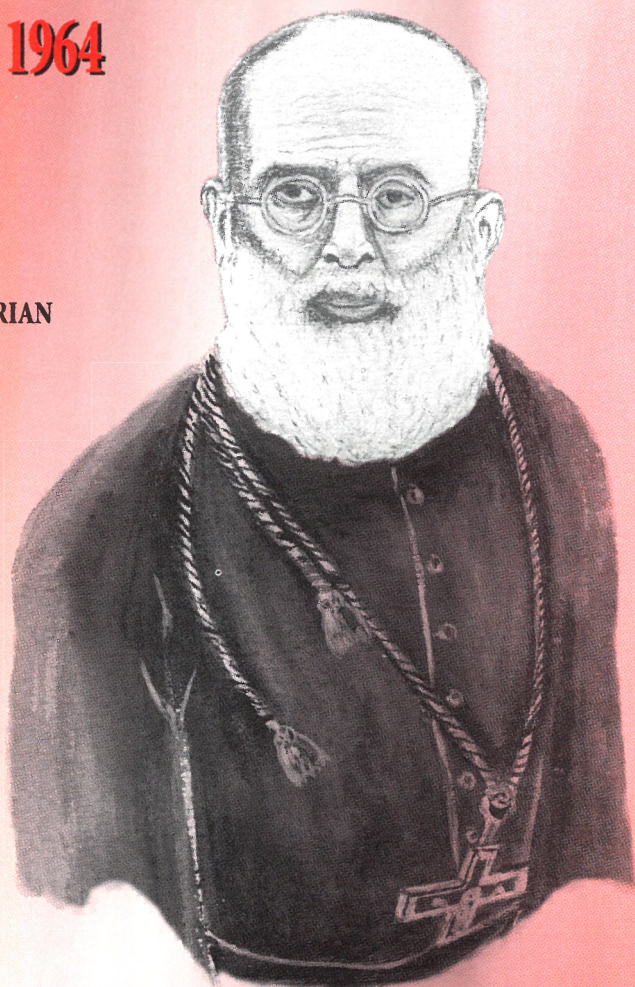



Bastiampillai Anthonipillai Thomas, O.M.I.

1886 - 1964

A ROSARIAN



OBLATE
HERITAGE

3

*“The Mad Monk of
Tholagatty”*

Father B. A. Thomas, O.M.I.

1886 - 1964

A Rosarian

5

Oblate Heritage Series
Oblate General Postulation
Rome, Italy
1992

Cover Portrait by: Br. Kingsley Cooray, O.M.I.

Printed by: Marian Press Ltd.,
Battleford, SK, Canada

Fr. B. A. Thomas, O.M.I.

1886 - 1964

In every age God raises up charismatic men and women — a Benedict, a Francis of Assisi, a Theresa of Avila, an Ignatius, a John XXIII — to renew and revitalize the Church. The list is long — as long as the life of the Church.

Thus it was in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), in the early part of the twentieth century, that God would grace a great rishi (sage) who would introduce a whole new dimension to the life of the Church in the vast Indo-Sri Lankan sub-continent. This was a priest, an Oblate of Mary Immaculate, Bastiampillai Anthonipillai — known as Fr. B. A. Thomas. A congenital cripple and an invalid all his life, this quiet Oblate priest was the unlikely instrument chosen by God to found the first indigenous, strictly contemplative and penitential Congregations, both of men and women, in the whole of Asia. These are the Rosarian Congregations of cloistered men and women which are now flourishing in Sri Lanka and India, with twelve Ashrama (monasteries) and eleven convents. In the life and work of Fr. Thomas we see a wondrous fulfilment of the words of the Apostle Paul: “God purposely chooses what the world considers weak to shame the powerful” (I Cor. 1:27).

The Early Years

Bastiampillai Anthonipillai was born on March 7th, 1889 at Pandiyanthalvu, a small village near Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka (called Ceylon then). His father was Bastiampillai and his mother Lucyammal. The child was so weak at birth that he was not expected to survive beyond that first day. But, against all predictions the crippled infant not only survived, but lived on to a ripe old age of 78 years. Right from the beginning he

confounded those around him, for it seems that God had special plans for him.

He was baptized and christened only as Anthonipillai — the name Thomas being assigned to him as a compliment, by his philosophy professor years later during his study at St. Martin's Seminary, Jaffna. This name was to stick, and for the rest of his life he was known everywhere as B. A. Thomas. After his early schooling at St. Charles School, Antonipillai went as a pupil to St. Patrick's College, the premier school in Jaffna, conducted by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. During his years there he succeeded brilliantly in his studies, and in 1903 passed the Senior Cambridge Examination with distinction.

Being infirm and weak from birth, constantly sick and in need of frequent medical care, Anthonipillai had eschewed all thoughts of joining the priesthood when he was a boy. Fr. Michael Blachot, O.M.I., Director of the Confraternity of St. Aloysius, of which Anthonipillai was a member, had suggested the idea to him. Despite his desire the young boy felt that it could never become a reality for him. It seemed unattainable. But he suddenly and dramatically took courage following an incident in a Scripture class at St. Patrick's. The scripture teacher was explaining these words of Our Lord: "If anyone wants to come with me, he must forget self, carry his cross and follow me." (Mt. 16:24). These words made an immediate and lasting impression on the young man, and there and then he made up his mind — he would be a priest. Despite all the things which seemed to indicate its impossibility for him he steeled himself to strive for his goal. All hesitations vanished. His parents were nonplussed when Anthonipillai conveyed his decision to them. He was able to convince his mother, but his father was dead against the idea.

On February 26th, 1904, Anthonipillai, with his mother's connivance, left his home early in the morning with his baggage, and went straight to St. Martin's Seminary, Jaffna. His father immediately guessed where his son had gone and rushed

to the Seminary after him. But the Director, Fr. François-Marie Bizien, O.M.I., finally managed to persuade Bastiampillai to agree to let his son stay.

Normally, no Seminary would ever have admitted such a frail and infirm candidate as Anthonipillai, but there seemed to be a higher logic at work. He was an excellent student, and achieved honours at the quarterly examinations conducted by Bishop Henri Joulain, O.M.I. of Jaffna. However, owing to his frequent illnesses, most of his examinations had to be held in the infirmary.

In 1907 Anthonipillai, along with the other seminarians who wished to join the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, went to Colombo to enter the Oblate novitiate at Slave Island. His studies were continued at St. Bernard's Seminary. Limited as he was in his physical abilities, the young seminarian displayed a keen intellect and a voracious appetite for reading and study. His fellow students nicknamed him "The Philosopher" because of his marvelous mastery of Thomist philosophy. His Professor of Philosophy, Fr. Louis Coquil, O.M.I., went one better and gave him the new name of Thomas, after St. Thomas Aquinas himself. He was never to lose this name.

Right through his time in the Seminary, Bro. Thomas' health continued to be very poor, and once he even received the Anointing of the Sick, which in those days was given only on the point of death. When the time for his ordination came, the Bishop of Jaffna, Mons. Henri Joulain, O.M.I., could not make up his mind as to whether he should ordain him, in view of the candidate's extreme infirmity. But Br. Thomas pleaded with the Bishop with so much earnestness the Mons. Joulain finally consented to ordain him a priest. Accordingly, Br. Thomas was ordained an Oblate priest on January 6th, 1912. The seemingly impossible had been achieved — he was not only an Oblate, but also a priest.

The doctor who had been attending Br. Thomas advised that the newly ordained priest would not survive for long, and therefore, he recommended to his superiors that Fr. Thomas should be sent to a place where he could lead a 'quiet retired life'.

Faced with this warning, Fr. Thomas' superiors decided to assign him to his old Alma Mater — St. Patrick's College, Jaffna. The then Rector, Fr. Charles Mathews, O.M.I., was enjoined to take special care of him. Thomas was appointed assistant to Fr. Charles Beaud, O.M.I., the Prefect of the "Hindu Boarding", which was the hostel for the students who were not Catholics. In addition, Fr. Thomas was assigned a few classes in Scripture and Tamil. However, the young priest did not intend to live a 'quiet retired life', at least not just yet, and he threw himself with gusto into whatever tasks he was given, or could add to his daily routine. He would never allow himself to be a stranger to hard work, despite his physical condition.

Fr. Thomas became so involved with the students that in 1913, when Fr. Beaud finished his term at the college, Fr. Thomas took over as Prefect of the Hindu Boarding — no mean task even for a healthy man. He also was Director of the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament, the Sacred Heart Confraternity, and the St. Vincent de Paul Conference. Fr. Claude Lawrence, O.M.I., a former student of Fr. Thomas, remembers him around this time: "Here was a gaunt young priest straight from St Bernard's Seminary. His deep-set dark eyes peered out on the world with a penetrating yet far-away look. Within a year or two, a bristly black beard would add to the impression of austerity one got at first sight. Austerity — but not severity, for a gently melancholic light softened the piercing eyes. His voice bore the same marks of self-abnegation, compassion for others, quiet earnestness, a sense of mystery, the consciousness of a mission waiting to be fulfilled."

A Hindu Rishi

Fr. Thomas included in his workload much time for study. He read a great deal about monasticism and the major role played by the monks in the work of evangelization. He also acquired a thorough knowledge of the Hindu Scriptures, as also of Hindi classics such as the Thirukural, Manimekalai, etc. This enabled Fr. Thomas to enter into informed and serious dialogue with the Hindu students, and to develop an excellent rapport with them. He was at ease in bridging diverse cultures and faiths — as respectful of the other as he was sure of his own.

Fr. Thomas' intellectual abilities, his open friendliness, his austerity and compassion made a tremendous impact on the Hindu boarders. They regarded him as a true Rishi (wise and holy man). The Oblates at St. Patrick's never made any attempt at direct proselytizing, but such was the benign presence and wholesome influence of Fr. Thomas on his Hindu wards that a number of them voluntarily embraced Catholicism. In fact, no less than three of them later became Oblate priests, two diocesan priests, and one a Rosarian.

A Fortunate Friendship

In 1914, a French Oblate priest, Fr. J. A. Guyomard, joined the staff of St. Patrick's, and Fr. Thomas and he became the best of friends. In 1921, Fr. Guyomard became the Rector of the College, but little did each of them know how closely they would be united in a major undertaking in the years ahead.

The two friends used to spend their vacations together working in parishes along the coast. In their long and leisurely conversations they exchanged ideas about the missions and various missionary activities. Fr. Thomas always insisted that the Church in the Indo-Sri Lankan sub-continent suffered from a serious lack — namely, the absence of the contemplative religious life. He felt that it was the absence of an indigenous and inculturated contemplative order of monks, to be there as a power-house of prayer, that was holding up the work of evangelization in this vast area. Fr. Guyomard became an ardent ad-



Bishop J. A. Guyomard, O.M.I.

mirer of Fr. Thomas, and an enthusiastic supporter of his plan for the place of houses of contemplation in Sri Lanka and India.

Fr. Thomas served the students of St. Patrick's College for sixteen long years. During this whole time, perhaps unconsciously, he was preparing and being prepared for his future life's work. God was not finished with him yet.

A New Role?

Time and time again it is possible to discern the Hand of God in Fr. Thomas' life. In January 1924, Fr. Guyomard was appointed Bishop of Jaffna. Providentially he was the right man in the right place, able to facilitate the realization of Fr. Thomas' dream for a local contemplative institute.

The immediate catalyst for this great endeavour was the issuing of the Encyclical Letter, "*Rerum Ecclesiae*" by Pope Pius XI on February 28th, 1926. In it the Pope, after extolling the virtues of the contemplative way of life, and recognizing its role in the wider Church went on to write: "... we exhort you, venerable Brethren, beloved Sons, to take care that the practice of this austere life of contemplation be introduced in the mission fields, and widely extended by the establishment of monasteries, for it is wonderful what an abundance of heavenly graces these solitaries will bring down upon your labours."

Shortly after this Encyclical Letter was issued, the Benedictines of St. Andrew's Abbey, Lophem-les-Bruges, in Belgium, founded a work entitled "Contemplation and Apostolate" which had as its aim the enlistment of houses of contemplation in Asia and Africa for the evangelization of the world.

It was against the background of these developments that Bishop Guyomard, in 1927, remembering Fr. Thomas' enthusiasm and ardent conviction concerning local houses of contemplative religious, cleared the way for their foundation in Jaffna. And Fr. Thomas was the God-given man to be the founder.

Fr. Thomas himself, convinced as he was, had no ready-made blue print in this matter.

He was totally in the dark as to how to go about the task assigned to him by his friend. Not only was he worried about his lack of experience, he was also concerned about his evident infirmities, with the "supposed early death" always around the corner, as the doctors constantly reminded him. Despite his wholehearted enthusiasm for the idea, Fr. Thomas had doubts as to whether he himself was the man for the job. And he presented these doubts to the Bishop.

Bishop Guyomard listened to Fr. Thomas' doubts, but repeated his request. Then Fr. Thomas replied: *"You are my Bishop, who represents Christ and His Vicar on earth to me. If your Lordship orders me to begin, I just simply obey."* The die was cast.

Renewed in spirit, and with the special confidence that comes from religious obedience, Fr. Thomas now set about the task entrusted to him. He had an unbounded trust in his Heavenly Father and in the Divine Providence, and these were bedrocks of his faith. It was typical of Fr. Thomas that he prayed and fasted and waited. He would step out only with God. And before long he was able to gather together six young men who were members of a Confraternity organized by an

Oblate coadjutor-brother, Br. Groussalt. This was a group of young men all from the working class who met to consolidate and advance their personal religious lives. They were men of very little education, and were drawn from different castes. On the surface the founding community was an unlikely assemblage — a crippled and infirm leader, six young men with almost no schooling, drawn from groups that traditionally would not live together, starting a project that had never been tried before in the country. If ever there was an unpromising start, it was this little group. If it was to succeed it would have to be truly the work of God, since humanly it seemed that it had little to offer. Above all else it was an adventure in faith.



The old Tholagatty Church which
became the Chapel of the first Monastery

On January 1st, 1928, Fr Thomas began a month-long retreat. At 8:30 p.m. on February 1st, the first six young men joined Father Thomas in an all-night vigil before the Blessed Sacrament in St Anthony's Church, at Tholagatty, a village 16 kilometers from Jaffna. The next morning, February 2nd, 1928, Bishop Guyomard, O.M.I., lead the group in the Eucharist to inaugurate the postulancy of the monks. On that day, the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Congregation of the Rosarians, which even today is the only indigenous penitential and strictly contemplative group of monks founded in the whole of Asia, came into being. The old and dilapidated presbytery at Tholagatty served as the 'monastery' for the Founder and his pioneer band of monks. Their project was founded in dire poverty, and this was in accord with their desires, but it was also founded on an abiding sense of faith. The early years saw many a test of that faith.

In composing the Constitutions of the Rosarian Congregation, Fr. Thomas drew heavily on the Trappist and Benedictine Rules. He was conscious of the wonderful heritage the Church had received from these contemplative and monastic groups, and it was but natural that he turned to their well-established experience for his initial inspiration. Because of their history of involvement in direct evangelization, institutes such as the Benedictines, which had started as a gathering of lay monks, moved ultimately to the incorporation of priesthood into their charism. Fr. Thomas, who at the beginning saw his foundation as being one only of brothers, moved within a few years in the same direction.

The Rosarian Rule enjoins a programme of strict silence, solitude, manual work, fast and abstinence combined with prayer. There is place for contemplation and also for the chanting of the full Divine Office, and continuous recitation of the Rosary before the Blessed Sacrament.



Novices at prayer before a decorated altar on a dirt floor

In the initial stages, the penitential life required of the monks was extremely severe. During the first three and a half years the monks observed a perpetual silence, so complete that it was not broken even at Christmas or on Easter Sunday. Similarly, a rigid fast was in force on all the 365 days of the year. It was found that the health of the members, especially that of the young aspirants and postulants, was adversely affected by

the extreme rigour of the fasting. After a few years the Bishops asked Fr. Thomas, who was himself observing this penitential regime, to mitigate the observance of silence and the extent of the fast. Recreation became allowable on Sundays and feast days, and the fast was made less rigorous.

Whilst freely drawing on the traditions of the great monastic and contemplative orders, Fr. Thomas wished to give a local colouring to the Rules adapted from European Western monasticism. For example, manual work was to be a joyous participation in the lot of the local people. It was not just an exercise for the monks; the villagers living nearby were to be involved in the work of the religious, to share in their Christian spirit. By their association with the monks, many local poor people were taught skills which increased their chances for employment and enabled them to help provide for their families. The locals would also share in the material produce of the monk's labour. Profit for the sake of profit, however, was to be ruled out, and work was always to remain subordinate to monastic mysticism. It would never be pushed to such a degree of productivity as to leave no margin for dependence on Divine Providence, or on the alms of benefactors who would reap spiritual blessings by their giving.

In other aspects, the Rosarian way of life was touched by its local origin. The strictly vegetarian diet adopted by the Rosarians served as a bridge of friendship with the Hindus and the Buddhists of Sri Lanka — and later of India. For the choral chanting of the Divine Office Fr. Thomas gradually adapted an Oriental (“Carnatic”) chant, instead of the pure Gregorian. These measures, which were pioneering in the Church at the time, showed the great respect that Fr. Thomas had for the rich cultural traditions of his own native land, and of his desire to marry these to the hallowed European monastic heritage.

Rosarian Every- day Living

The day of the Rosarian monks began at 4:30 a.m. when they rose from hard wooden plank beds without mattresses or blankets to praise God in the Morning Prayer. The schedule prescribed by their Founder for his monks was to divide the day into three equal parts — eight hours of prayer, eight hours of manual labour, and eight hours for the needs of the body — sleeping, bathing, eating, etc. Prayer and penance were the twin pillars on which the Rosarian Congregation stood firmly rooted.



Recitation of the Rosary with arms outstretched

The Mad Monk of Tholagatty

The common measure of contemplation set by Fr. Thomas for his institute was a meditative recitation of the Rosary — slow and punctuated. The monks would take turns to recite the Rosary in this manner, day and night, before the Blessed Sacrament. This joining of adoration of the Sacrament and devotion to Mary was a unique Rosarian characteristic. Fr. Thomas himself had a deep devotion to Mary, and taught that every Rosarian should “ . . . live in the Immaculate Heart of Mary”. He also introduced the practice of Rosarian monks greeting each other with the exclamation “Ave Maria”. He exhorted them to repeat frequently the aspiration “Immaculate Heart of Mary, refuge of sinners, pray for us”, especially when beset by trials or temptations. His dedication as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate led Fr. Thomas to include a sign of Mary in the Rosarian habit, which is a white cassock with a blue cincture.

The Rosarians endeavour to be self-sufficient, as far as possible by producing most of their own requirements such as food-grains, fruits, milk, bread, biogas (for cooking), etc. The eggs and chickens from the poultry-farms are strictly for sale only. They also run small-scale cottage industries for making wine, fruit cordials, candles, altar breads, etc., for marketing.

Because of the extreme rigour of the silence and the fasting enjoined by Fr. Thomas on himself and on his first monks, because he himself slept hardly 2 to 3 hours per day, because of acceptance of low caste men into his community, Fr. Thomas was dubbed by some “The Mad Monk of Tholagatty”. Whilst this was meant to be a pejorative title, it was one in which Fr. Thomas would have rejoiced. He was a man of genuine humility, and one of his favourite quotations was the words of Our Lord to St. Catherine of Sienna, spoken in a vision: “You shall be fortunate if you have this two-fold knowledge: You are who is not: I am Who is”.

Further, the motto (from St. Paul, I Cor. 4:10) which he incorporated into the emblem of the Congregation was “We are fools for Christ’s sake”. This Founder of the monks at

The Three Disorders

Tholagatty was not too concerned with human judgment: his aim was to reach to the wisdom of the Divine.

Whilst Fr. Thomas counseled his monks to aspire to the heights of contemplation, his ideal for them was not divorced from the realities of life. Apart from the primary aim of undertaking prayer and penance in vicarious reparation for the sins of the world, he also wished, through his community, to combat three particularly rampant social disorders which weighed on the people of the area. In this he showed an advanced sense of Catholic social awareness.

Materialism

The first disorder was materialism — a world separated from God and becoming more and more materially minded, not giving God His due place in the life of the individual and of society. This great disorder had to be countered by the dedicated life of giving God the first place, by rendering to the Creator the supreme homage of prayer and penance. For this purpose Fr. Thomas gave to the Rosarians a basic motto: “Who is like unto God” (Exod. 13:11). This formula was to be repeated very often during the day. By this maxim Fr. Thomas sought to proclaim the Allness of God and the Nothingness of man. The very existence of the Rosarians was a witness to the sacred.

Caste System

The second evil to be withstood was the obnoxious caste system which categorized people from birth, denied equality, and condemned people to a level of living beyond their control. This system was rampant in Sri Lanka — and even within the Church and among priests. To remedy this monstrous aberration Fr. Thomas deliberately went against the established order and admitted candidates of all castes without distinction into his Congregation to live and serve together, animated not by human prejudice but by Christ-like charity. In this rejection of the inherent injustice of the caste system he was a pioneering

spirit, and received considerable opposition, both from inside and outside the Church. But, he stood firm. He insisted that no mention of caste should ever be made in the community. His resolute action in this matter gave reality and substance to his words, and should earn for him a place of respect in the Sri Lankan social story. In 1928 he was much ahead of his contemporaries, and he made a significant contribution to combatting this most insidious evil.

Poverty

The third disorder that was addressed was of an economic nature — that ordering of society that led to a few people being excessively rich and a great number of others being oppressively poor. On the lines laid down by the great social encyclical



Monks at manual labour in the garden of the Monastery

Providence – A Constant Companion

“*Quadragesimo Anno*”, issued by Pope Pius XI on May 15th, 1931, Fr. Thomas wanted his Congregation to make a clear contribution to the social reconstruction of the country. As a small beginning, he put this idea into practice by a firm policy of providing employment in the monastery workshops and gardens for the poorest and most depressed groups. He provided them with a just living wage, and also took time to see to both their spiritual and material welfare. He and his followers gave themselves in a total and balanced commitment to those who lacked material security, and at the same time served equally their spiritual needs. The Rosarians were to lead by example. To show their solidarity with those less well off, the monks themselves lived a life of utter simplicity, earning what meagre goods they had by manual labour. All the members of the Congregation, even the most highly qualified, had to share in this daily work, including the priests. Fr. Thomas was a man not just of words, but of action.

The Founder and his pioneer band of monks had to endure great hardships in the early years of the Congregation. Many of these arose from lack of financial support. Fr. Thomas, however, totally depended on Divine Providence for maintaining the monastery and its monks. And Divine Providence never failed him, for whenever he had no money, cheques and money would come from grateful visitors. People would bring food, e.g. a bag of rice which would suffice the monks for more than a month.

Father Thomas Balasunderam, O.M.I., who was one of the former Hindu boarders at St. Patrick's College who, by the influence of Fr. B. A. Thomas converted to Catholicism, relates the following true incident. Father Thomas was given the last warning by the manager of a grocery store to settle his large outstanding bills. If these were not paid promptly all future supplies would be stopped. After reflection and prayer Fr. Thomas got on his bicycle and rode the 16 kilometers to Jaffna carrying with him a few hand-made rosary beads which he

hoped to sell in a shop owned by a Mr. Bastiampillai. He also intended to appeal to the Bishop for aid. When he entered the shop, Mr. Bastiampillai, noticing Fr. Thomas' troubled countenance, asked what the trouble was. Fr. Thomas explained briefly his dilemma. Immediately Mr. Bastiampillai, who had great veneration for Fr. Thomas, opened his drawer, pulled out a bundle of notes, and thrust them into Father's hand. Father thanked him profusely, and when he arrived at the Bishop's house started counting the notes. They totalled exactly the amount of his outstanding grocery bills.

A Brush With Death

During his long period of teaching Scripture at St. Patrick's College Fr. Thomas had made a profound study of the Epistles of St Paul, so much so that he had imbibed deeply the Pauline absolute trust in God: "I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me" (Phil. 4:13). Soon after starting his Congregation Fr. Thomas, yet again, became so seriously ill that it was thought that he would not survive. One of his monks approached him and said: "Father, what a pity that all your hard work, prayer and penance are to come to nothing with your fast approaching end."

Fr. Thomas raised himself with all his strength, and in faith and humility said: *"If my work is not God's work, let it go. What does it matter!"* Yet again God had other plans for this frail man. With the incessant supplications of the monks to Our Lady of the Rosary, Fr. Thomas recovered and lived on to lead and develop his community.

Official Approval: A Visit to Europe

Fr. Thomas' new order of monks was canonically erected as the "Congregation of the Rosarians" on the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady, August 15th, 1934. In February 1935 the second Rosarian foundation was opened at Madhu. However, this had to be closed down within two years because of the virulent malaria prevailing there.

On March 16th, 1937, Very Rev. Fr. Theodore Labouré, Superior General of the Oblates, visited the Tholagatty Monastery in the course of his Visitation of Sri Lanka. Whilst there, he highly extolled Fr. Thomas' work as "the most worthwhile undertaking of an Oblate in the Island of Sri Lanka". Moreover, he appointed the Founder personally a member of the Oblate General Chapter in Rome to be held during 1930.

Fr. Thomas left for Rome on May 8th, 1930, to attend the Oblate General Chapter, and submitted to the Chapter a report on the Rosarians. The report indicates that there were forty-three professed Rosarian monks in 1930, representing ten different castes. The total number of admissions for the previous ten years was eighty-six. The adventure in faith was bearing fruit.

After the General Chapter, Fr. Thomas took the opportunity to visit some Trappist and Benedictine monasteries in France and Belgium for a few months to study their current monastic life, and to establish fraternal contact. He lived with various communities, sensing their spirit, and sharing his experience in establishing his Congregation in Sri Lanka. A number of these older European foundations became both spiritually and materially supportive of the new monastic venture so far from their shores. On his return to Sri Lanka, Fr. Thomas shared the richness of his experience with his own fledgling group.

Whilst the Rosarians were founded in northern Sri Lanka an increasing number of the members joining were from India. In April 1939 a Fr. Anthony Fernando, a veteran missionary from Manapad, in the Diocese of Tuticorin in India, came to Sri Lanka to join the Rosarians. He took the name of Susainather. Five years later the Bishop of Tuticorin, Bishop Tibutius Roche, S.J., came to visit him. The Bishop also took the occasion to ask Fr. Thomas to establish a Rosarian Ashram in his diocese. This invitation was to prove a new venture for the young institute, and one which was to herald a fruitful development. Fr. Susainather made his perpetual vows as a Rosarian priest in Septem-

ber 1943, and on October 20th of the same year he set out, along with three Brothers, for Vadakangulam in the Tuticorin Diocese. The first Rosarian House in India was named Fatimagiri Ashram.

Nine years later, in 1952, a second Rosarian House, Pushpavanam Ashram, was opened in India at Manaparai in the Diocese of Tiruchirapalli. Just three years later, on Jan. 18th, 1955, the third Indian Rosarian Ashram was inaugurated. It was the first in the north of the country at Ambikapur in Madhya Pradesh. More foundations followed, and eventually even the Prior General moved the central house of the Congregation to Bangalore in India.



Rosarian Community Tholagatty
(Seated: Fr. Thomas, Bishop Guyomard, Fr. Manka)

From March 1941 Father Thomas himself started training the Rosarian candidates for the priesthood at Tholagatty. In May of the same year he commenced teaching philosophy, and continued with both the spiritual and intellectual formation of his men. On October 7th, 1944, Fr. Francis and Fr. John were ordained — the first of those trained by Fr. Thomas himself, and these were followed by a second group in 1949.

The Rosarians were now a stable part of the local Church and the wider community. In November 1951 the Governor General of Sri Lanka, Lord Soulbury, made a visit to the Tholagatty Monastery to acknowledge it. The monks were a unique blend of the old and the new, of Eastern and Western, of the contemplative and the involved, of the silence of God and of the voice of the poor. Fr. Thomas was the light and the power of the community. His health, however, was a constant source of worry. From October 1952 he was again in Jaffna General Hospital for two months. It was feared that he would not live to see the silver jubilee of his institute which fell the following year. But yet again, prayer and his indomitable will pulled him through.

February 2nd, 1953, marked 25 years of the Congregation. In that time it had grown from an idea to a firm reality. Asia had its first locally-founded contemplative Catholic religious institute. Its roots were struck deep in an original fusion of Euro-pean monasticism and Asian spirituality. Bishop Guyomard, O.M.I., who had had faith in Fr. Thomas' dreaming, led the Rosarian community in a Liturgy of Thanksgiving, and at his side was that unassuming dreamer.

Right from the beginning, it had been Fr. Thomas' hope to start a community of contemplative women also. If there were difficulties with the founding of the male branch, the establishment of the Rosarian Sisters was a protracted test of faith. His first three attempts were failures one after another.

In April 1928, just a few months after the men's congregation had been started, Fr. Thomas gathered together seven girls from the neighbouring parish of Vasavilan and accommodated them in a dilapidated mission house there. He asked them to follow a Rule similar to that of the Brothers. Daily he visited them to give them instructions. After some time, they had to be transferred to a retreat house in the city of Jaffna to avoid frequent harassment from the girl's parents and relatives. After trying for two years, the house had to be closed down in 1930. The local people evidently weren't ready for an indigenous contemplative foundation for women.

The second attempt was made in October 1935, when a Miss Kendal, a Jewish lady from Austria, came to Sri Lanka through Palestine and was given hospitality by the Holy Family Sisters of Jaffna. Fr. Thomas installed Miss Kendal along with a group of local young ladies in a house in Jaffna. Several times a week he made the 16 kms journey by bicycle from Tholagatty to direct their training. However, Miss Kendall left within a month, and the local girls were unable to sustain the community. Again Fr. Thomas' attempt ended in failure.

In the following year, yet again he tried. In January of 1936, a Miss Martens, a young woman from Belgium who had prepared for some time in India by a type of correspondence course, came to Jaffna to start a convent of Rosarian sisters. She was soon joined by two other young women, one from Manga-lore in India, the other from the original batch of Vasavilan girls. Fr. Thomas got the necessary permission from the Bishop of Jaffna and installed them in a shanty put up on a plot of land donated by some benefactors in Vasavilan. Both the Indian girls left after a few months as they found the Rosarian life too hard for them. It was the end of the third attempt. A contemplative congregation for women seemed to be out of reach — but Fr. Thomas was determined to keep his dream alive.

Success at Last: Rosarian Sisters

For another ten years there was no progress. But in 1946 there appeared a glimmer of hope. Two Vasavilan girls from the original attempt, along with five other girls, came to live in the shanty standing forlornly on Fr. Thomas' plot of donated land. The girls limped along, but there was a danger that this would end up as a fourth failed venture. Two years later, in 1940, the Bishop obtained the help of Sister Jeanne Marie, a Spanish sister of the Congregation of the Holy Family of Bordeaux to assist Fr. Thomas in the formation of the budding Rosarian Sisters. Right from the beginning, the Holy Family Sisters were closely involved in the founding and the development of the Rosarians.

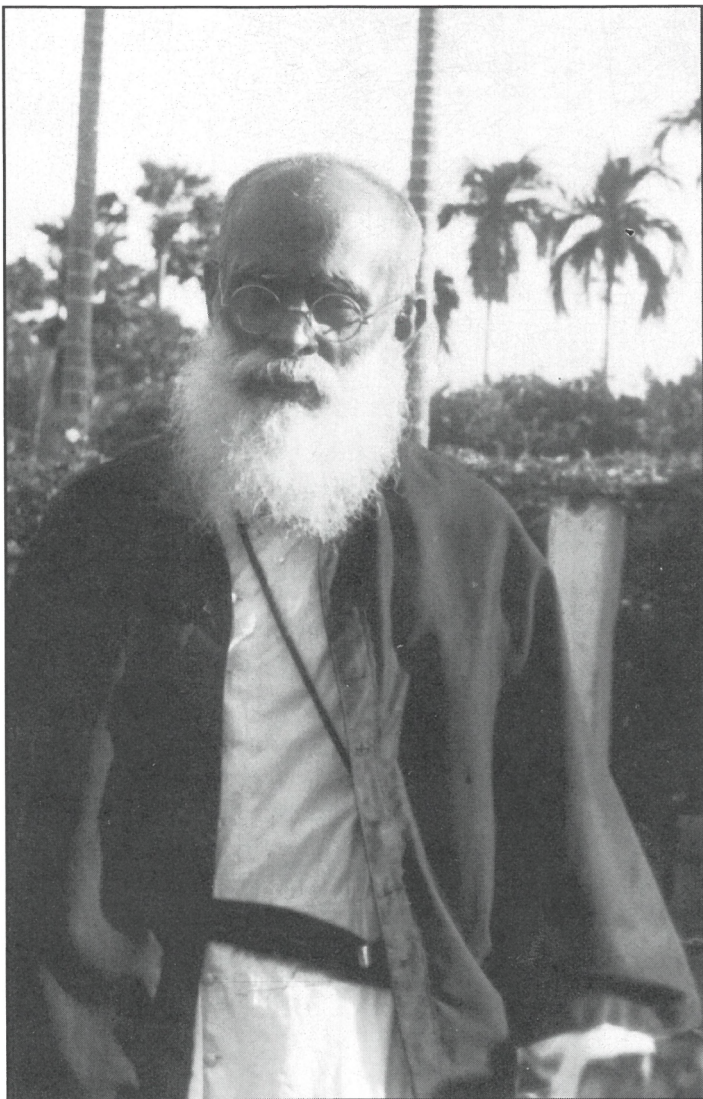
On September 8th, 1948, Fr. Thomas inaugurated the Congregation of the Rosarian Sisters at Vasavilan, with Sr. Jeanne Marie as the Mother Superior. There were nine aspirants at the time. At last there was a firm beginning which was to last, and Fr. Thomas' perseverance was rewarded. It was a remarkable coincidence that Sr. Jeanne Marie, who was the first Superior, was herself, like Fr. Thomas, a sickly invalid. He encouraged her: *"You will enrich the new Congregation by your sufferings and you will be a powerful instrument in the hands of God"* — words which could be equally applied to Fr. Thomas himself.

The Congregation of the Rosarian Sisters was formally inaugurated on August 22nd, 1950, by Bishop Guyomard, O.M.I., and the canonical erection took place on February 11th, 1952. In 1960, the Rosarian Sisters became an independent Congregation with Mother Jeanne Marie as the first Prioress General. Over the years, despite their hesitant beginnings, they have grown strong, and now have eleven convents in Sri Lanka and India.

His Last Giving

Like many Founders of religious families, Fr. Thomas underwent great sufferings in his last years. Age and infirmity had dulled his ability to lead and to take clear decisions. Financial problems plagued him, and he was finding it increasingly diffi-

cult to cope. He had to suffer being withdrawn from the daily direction of his monks and sisters for his last six years. But his heart was with them, and the sustaining strength of his prayer. The final years weighed heavily on him.



“The Mad Monk of Tholagatty”

Repeatedly he fell ill and had to be hospitalized. In June 1960 he became too weak to celebrate Mass or to recite the Divine Office. In February 1962 he was moved to the Bishop's House in Jaffna where he remained until the end. Whilst there, in the midst of his great suffering, he struggled around the Chapel meditating on the Stations of the Cross each day. Born to infirmity, living always with infirmity, he would not allow it to hold him back from showing honour to the God he loved so well.

As the year 1964 began Fr. Thomas' condition steadily deteriorated. On January 19th he was anointed yet again, and the Bishop administered Viaticum. On the 24th his life was seen to be in final danger. He breathed his last very gently, his breath hardly perceptible, at 1 a.m. on January 26th, 1964.

Even though he had founded the Rosarians, lived with them in their communities, been their heart and soul for so many years, Fr. Thomas remained always an Oblate of Mary Immaculate. He enriched the Church by giving it two new religious families whilst still maintaining his own original and vowed dedication.

In the last years of Fr. Thomas' life, the then Superior General of the Oblates, V. Rev. Fr. Leo Deschâtelets, O.M.I., visited him in Sri Lanka. On returning to Rome, the Superior General, in a talk to the young Oblate students at the International Scholasticate, spoke movingly of Fr. Thomas: “If you wish to see a real saint, you must go to Tholagatty. One finds in that old man all that is usually associated with sanctity. Everything about him responds to our common conception of a man of God”.

Even until today there are those who go with joy to Tholagatty to visit the tomb of this man of God, this holy rishi, this founding father, this “Mad Monk of Tholagatty”.

OBLATE HERITAGE SERIES

1992

1. *"One of Our Own"*
Archbishop E. 'Mabathoana, O.M.I., 1904 - 1966
First Oblate Mosotho Priest and Bishop in Lesotho
2. *"A Way of the Cross in the 20th Century"*
Fr. Friedrich Lorenz, O.M.I., 1897 - 1944
A German Oblate tried and beheaded by the Nazis
3. *"The Mad Monk of Tholagatty"*
Fr. B. A. Thomas, O.M.I., 1886 - 1964
Founder of the Rosarian Congregations in Sri Lanka
4. *"To Be a Happy Man"*
Fr. Mario Borzaga, O.M.I., 1932 - 1960
An Italian Missionary who disappeared in Laos
5. *"Brother Church"*
Br. Ernest Gauthier, O.M.I., 1908 - 1983
Devoted doorkeeper at the University Seminary,
Ottawa
6. *"If Only for an Hour"*
Fr. Ludwik Wrodarczyk, O.M.I., 1907 - 1943
A young Polish priest cruelly put to death

Oblate General Postulation

C.P. 9061

00100 Roma Aurelio

Italy