

# SoMi – Bulletin – JVID

*Claretian Missionaries*

**“Interreligious Living and Dialogue to Build Peace in Sri Lanka”**



The dream of “universal fraternity” which encompasses the unity in diversity of whole humanity and creation was expressed by Pope Francis in his social Encyclical “Fratelli Tutti” (2020) inspired by life and actions of St. Francis of Assisi. The Pope states, “It is my desire that, in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity. Fraternity between all men and women. Here we have a splendid secret that shows us how to dream and to turn our life into a wonderful adventure. No one can face life in isolation... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead... Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all” (FT 8). In the same line, we Claretian Missionaries dream, “We dream of a Congregation committed to universal brotherhood (Fratelli Tutti), justice, peace and the care of the common home (Laudato Si’). In a spirit of synodality, we collaborate with people of different cultures, ethnicities and religions for the transformation of the world in accord with God’s plan (cf. CC 46)” (QC 79). This is the reason that this edition of SoMi Bulletin is given an interreligious dialogue character: “Interreligious Living and Dialogue to Build Peace in Sri Lanka”. Thanks to the witnessing and reflective contribution of Ms. Aneesa from Islamic community (Batikolao) and our claretian missionaries in Barawakumbuka school mission.

## Fostering Harmony: Building Bridges Across Religions in Barawakumbuka



**Introduction.** Barawakumbuka, a small village in Sri Lanka, in the district of Hambantota is a unique example of inter-religious harmony. With a population that is 99.9% Buddhist and a small Catholic minority of just 15 individuals from ten families, the community has developed a deep mutual respect over the decades. Despite the religious differences, Buddhists and Catholics in

Barawakumbuka have fostered a spirit of understanding, cooperation, and shared humanity. This article explores how the long-standing Catholic presence in the village has strengthened Buddhist-Catholic relations, leading to a model of peaceful coexistence.

### **Historical Context: The Catholic Presence in Barawakumbuka.**

The Catholic mission in Barawakumbuka has a history spanning over 50 years. It began with Jesuit priest Fr. Ashly, who initiated the mission and invited the Holy Family Sisters to serve the community. One of their most impactful contributions was the establishment of Samagi Seva Preschool, where many villagers received their first formal education. Over time, the preschool became a symbol of hope and development for the community.



On February 1, 2024, the Claretians took over the mission from the sisters, continuing the educational service by transforming the preschool into an English medium institution with plans to expand into an international school. The Catholic mission's commitment to education and community welfare has played a vital role in strengthening relationships with the predominantly Buddhist community.

**Mutual Respect and Support: A Testament to Harmony.** The relationship between Buddhists and Catholics in Barawakumbuka is not defined by formal inter-religious dialogue but by lived experiences of mutual cooperation and respect. Several significant instances highlight this unique interfaith understanding:

- a) **Shared Participation in Religious and Cultural Events:** Catholic priests and sisters regularly attend Buddhist festivals, strengthening the communal bond. Similarly, Buddhist monks and faithful actively participate in Catholic celebrations, such as the Christmas visit by Venerable Gnanarathne Thero and his followers.
- b) **Expressions of Support and Solidarity:** When news of Pope Francis's illness spread, the historic Rambaviharaya Temple organized a special Buddhist religious service



attended by hundreds of Buddhist faithful to pray for his recovery. This act of kindness demonstrated the depth of inter-religious solidarity in the village.

- c) **Community Service and Joint Initiatives:** The Claretians organize spiritual and charitable programs that extend beyond religious boundaries, benefiting Buddhists and Catholics alike. These include educational projects, charity work, and social welfare initiatives. The Buddhist community, in turn, contributes to the well-being of Catholic clergy by providing dry rations and volunteering in church activities, such as organizing the annual church feast.
- d) **Interfaith Pilgrimages and Exchanges:** Claretians have participated in Buddhist pilgrimages alongside local monks, fostering a sense of unity and mutual respect. These engagements have reinforced the understanding that both religious traditions share common values of compassion, service, and moral integrity.

**Challenges and Opportunities for Growth.** Unlike many other regions where religious tensions can pose challenges, Barawakumbuka enjoys an atmosphere of peace and cooperation. There have been no significant conflicts or misunderstandings between Buddhists and Catholics, except for a single event that took place in the past due to a miscommunication. However, the absence of structured inter-religious dialogue presents an opportunity for growth. While the community's harmony is currently built on personal relationships and shared experiences, formal dialogue initiatives could further deepen mutual understanding and pave the way for collaborative efforts in social development. (Fr. Royestan, CMF)

**Lessons Learned and the Future of Catholic-Buddhist Relations.** The experience in Barawakumbuka underscores essential lessons for inter-religious harmony:

- a) **Life witness and openness:** Living one's faith with sincerity and openness fosters trust and respect.
- b) **Valuing other religions:** Recognizing the beauty and depth of different religious traditions strengthens bonds.
- c) **Focusing on shared human values:** Compassion, hospitality, and a commitment to service transcend religious differences.
- d) **Building on positive historical relationships:** The longstanding goodwill between the Catholic mission and the Buddhist community continues to shape a harmonious future.

Looking ahead, the Catholic presence in Barawakumbuka has the potential to contribute even more to the village's holistic development. By expanding educational opportunities, enhancing community service projects, and engaging in structured interfaith dialogue, the relationship between Buddhists and Catholics can continue to thrive as a beacon of peace and cooperation.

**Conclusion.** Barawakumbuka's inter-religious harmony offers a powerful message to the world: understanding and respect between different faiths are possible through shared values and meaningful engagement. The collaborative efforts between Buddhists and Catholics in the village stand as a testament to the strength of interfaith relationships built on trust, gratitude, and a shared vision for the future. As the Catholic mission continues to evolve, it remains committed to nurturing this harmony, ensuring that Barawakumbuka remains a model of inter-religious coexistence for generations to come.

## **Bridging Divides: The Islamic Women's Association for Research and Empowerment's Role in Post-Conflict Reconciliation**

For decades, our nation endured the devastating impact of a prolonged conflict, leaving deep societal fissures and fostering suspicion between communities. As a women's rights activist within the Muslim community, I recognized the urgent need for interfaith dialogue and collaboration to rebuild trust and foster lasting peace. The Islamic Women's Association for Research and Empowerment (IWARE) is

committed to address these challenges, working alongside women's organizations from diverse religious backgrounds.



Our initial efforts focused on creating platforms for meaningful interaction, facilitating dialogues and awareness programs aimed at dismantling prejudice and promoting understanding. We sought to bridge the gap between communities, particularly between Muslim and other religious groups, who had been historically

isolated. These initiatives yielded promising results, fostering a sense of shared humanity and laying the groundwork for reconciliation.

However, the horrific Easter Sunday attacks of 2019 dealt a devastating blow to our progress. This tragic event, falsely attributed to the Muslim community, reignited deep-seated fears and mistrust. Muslims were unjustly labeled as extremists and terrorists, exacerbating existing tensions and creating a chasm between Muslim and Christian communities.

In the face of this adversity, IWARE intensified its efforts to promote truth and understanding. Recognizing the urgent need to counter the prevailing narrative, we facilitated visits by religious leaders from other communities to our region. These visits enabled firsthand observation and fostered open, honest discussions, revealing the true nature of the attacks and dispelling the false accusations against the Muslim community.

Through these dialogues, it became evident that the attacks were not perpetrated by the Muslim community as a whole, but by extremist elements who falsely claimed to represent Islam. This revelation significantly shifted perceptions and fostered a renewed sense of empathy and understanding.

IWARE's commitment to reconciliation extends beyond dialogue. We are actively supporting the families of both Muslim and Christian victims of the Easter Sunday attacks, providing assistance and fostering healing. We also collaborated with the Sri Lanka Reconciliation Movement to produce the documentary, "The Other Side of the Story," which portrays the shared suffering of both communities and highlights the importance of unity in the face of adversity.

Our work underscores the crucial role of women in peacebuilding. Women, as mothers, sisters, and community leaders, possess a unique ability to bridge divides and foster empathy. By empowering women and creating platforms for interfaith collaboration, we can build a more just and peaceful society.



Moving forward, IWARE remains committed to fostering dialogue, promoting understanding, and working alongside our partners to heal the wounds of the past and build a future where all communities can coexist in peace and harmony. We are dedicated to ensuring that the voices of women are heard and that their contributions to reconciliation are recognized and valued. (Aneesa, IWARE).

## Reporting Recent Developments

**Workshop.** Four days of workshop on “Empowering and Capacity Building in Project Planning” was organized by Jesuit Province of Sri Lanka under the guidance of Dr. Pradeep N. Weerasinghe. It took place at Serene Pastures Retreat Centre, Bolowalana – Negombo, from the 19 to 23 of January 2025. Fr. Donald Christy, CMF, participated in this formation event from JVID.



**Di- addiction Programs:** Fr. Nesan Culas, CMF, conducted the program at the request of the Directors Frs. Arulraja and Ronald Sujeevan. The program, “Drug addiction and Alcoholism Prevention” was held for the staff of CLASIKA and Bible Media Apostolate. It took place on the 23 and 24, of January, 2025, at Claret Aham, Jaffna.



As part of Wellness Ministry, Fr. Culas, CMF, with the help of Bro. Rubesan and Mr. Abisan from Uva Wellessa University have conducted the awareness on addictions session for the students of Passara Tamil National School at the request of Passara Police. The participants were 300 students and 3 teachers in the program.

**Ecumenical Week: A Call for Christian Unity.** It was celebrated from 18 to 26 of January 2025; the theme "Do you believe this?" (Jn 11:26) coupled with the mind blowing of church history and the course on ecumenism; it seems to be a moment of integrating all these into a practical experience. A question



hurled my mind, are we going to join other denominations or they will come to us, as usual sprang up? In the reflection and testimony of Fr. Shelton, the Anglican priest, there was a touching aspect that questioned “Does the church suffer ecumenically or ecumenism suffers ecclesially?” This awoken in me the spirit of curiosity regarding to disunity among those who proclaim

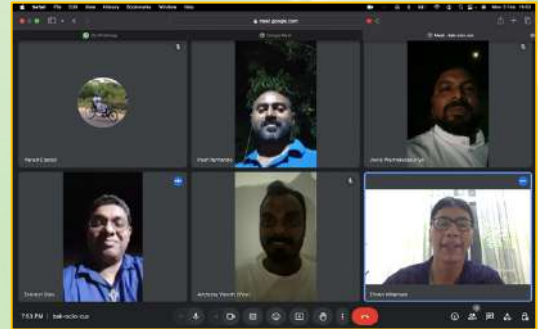
Christ as Lord. There are actually places of difference but one could base his understanding that ecumenism suffers ecclesially because of no common ground for dialogue among the Christian confessions; in fact, Christian leaders are reluctant to come to a common ground. Therefore, unity remains a necessity, we must accept that there are divisions and avoid justifications. On this reason, the World Council of Churches (1948) highlighted that "doctrines divide and Christ unites"; it reflected the WCC's mission to overcome theological differences and focus on the common ground found in Christ. Therefore, efforts were taking place to maintain the unity must be applauded.

The unanswered question is how do I implement this unity personally and how can I be a promoter of this unity? Going back to his reflection on Jn 11:16, we need one another to untie the straps that block

us from being active, from coming back to life and Jesus is our model who prayed for oneness in Jn 17:21-23.

In conclusion, the experience was unique and calls for a shift from discourses to facing reality by living and dialoguing together for Christian unity is deeper, and profound than getting together. Therefore, following our church's teaching on ecumenism, we are reminded "ecumenism is not an optional addition to the Church's mission but an integral part of it. ... That dialogue and cooperation are necessary to overcome divisions and work towards the unity that Christ prayed for" (*ut unum sint*). This is a progressive journey which needs patience and perseverance and the master key to achieve this is prayer, solidarity and frequent meetings and platforms of sharing our experiences. (Bro. Boris, CMF)

**Socialization of SoMi Guidelines.** On 23 of January and the 03 of February from 7:00 to 8:00 PM, were held the online meetings to socialize the new SoMi Guidelines among the JVID-SoMi team; the majority of the members participated. It was an urgent activity to do, because all the members first and for most have to have knowledge about the guidelines and carry out all the SoMi annual plan according these guidelines.



**Human Rights Workshop.** The Human Rights Office of the diocese of Kandy organized the semester workshop for religious and priests with the theme, "Campaigning to achieve Democracy Goals with Hope". It was held from 10 to 13 of February 2025, at Miani Technical Institute Thannamunai, Batticaloa. From the SoMi team of JVID, Fr. Efrain, cmf. participated from the event.



After scriptural inputs given by retired Anglican Bishop Kumara Illangasinghe at the beginning of the event, the second day, the participants were sent to an exposure to two different sites like "Batti Walk for Justice" joining to the people who are silently walking, already 1007 days of protest, looking for justice for the people who were killed and injured in the Easter attack. The walking protest

started on 12 of May 2022 from St. Sebastian Church to Gandhi Park. Other group went to get in touch with Muslims' reality, visiting "Islamic Women's Association for Research and Empowerment" (IWARE) center, Kattakudy mosque, and so on. After all these experiences the participants shared the findings from the visited field. The third day was sharing and reflecting on political and economic situation of the country, identifying issues of Eastern Province, Human Rights under NPP Government, etc.

**Earth Hour.** Some of our local communities of the Delegation like St. Claret Seminary (Kattuwa), Claret Nivas (Kandy), Claret Center (Curia - Ragama) actively participated in the environmental action of "Earth Hour" joining to many other communities of our claretian family around the world. This global activity is organized annually by CMF-UN and claretian family. Below we find the encouraging and thanksgiving letter from Fr. Rohan Dominic, CMF.

"Dear Claretian Family, with deep gratitude and joy, we thank each one of you who helped make this year's Earth Hour (March 22, 2025) the biggest Hour for Earth in our history. Your active participation and heartfelt commitment across our global Claretian community have truly made a difference.



We are especially grateful to all the Claretian Missionaries, Prefects of Apostolates, SOMI Teams, communities, collaborators, and mission partners who embraced this sacred hour with such zeal. From Australia to California, across every time zone over 18 hours, somewhere in our mission, lights were switched off and hearts were lit with solidarity and hope. Together, we joined millions around the world in a united expression of care for our common home.

Globally, it is estimated that nearly 3 million hours were dedicated this year to the Earth on this day. Within our own congregation, we received over 350 photos from almost all the Major Organisms, reflecting a powerful witness of unity and ecological conversion. It was moving to see not just Claretian communities, but also the broader Claretian Family—Claretian Sisters, Lay Claretians, collaborators, parishioners, and schoolchildren—leading and participating in meaningful Earth Hour celebrations across parishes, schools, and missions.

Through your prayers, reflections, and concrete actions, you have embodied the spirit of *Laudato Si'*, the Paris Agreement, and our Claretian charism, reminding us that caring for creation is integral to our mission of evangelization and ecological responsibility. This hour was not just symbolic—it was transformative.

But our solidarity must not end here. Let this Hour be a spark that fuels a lifetime of care for creation. Remember, every small act of love for the Earth is a great gift to the world. Whether switching off lights, planting a tree, cleaning a beach, advocating for change, or educating others—each step counts.

Let us continue to walk together as faithful stewards of God's creation, building a more just and sustainable world for generations to come" (March 23, 2025).



**“JPIC Claretian Family a Prophetic Call.”** The Claretian Family from around the world held an



online meeting on 22 of March 2025. The main speakers were Maamalifar M. Poreku MSOLA (Africa); Emilia Sena, SOMICLA (Uruguay); Robert Omondi, CMF (Kenia); and Marta Bratti, MSAMC (Philippines). The speakers shared their reflections and experiences on JPIC work, women’s rights and empowerment, and the poor connected to Laudato Si and Fratelli Tutti.

**Mission Procure.** On 06 of March 2025, the General Mission Procure (GMP) organized a workshop for all the members of Mission Procure, SoMi team, and other interest members on the "Concept of Integral Human Development". Fr. Everest, the Procurator of JVID, took part in it. Fr. Gabriel Ponce from GMP was the main speaker. The next workshop will be on 3<sup>rd</sup> of June on developing projects to attain sustainable development goals.

**Initiatives.** Some ecofriendly initiatives took place in Claret Center community. Fr. Everest, CMF, the SoMi coordinator, took the initiative to visualize the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as part of socio-ecological conversion.



### Upcoming Activities

- May 24 – 31 “Laudato Si Week” 2025

