galle was limited to the districts of Galle, Matara and Hambantota. Bishop Elmo Perera resigned on the 11th October 2004.

The Galle diocese was affected by the raging Tsunami waves which devastated the coastal belt on 26th December 2004. Shrine of Our Lady of Matara was greatly damaged. The statue of Virgin Mary was lost among the raging ocean waves and a number of devotees who were present at the communion rite in the Eucharist at the time the waves struck were drowned. On 15th February 2005, the Bishop of Ratnapura, Rt. Rev. Dr. Harold Anthony Perera was transferred to the See of Galle, and on the 8th March 2005 he was consecrated in Galle by His Excellency Mgr. Mario Zenari Apostolic Nuncio in Sri Lanka. The first and foremost task entrusted on him was the rehabilitation of the Tsunami affected in the diocese.



# CHURCHES IN THE DIOCESE



## LOCATIONS OF THE CHURCHES

01. St. Mary's Cathedral, Galle
02. Church of Francis Xavier, Kalegana
03. Church of Our Lady of Lourdes, Halpathota
04. St. Anthony's Church, Ganegama
05. Church of Immaculate Conception, Balapitiya
06. Sacred Heart Church, Elpitiya
07. St. Anne's Church, Hiniduma
08. Shrine of Our Lady of Matara, Matara
09. St. Joseph's Church, Deniyaya
10. Church of Christ the Healer, Weligama.
11. Church of Our Lady of Sorrows, Hambantota
12. Church of St. Francis of Assisi, Tangalle



Inside of the dome above the altar of the Cathedral



Stained glass of St. Benedict – made in the namesake of Fr. Don Benedict Martin and is the only stained glass figure window in the Cathedral



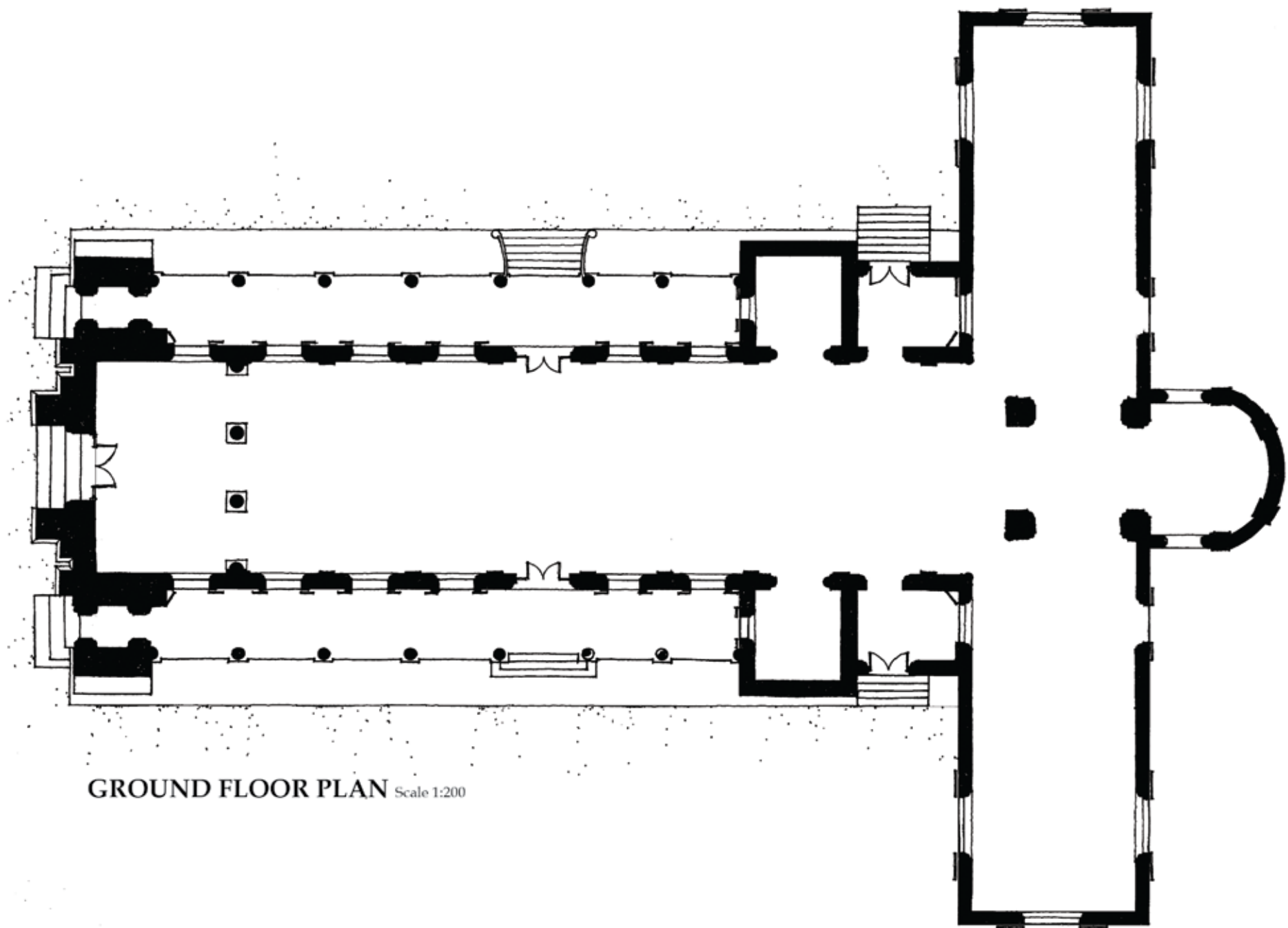
Notation of dedication and blessing incised in the façade

## ST. MARY'S CATHEDRAL GALLE

As far back as 1621 in Galle historically there is a record of a Jesuit school being run for the children of the Portuguese settlers in the Fort of Galle. This is the first instance of reference to a church in the Galle Fort. With the advent of the Dutch the school ceased to exist in 1640.

A church was constructed during the Dutch rule at the premises where the present Cathedral is today. The same was also used as the school hall in keeping with the prevailing customs in early times. A map of Galle during 1795 shows a small church, the church of the Holy Rosary, the first ever to be built on Mount Calvary which is a Christian rendering of Poraka Kande or Gibbet Hill of Dutch times. Frs. Emiliano Miliani, (OSB. M. Ap) and Rev R. M. Fornelli (M. Ap) were in charge of this little church. Fr. Emiliano set off with the construction of the Sanctuary of a new church but could not complete it. The present Cathedral was later erected on this foundation.

St. Mary's Cathedral was the aspiration of Priest Don Benedict Martin (OSB). In 1852 while on a journey by ship to Perth, he observed the hillock 'Mount Calvary' a prominent elevation and visualized it to be a Port Church. Later Fr. Don Benedict during his tenure as the resident priest of Galle he initiated the construction of the church. Thus in 1873 the foundation was laid and in 1874 work begun. The blessing of this church was fixed for the feast of the dedication of the Basilica of SS Peter and Paul on 18th January 1876. The Sylvestrine Vicar Apostolic of Colombo Mgr. Hillarian Sillani (O.S.B.) performed the rites of solemn blessing and Fr. Dom Phillip Direckeze (O.S.B.) said the first mass of the church.



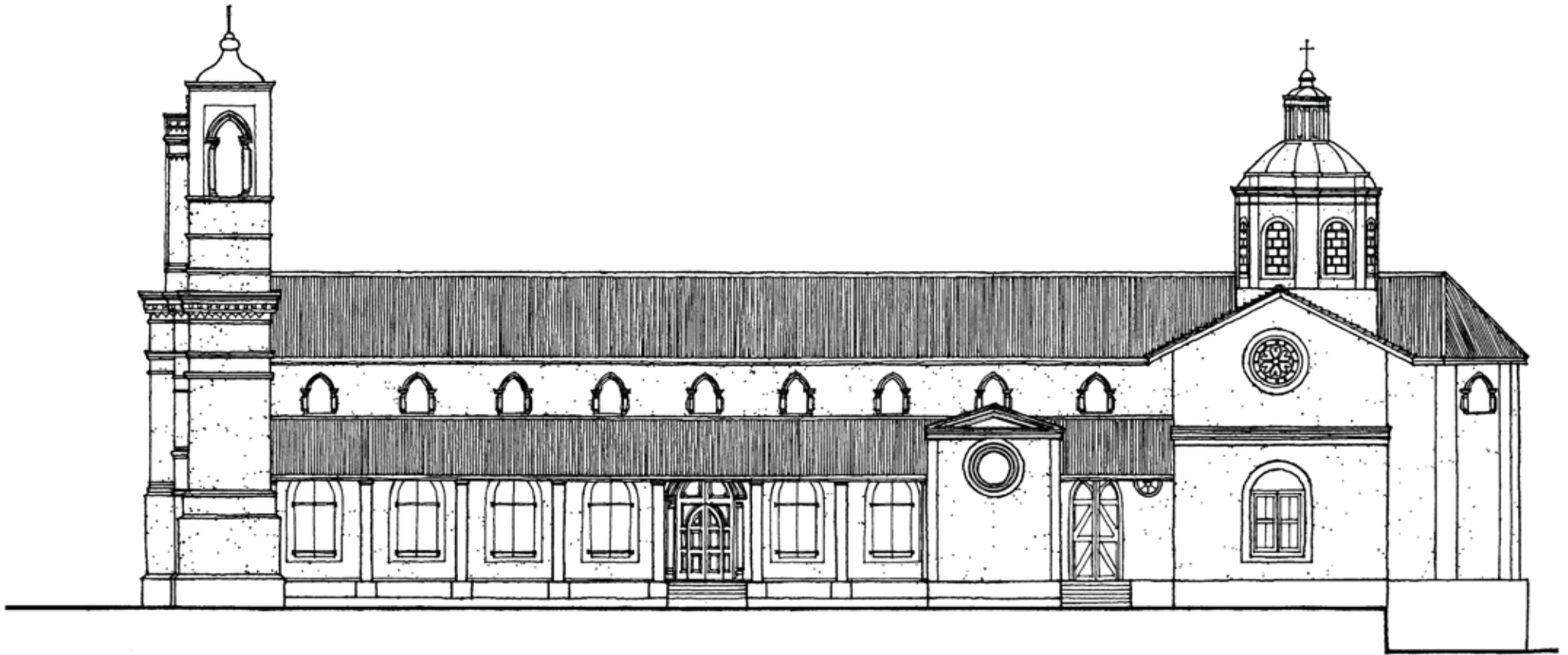
GROUND FLOOR PLAN Scale 1:200



The Cathedral today



FACADE ELEVATION Scale 1:200



SIDE ELEVATION Scale 1:200



The ornate facade with a series of Corinthian columns





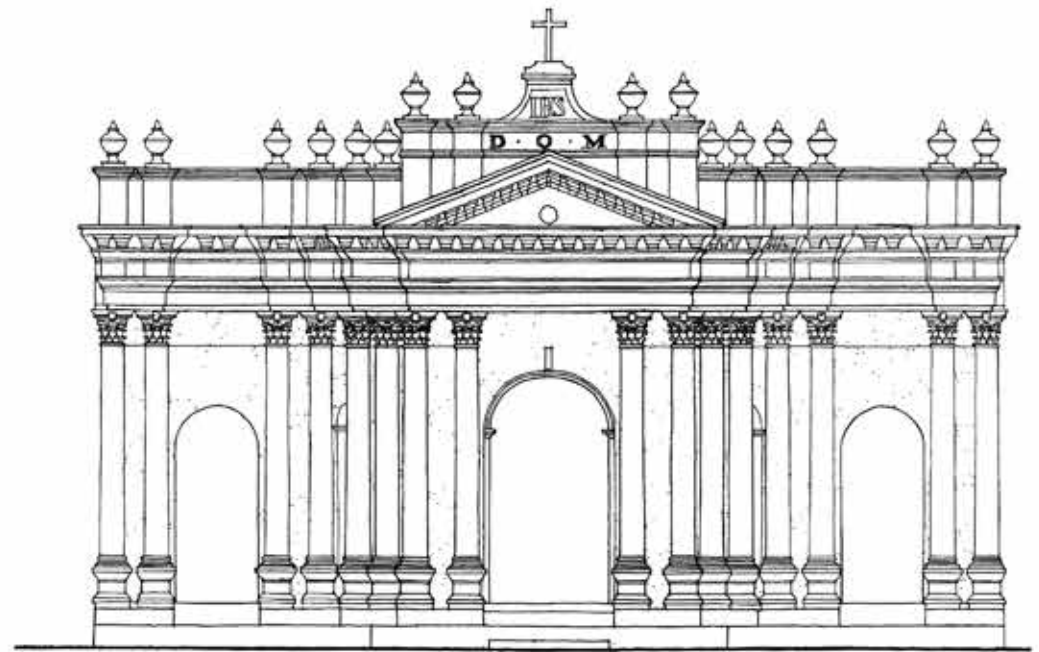
Statue St. Francis Xavier

## CHURCH OF FRANCIS XAVIER KALEGANA

Situated in the village of Kalegena, two miles north of Galle is the oldest church structure that exists in the diocese. The foundation stone of the church was laid by Bishop J. M. Bravi, Vicar Apostolic of the Western and Southern Province of Ceylon, during his pastoral visitation in 1858. At this time Fr. C. J. B. Fernando (OSB), the first Ceylonese priest in Galle, was in charge of the mission. In one of the writings of Fr. Fernando forwarded to Propaganda on 3rd December 1859, he very gladly reminisces that *"The new church in honour of St. Francis Xavier which I began to build in June last year, is happily nearing completion."*

Its plan is Latin cross shaped with a semi circular apse and an unusually curved frontage. The façade is enriched with a series of Corinthian columns and pilasters in gracious proportions making it the richest architectural masterpiece in the area.

According to Missionary appointments made by Bishop J. M. Bravi in 1866, Fr. E. Milliani was assigned to be in charge of the churches in Galle, Matara, Kalegana and Hambantota. It is believed that Fr. Milliani set the foundation stone to the present St. Mary's Cathedral at Galle while he was stationed at Kalegana.



FRONT ELEVATION





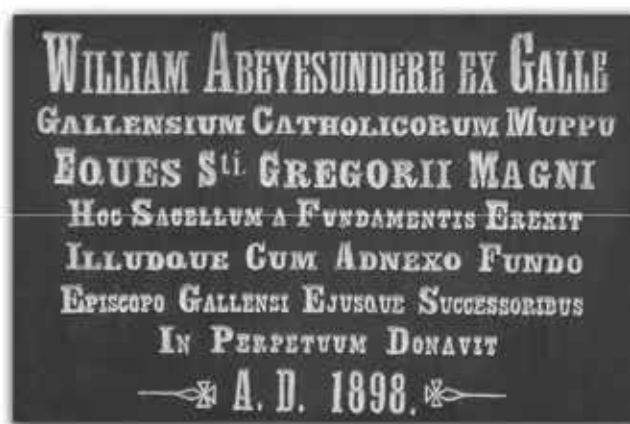
Aisle through archway of transept

## CHURCH OF OUR LADY OF LOURDES HALPATHOTA

Another location where it could be said that God himself exists lies on the way in between Hikkaduwa and Baddegama. Halpotota, a village situated twelve miles to the north of Galle. Mr. Abeyesundera who possessed a large estate at Halpatota, had built a church dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes on a hill in his estate. Mr. William Abeyesundera was an outstanding citizen of Galle. He was the pride of the Catholics and a munificent of the Church of Galle, of which he was the Muppu.

On May 8th, 1898 Bishop Van Reeth, Bishop of Galle, performed the rites of solemn blessing of the church and Bishop Pagnani (O.S.B.), Bishop of Kandy celebrated Pontifical High Mass together with a vast concourse of people. At the foot of this hill, close to a fountain, Mr. William Abeyesundera has erected a grotto adorned with a statue of Lady of Lourdes. And all this was donated, together with a not inconsiderable part of the estate, to the Bishop of Galle. Although at the outset the church had been dependent on the parish of Ganegama. A resident priest had been allocated from the year 1907.

The magnificent façade of the church was designed in the Romanesque style. It is remarkable for its graceful proportions. The statues of the four evangelists; Matthew, Mark, Luke and John positioned at the top of the façade is unique to the area. The mono axial plan form is evident only at the nave and towards the altar as the additional Presbytery area that has been added making total the structure in-symmetrical.



Inscription set in the facade



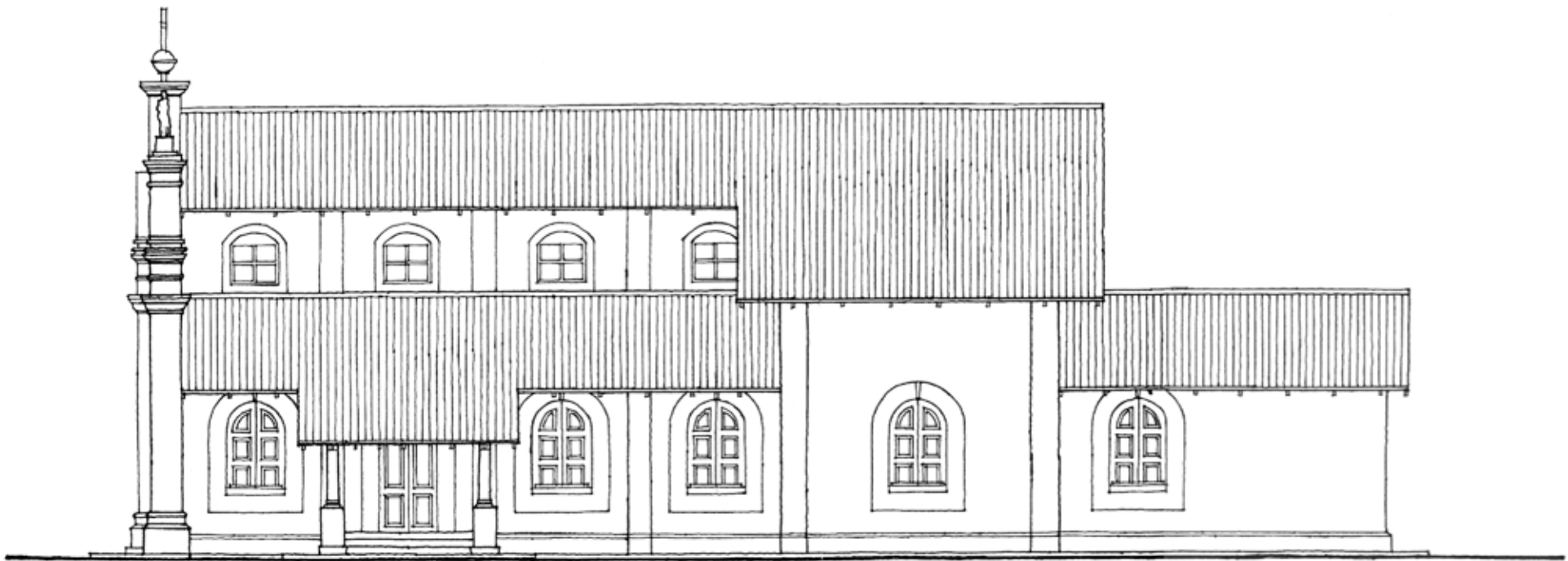
View across the church through the arches



**Palanquin**

A timber structure used to carry the statue in the procession of the annual feast. This is usually carried on the shoulders of devotees who take turns in doing so.





**SIDE ELEVATION**

Scale 1:125



## SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF MATARA MATARA

The salty breeze moves across. Tall trees toss their heads.  
Carefree waves chuckle.....  
The thrilling atmosphere makes us silent.

According to the available records the history of the church founded by the priests of the Belgian Province of the Society of Jesus goes back to 1600 AD. In 1906, the population in Matara was 24 000 and about 400 were Catholics. The church was not spacious to accommodate all the faithful. Therefore a decision was made to rebuild this church. The Rear boundary of church demarcates St. Servatius' College and on either side, by St. Mary's Convent and its primary section. The architects behind the construction of the church were Bishop Joseph Van Reeth and Father Adolf Closset.

On August, 04th in 1907 the Vicar General solemnly blessed the new and spacious church while on the previous day he blessed the new chapel in the cemetery built by one of the Catholics in memory of his wife. A Parish house for the missionary had already been built by then.

In 1911 two dramatic altars had been erected, one in honor of Blessed Mary Virgin donated by a leading Catholic, in memory his late wife, and the other in honour of the Sacred Heart, donated by all the Catholics in memory of Fr. Antwerpen. As part of the church history, in 1912 the church was enriched in several ways. A new set of the Stations of the Cross were added, the new main altar was redesigned ,with a small but beautiful crib, and two kerosene lamps were installed. In the same year the statue of the Virgin Mary venerated at Matara with great devotion for several centuries, had returned to its origin positions after a mission of travelling to Ghent in Belgium to be renovated and repainted.



Rev. Fr. Adolf Closset  
The founder of the Church



## STAINED GLASS

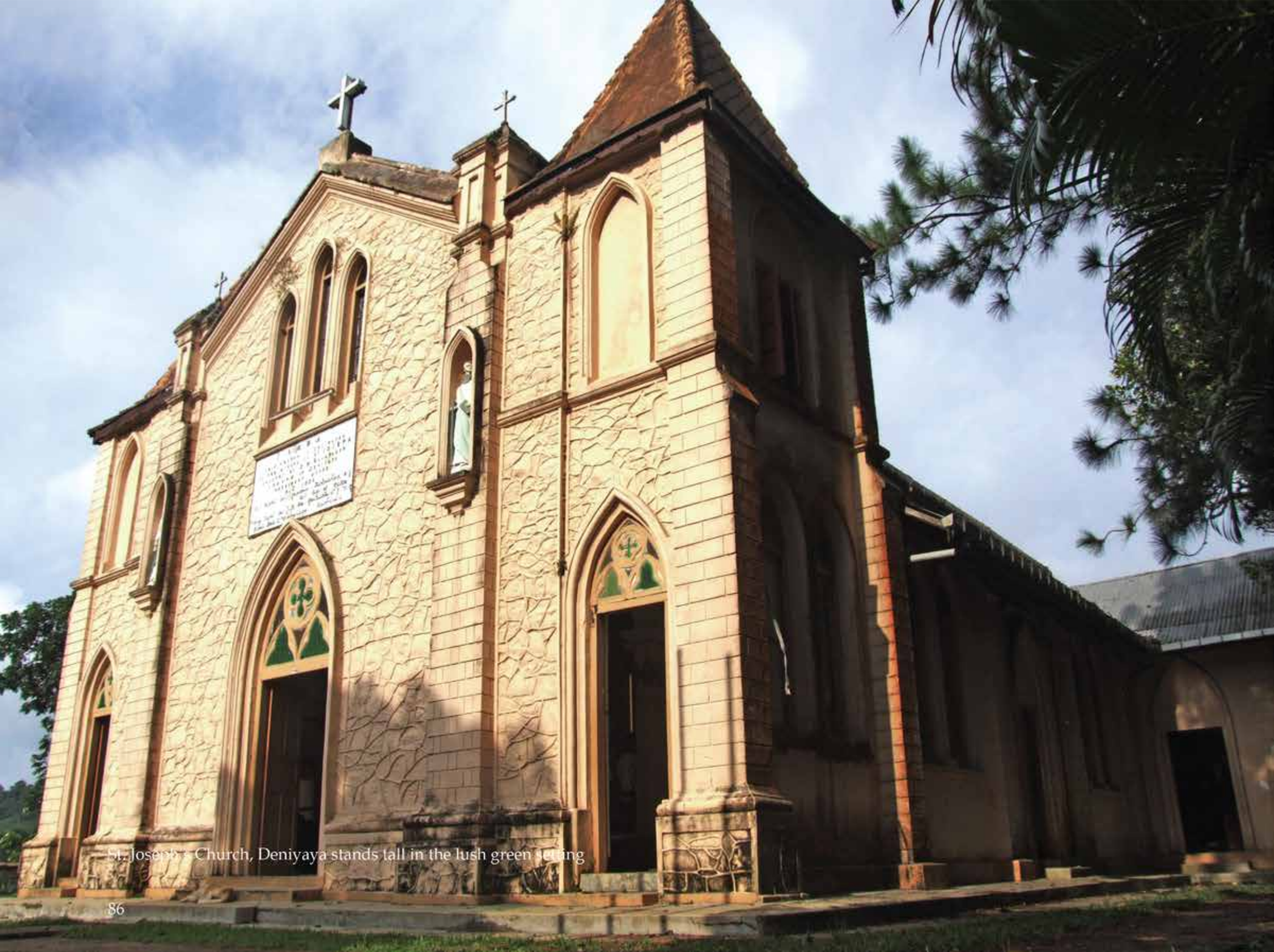
In memory of deceased members, a catholic family had donated ten numbers stained glass windows representing the patron saints of those. These had been the work of the house of Osterrah of Tilff, in Belgium.





**FRONT ELEVATION**

Scale 1:125



St. Joseph's Church, Deniyaya stands tall in the lush green setting

## ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH DENIYAYA

The smell of eucalyptus fills the air. The silhouette of Sinaharaja mountain provides a dramatic background. The surrounding green disciplines us a little more. Dew drops refresh soul. A gravel pathway leads to a tiny old glory on top of the hillock. Majesty is governing. Thy soul kneels down unconsciously.

The history of the church begins in 1923. Rev. Fr. G. Van Austen (S.J.), the parish priest of Sacred Heart church, Elpitiya who was committed to the wellbeing of the Catholics of Deniyaya realized the necessity of a church for Deniyaya. Finding a piece of land was an obstacle. God exists everywhere and his blessings provide the most suitable place for his existence. Don Mathew Rajapakse volunteered to grant one of his properties' for the purpose and the dream was realized together with the help of all other Catholics in Deniyaya.

A small altar in Gunathilake's bungalow was sufficient to accommodate all the faithful until the construction of a new church concluded. It is interesting to identify and appreciate the grandeur architecture created by Rev. Bro. Verbrugge (S.J.) and Mr. Aloysius, who himself worked as a mason for a long period of time. On 24th February, 1924 the church was solemnly blessed and dedicated in honour of St. Joseph.

In 1933 Deniyaya was separated as a mission by Bishop Guston Robichez (S.J.) the Administrator Apostolic of the Diocese and Rev. Fr. G. Van Austen (S.J.) was the first resident priest.



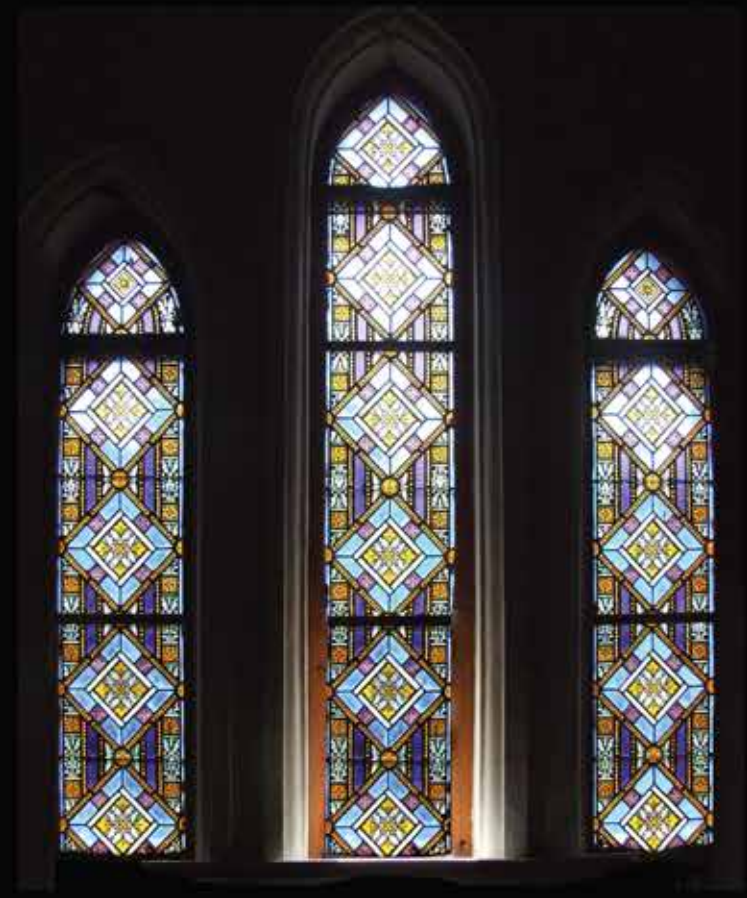
Dedication and Notation of gratitude set in the facade



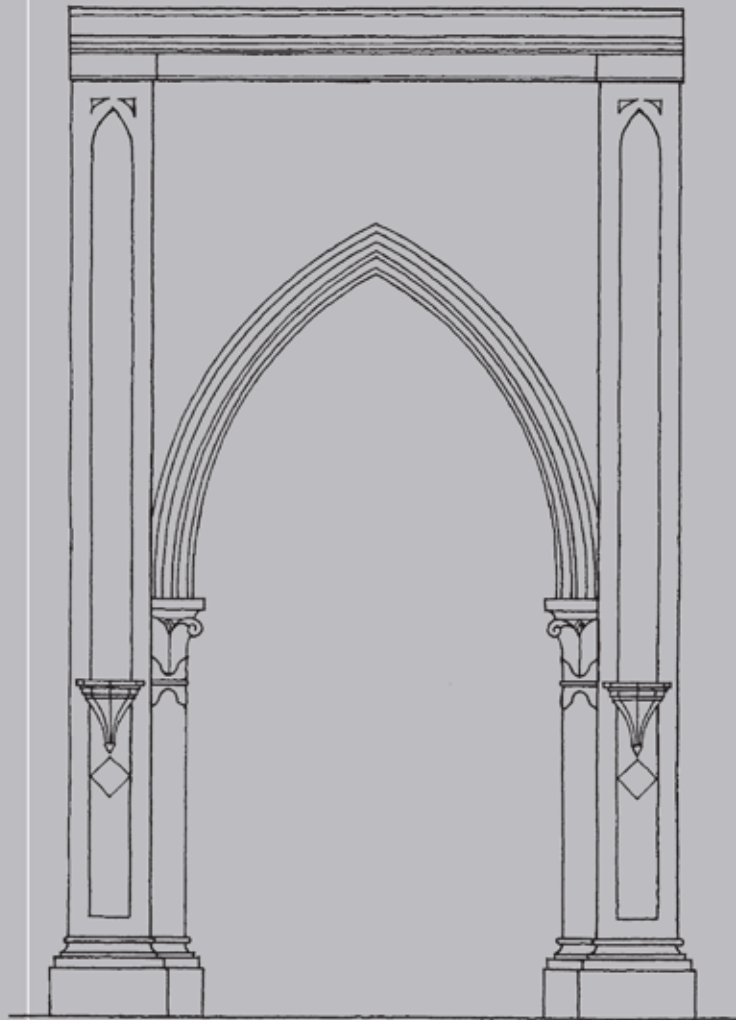
Stained glass of St. Matthew positioned in one of the transepts

The church is a classical example of the cruciform plan and has the shape of the traditional Latin cross. The square towers on either side and triangular traliante at the centre of the facade emphasis the quality of dominance.

Among the different architectural styles adopted in the church architecture is the flat tiled roof of both towers expressing the locality. The gothic style "three - light" stained glass window above the main door of the church expresses the "Trinitarian concept" of the traditional church architecture. The pointed gothic - style arches inlaid with beautiful mouldings and magnificent stained glass windows have contributed to a fine interior.

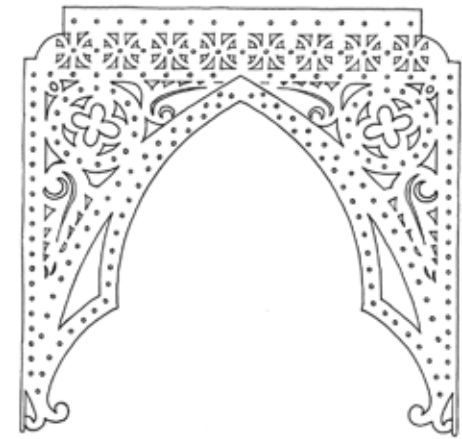


The gothic style "three - light" stained glass window above the main door.

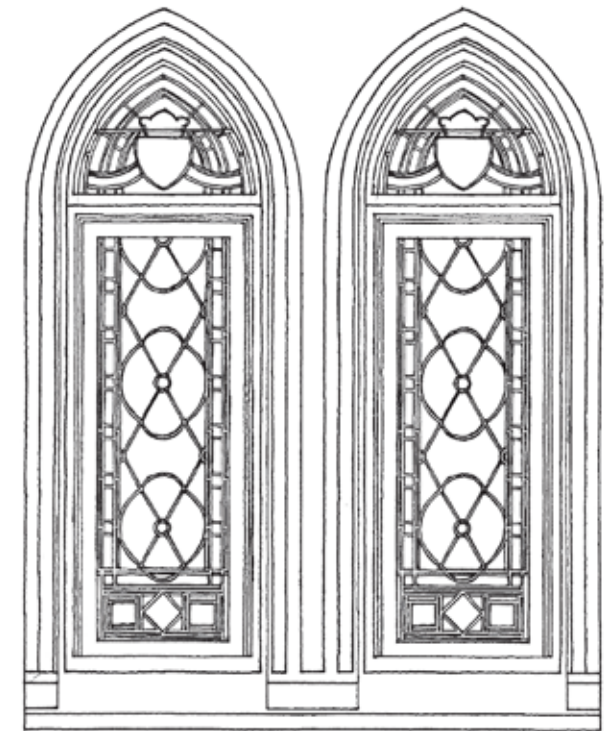


**ELEVATION OF NAVE ARCH**

Scale 1 : 200



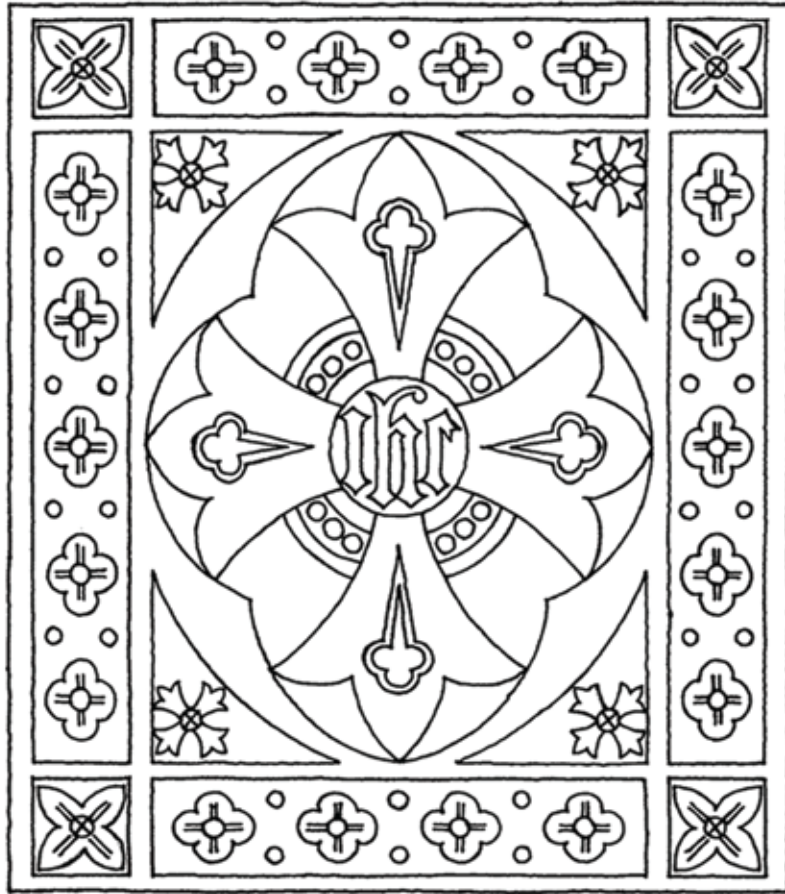
Detail of decorative cement lintel  
at the sanctuary



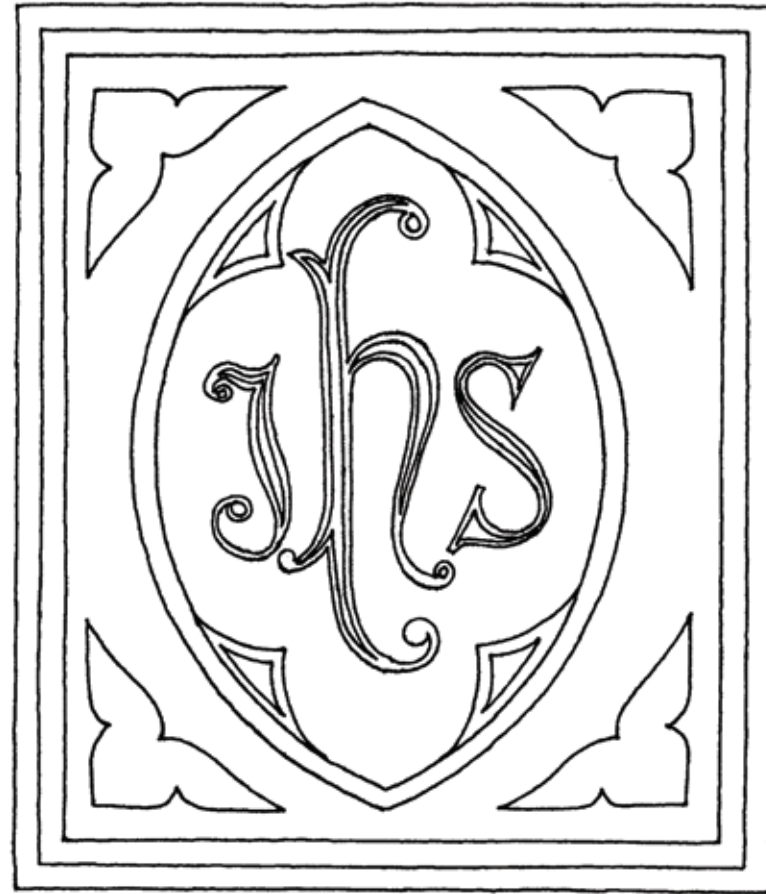
Elevation of stained glass twin window  
found on external wall of the aisle of nave arches







St. Francis of Assisi Church, Hambantota



St. Mary's Cathedral, Galle

#### Brass Tabernacle Doors with incised carvings

The Symbol of IHS is placed at the centre in a circle with four petals projecting out. These petals are encompassed by four other curvatures, depicting a large blossomed four petal flower, thus forming the shape of a cross. The flowers that are surrounding too are in form of a cross, i.e., *kurusa mala* or *kathira mala*, elements that are largely found in temple paintings.



**Detail of the center panel of the Communion Railing**  
The carvings are highly elaborated resembling the characters of Gothic style. A Trinity Sheild and a crown in the centre surrounded by the *trefoil* symbols, which represent eternity, signifying the Holy Trinity.



Communion Railing /Church of Our Lady of Sorrows, Hambantota



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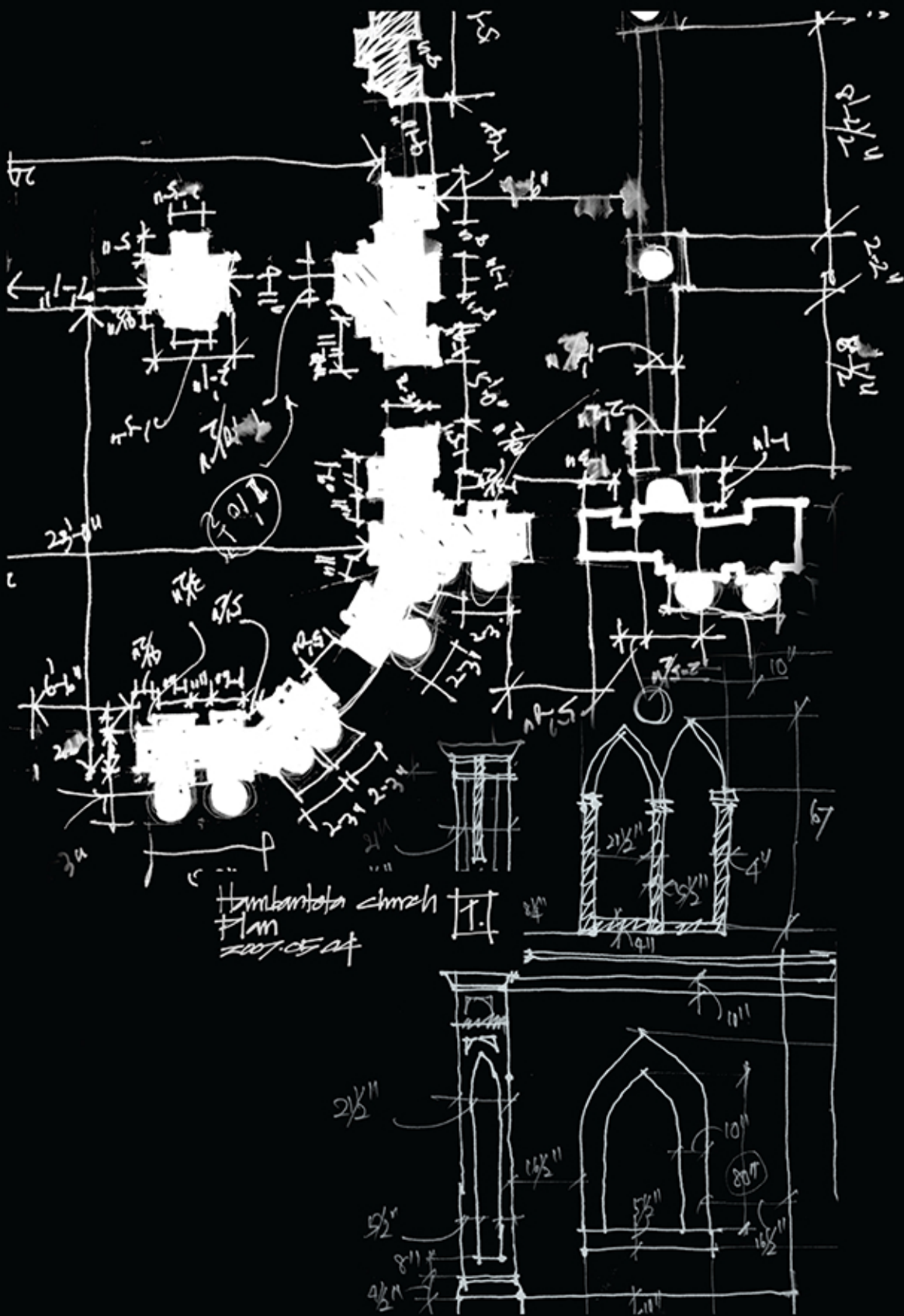
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Sagara currently functions as the Coordinator of the "Furniture Design" stream of the Bachelor of Design (B.Des.) degree program conducted by the Department of Architecture, University of Moratuwa.