

THE ARRIVAL OF CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE ANGAMI AREA IN NAGALAND

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This paper makes an attempt to trace some of the important events leading to the arrival of the Catholic Church in the Angami area and also the contribution of the Church to the overall development of the Angami Nagas.

Christianity in Nagaland began with the arrival of the American Baptist missionaries in Upper Assam, extending their mission into the Hills. There are several Christian denominations working in Nagaland such as the Catholics, the Baptists, the Christian Revival Church, the Assembly of God, the Pentecostal, the Seventh Day Adventist and the Jehovah Witnesses.

The Catholic Mission came to Nagaland just after the British had left. The first Catholic priest to reside in Nagaland was Father Emmanuel Bars SDB. He came to Nagaland in 1948. Father Bars, however, was not the first Catholic priest to visit the Naga Hills. It is on record that about a century back, Fr. Freyccenon of Dacca visited the foot hills of the Naga area in 1847. Then in 1908 the Salvadorian Father Marcellinus Molz visited these hills. He was staying with the Aos for sometime in Tamlu. In 1912 Fr. Angar Koenigsbauer who was the first Catholic missionary to Manipur had to reach Imphal via Dimapur and Kohima. However, none of these priests could stay long enough in Naga Hills and as such their visits did not bear much result.

The Second World War had a tremendous impact on the Nagas. Their hills became a battleground and they had to endure all the hardships of a war which they had not in any way started. And during the war the Nagas remained steadfast to the British, giving no support to the Japanese. Soon after hostilities ceased in what was the westernmost drive of the Japanese imperialism, the British Government of India showed its appreciation of the services rendered by the Nagas in resisting the Japanese expansion and control over the hills, by constructing a much needed hospital at Kohima. So this was a 'War-gift' given to the Nagas by the British and it needed nurses to look after the patients. This need was communicated by Sir Akbar Hydari, the then Governor of Assam to Stephen Farrando, the Bishop of Shillong whose

diocese then covered the entire North Eastern Region of India. As a result, the Bishop invited the sisters from the congregation of Missionaras de Cristo Jesu of Spain to come and start the hospital at Kohima. On the 25th November, 1948 five sisters, including their founding Mother Camino arrived in Shillong. Given just a month to acquaint themselves with the new environment and a new language, two sisters: Margerita and Guadelupe, accompanied by their chaplain Fr. Emmanuel Bars came to Kohima on December 31, 1948 and stayed for few days in the only hotel available in the town. Four days later they were provided quarters in the hospital compound. Despite the great difficulty in conversation, for the Sisters had only just started to learn English and knew no Indian language, the professional experience of the nuns and their optimism stood them in good stead during this difficult period.

Fr. Emmanuel Bars had come to India in January, 1992 with the first group of Salesian Fathers and Brothers. He first worked in the Khasi Hills as a teacher and a touring missionary. Later on he served as the Administrator Apostolic of Krishnagar in Bengal followed by a very long tenure of forty years as Vicar General of Shillong. He accompanied the Spanish Sisters to Kohima as their chaplain because he was a Spanish. However, he was not allowed any pastoral work other than the care of medical sisters. Fr. Bars was a homeopath and he put his skills to some use while in Kohima. Sometimes he even visited Kohima village and gave homeopathic treatment to the sick people. In this way he came to know some people in Kohima and began to share his faith with them. He was also interested in photography. He left Kohima in 1952.

When Fr. Bars left Kohima, his place was taken by Fr. Hubert Marocchino who was earlier stationed at Tezpur. The same restriction of movement and work was imposed on him. By now the three sisters became familiar figures in Kohima, another sister having joined the first two. And they were slowly permitted to extend their area of their medical work to Kohima village, located just above the town. Fr. Marocchino along with the Sisters used to visit the sick and called on friends. Slowly a small group of people became interested in the Catholic teachings and they used to attend the Sunday services at the hospital chapel. Among the first group of the Angami Catholics were Paul Kevipralie, Louis Neizo and Philip Suosahie. In spite of opposition from some of the Baptists and a threat to throw the supporters of the new faith out of the village and cut off from society, interest in Marocchino's work grew. It is not surprising that such opposition of the spread of Catholic Church should arise. Till now the only form of Christianity that the Nagas had come into contact was the preaching made by the American Baptists. Naturally it was difficult for the Angami Baptists to accept a new form of Church in their midst.

December 14, 1952 was a 'Red-Letter Day' in the history of Catholic Church among the Angami Nagas. On that day Fr. Marocchino baptized John Kevipele who was the son of Paulus Kevipralie. The Catholic Church had then, after four years, its first member.

Efforts were made to attract the attention of the people in the Church's activities, particularly during the celebrations at Christmas. Christmas of 1953 was celebrated not in the hospital but in the Kohima Village. A school building was converted into a Church for the occasion and many people came out to give a helping hand in the preparation. The Church at midnight Mass was filled to the capacity even though the only Catholics were Marocchino, the Sisters and few soldiers. The 25th December witnessed a great feast (Barakhana) for friends and sympathizers.

Christmas of 1954 was also held in the village school. Prizes were distributed to the children who had regularly attended the Sunday Mass: some fifty of them made it. This method of Christmas brought the first large group of adults and children into the Catholic faith.

The Spanish Sisters left Kohima in 1955. As for Fr. Marocchino, he had to remain in Kohima since there was a Catholic community growing in the town. He vacated the quarters in the hospital and moved into a small shed within the War Cemetery, close to the residence of its caretaker, Samuel Mezhur. He moved from place to place and finally he had a small hut built in a corner of the Kohima Village. Unfortunately the hut was looted and burnt down during the early phase of the Naga insurgency in 1956. Marocchino, however, escaped unhurt as he had gone to Imphal that time and he had returned to find all his properties gone, including his notes on the Angami language.

In spite of the trouble caused by the underground Nagas, Fr. Marocchino continued his work and during this time he really wanted to have a Church. In this regard, Keviselie Sekhose, not yet a Catholic leased his land in T.Khel of Kohima Village for the construction of the Church. However, before the construction could begin, the army occupied the site.

Sunday services were then held at the War Cemetery at the foot of the Memorial Cross. The Christmas celebrations in 1956 were held at the Kohima village in the unfinished chapel measuring 42×32 feet. When this chapel was completed, the Bishop of Dibrugarh came to Kohima and consecrated it on October 5, 1957. During this occasion the Bishop received 16 converts into the Church and administered the confirmation to over a hundred men, women and children.

Meanwhile Fr. Marocchino felt the need of a school. In this regard, he helped his friend Samuel Mezbur to start the Kohima English School. Fr. Marocchino also started on his own the Don Bosco Elementary School which was located at the Veterinary compound.

Fr. Marocchino truly was the first Catholic missionary for the Angamis as Fr. Bars having being restricted to preach and teach. During the period that Fr. Marocchino was in the Naga Hills he was able to establish a small but very vibrant Catholic community. He left Kohima in October, 1963 after twelve years of hard and dedicated service to the Nagas.

The little Church that began to conduct services in 1957 at the Kohima Village was soon too small to accommodate all the Catholics of the Kohima town and the village. The area on which it was built could not even accommodate a home for the priest. Moreover, the land on which it was constructed had been leased for only few years. So the Catholic leaders in Kohima purchased five acres of land on Bayavü hill, leveled the land and made an approach road so as to prepare for the construction of a large Church. But then even before the foundation of the Church could be laid, some of the Baptists opposed the project. The case was then taken to the Kohima Panchayat for settlement. Ultimately the Panchayat decided in favor of the Catholics. The Catholic community's joy was short lived as the Government demanded the land for the State Directorate of Education.

It took many more years for the selection of another site. Some of those who were ready to sell their land to the mission were threatened. Then came a generous offer from Vikuoso who donated his land for the mission. But construction could not start on this site as the army occupied it during its combining operation in the village in the heat of Naga insurgency.

The priests who followed Father Marocchino were Frs. Felix, T.Resto, Paul Bernick and Matthew Uzhunnalil. Father Felix is remembered for starting contact with the neighboring villages and the school he started in Kohima village. Many still remember Fr. T.Resto for his fine voice and the choir he organized, and Fr. Paul Bernick who with his affable and simple manners won the hearts of the people.

Two important developments at Kohima during this phase were establishment of the Little Flower School in 1965 and Christ King School in 1969. Little Flower School was entrusted to the Salesian Sisters and it is situated high over Kohima. Despite the distance and the climb, the school came to be regarded as the best girl school in Nagaland. Fr. Bernick took care to plan out Christ King School, located at the far end of the village. The Bethany Sisters were invited to help in the management of this school.

Apart from the work of the priests, simple villagers played their role in spreading the Catholic Church to other villages. The Catholic community of Khonoma began through the efforts of Pelie Elias. His curiosity about the Catholic Church was aroused when he came into contact with the Spanish Sisters during the admission of his son in the Civil hospital. He was baptized in 1955 by Father Marocchino. Father Felix started a school at Khonoma in 1965. The Catholic community of Medziphema had started in 1960 when Mrs. Neisoü and her family migrated there from Khonoma. However, it was only in 1974 that the Catholics could build their Church.

In 1959 Kramhieo of Keruma became a Catholic and after his baptism took his new faith to his village. The first group of converts in this village numbered about thirty could not build their Church within the village as the non-Christians did not allow the ringing of the Church bell as they believed that it would invite bad luck to the village. Later on when these laws were relaxed, a Church was built inside the village. The beginning of the Catholic Church in Nerhema goes back to May 9, 1959 when Xavier Zavilie, Joseph Lhouzetuo, Clement Kevakhrie, Andrew Zakietuolie, Veronica Zievilhouu and Cecilia Solesieu were baptized by Fr. Marocchino. Rüsoma village also set up Catholic Church with Lhoupfelie Linus' conversion in 1964.

Joseph Vitsutha and Govi of Jotsoma were baptized in Kohima in 1964. Joseph's faith soon attracted his friends in the village and they too became Catholics. Joseph became a Catechist and he led his people to build a small Church. Joseph's friend Govi also became a Catechist and he established a Church at Zubza. The Catholics of Jakhama are grateful to Zacharia Kehozecho for bringing the Catholic faith to their village. Paulus Pralie of Kohima urged Ada of Kedima to embrace Catholicism and Ada called others to follow his example.

The only diocese in the Northeastern region where the Jesuits began their mission of education and have come to stay is the Kohima Diocese. In 1967 Fr. Verstraeten, the former Rector of St. Xavier's College, Calcutta and a noted educationist was deputed to explore the possibilities of a Jesuit centre in Nagaland. His report to his superiors gave a favorable assessment of the educational prospects in Nagaland. Thus, some Jesuits priests arrived in 1970 and they selected a suitable site at Jakhama to construct a school. 10 acres of land was purchased and the construction work started for the present Loyola School.

Among the Southern Angamis, the Jesuits have started new ventures. The success of Loyola School at Jakhama as a centre for education and evangelization prompted the Jesuits to open up more schools such as St. Paul Primary School at Phesama in 1973, St. Joseph School at Viswema in 1974, Sacred Heart School at Khuzama in 1978 and St. Xavier's

School at Kedima in 1979. Much of the funds for these rural schools came from the Catholics of West Germany. The Jesuits also realized the need to train the school teachers. As a result, St. Paul's Institute of Education at Phesama was started to meet this need.

The Jesuits priests found a large number of children in total neglect in the Angami area. In this regard, so as to give these children love and care, a home and education, a Rural Agro-Industrial Training Centre at Khuzama called Eden Gardens was started. The latest venture of the Jesuits is St. Joseph's College at Jakhama which has become a good centre for higher education.

The success of Jesuit society has not been limited to education alone. As priests they have also been concerned with spreading the Christian faith. The evangelical influence of Loyola school has its impact in the place where their students come from. In 1971 contact was first made with Kigwema village. Three years later the Church took roots in Khuzama and then in other villagers like Viswema, Kezoma and Chakhaba. As a matter of fact, the Catholic Church is fast growing in the areas given to the Jesuits.

Apart from schools and other educational institutions, the Church has made a significant contribution in the field of health care. In fact, it was Catholic Church's interest in health services that occasioned the start of the Church's work among the Angamis. Today, almost every parish centre runs a dispensary or clinic. These are all affiliated to the large national organization called the Catholic Hospital Association of India which provides most of the medicines and infrastructure for the units.

In conclusion, we can say that the Catholic Church attempts to serve the people by means of education, medical care, socio-economic projects and above all with the Good News of Jesus Christ. The first group of priests were adventurers and missionaries in the real sense of the word. They toured the hills, walked long distances, contacted numerous villages and made the Catholic Church part of what Nagaland a Christian State today. In short, within a span of six decades, the Catholic faith has taken firm roots among the Angami Nagas.

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