

## **MYANMAR CATHOLIC CHURCH FOUND IN HISTORICAL RECORDS (1287-1900)**

The most ancient sign of Christianity in Myanmar can be found on the mural painting of Roman and Greek crosses inside Kyansittha cave in Bagan which had been established during the time of Bagan Dynasty (9-13 AD). Nestorians were among the Mongol soldiers who had marched into Bagan in 1287 AD. Basing on this mural it can be said that Christians had set foot on Myanmar soil ever since the end of 13<sup>th</sup> century.

King Min Bin from Rakhine had employed Portuguese soldiers and erected Myuk U or Myo Haung fortress. There were Portuguese mercenary soldiers under the King Tabinshwehte. They were being accompanied by some Jesuits for their spiritual assistance.

Philip de Brito, a Portuguese, reached Rakhine in 1599 and served the King Minrazagyi. He had been delegated by the King to occupy Than Hlyin with guards. He did not fail to offer annual tribute to the Kings of Rakhine and Taungngu. He built a church at Than Hlyin for his conferrers and raised Catholicism. The priests were the Jesuits.

In 1613, King Mahadamaraza conquered Than Hlyin, executed de Brito and deported the prisoners of war to Ava. The Catholic prisoners and their descendents were known as “Bayingyi”.

In 1721, Fr. Sigis Mondo Calchi, a Barnabite together with Fr. Giuseppe Vittoni arrived from Italy and began their mission in Pegu and Ava. King Tanninganwe of Ava, in 1723, invited Fr. S. Calchi to his imperial city, Ava. Fr. S. Calchi’s report, after the audience with the king, to his Superior General in Italy reads;

*After giving permission to build churches and to preach the Word of God, His Majesty had helped us with donations to build the church. The King wished to have contact especially with the Pope. He desires other missionaries and men expert in the arts of painting, weaving cloths, making glass, astronomers, mechanics, geographers, etc. Please send us some of your subjects who are good, well-disciplined, chaste and mild ....*

When Fr. S. Calchi passed away in 1728, Fr. Pio Gallizia and Fr. Giorgio Rosetti came from Italy to continue the mission. King Tanninganwe allowed them to construct a church and a school at Than Hlyin. Fr. P. Gallizia was nominated as Bishop in 1743. He was consecrated in Italy and returned to Myanmar bringing some more missionaries together with him. Wars waging among the feudal lords hindered them from reaching the Bayingyi villages in upper Myanmar. Not to waste the time they presented an Italian-made watch, with Myanmar words inscribed on the dial, to Thamainghtaw, King of Pegu. In 1745, Bishop P. Gallizia and his co-workers had been assassinated due to misunderstanding.

Fr. Paolo Nerini and Br. Angelo Cappello in Than Hlyin obtained the authorization from Banyadala to build a school and a dispensary. Fr. P. Nerini built a church and a school and Nicolas de Aquilar, an Armenian trader had donated the expenses. Next to the school was the boarding house. Peguans, Burmans, Armenian and Portuguese boys totaling about forty students had been admitted. Latin, Arithmetic, Geography and Nautical sciences were among the syllabus modeled after the Barnabite high schools in Europe. Than Hlyin, at the then an important sea port was the reason to train the students in navigation. Latin was the classic literature and Portuguese was the commercial language of Europe. Therefore, the curriculum could be considered as the most updated of the time.

In 1767, Fr. Giovanni Percoto founded a school at Monhla for teaching. The construction had been assisted by Chevalier Millard, French Captain of the King's bodyguard. The school embraced about 150 students including the poor and some orphans.

To their Superior General in Italy Fr. G. Percoto wrote, *“If we send four boys to Rome to be instructed, the voyage and everything would cost us more than what we request you to maintain and instruct one hundred”*.

King Sinphyushin invited Fr. G. Percoto to teach the royal pages. No less important than Latin, the classical literature of Europe was Portuguese, the commercial language of the Far East. For this reason, it can be said that the royal youths had been already accessed to an education of international standard since 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Bishop G. Percoto, in 1773, sent Fr. Melchiorre Carpani to Rome to cast Myanmar alphabets and do the printing. In his letter to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide he wrote, *“I will send through Fr. M. Carpani, Myanmar Primer Books, translated manuscripts and also rules, practice and conduct of Buddhist monks”*.

Fr. M. Carpani arrived at Rome in 1776 and engraved Myanmar types in lead by the help of Propaganda Fide press. Under his supervision Myanmar Fundamental Grammar had been published, not only the first Myanmar Grammar to be printed but was the first printed book in Myanmar. This work introduced the Europeans to Myanmar literature, alphabets, culture and traditions.

The Barnabite missionaries pioneered, among the Westerners, in learning Myanmar literature. The same was true in translating Sanskrit into Italian and Catholic doctrines into Myanmar. They can be regarded as the forerunners in the field of Myanmar translated literature.

Propaganda Fide sent 60,000 Myanmar types and 40,000 Latin alphabets, all cast in lead metal, together with two sets of printing instruments to Myanmar. Unfortunately all were lost in ship wreck at sea.

Bp. G. Percoto died in the year 1776. He endeavored not only in mission work but also in popularizing Pali, Myanmar literature, history and culture. He mastered both Pali and Myanmar as if he were a Buddhist monk. He translated Padimok, Kammawa and some Buddhist scriptures into Italian. The Italian Barnabites proved themselves to be the highly-cultured scholars who valued Myanmar and Buddhist literatures at that time.

Fr. Gaetano Mantegazza, together with U Sau and Pio Nge from Myanmar, went to Rome in 1784. He revised Bp. G. Percoto's first printed Grammar book of 1776 and published again in 1785. New casting fashioned by U Sau could reduce many errors of the previous one.

The Barnabites sowed the seed of printing in Myanmar. Its fruits, in the later age, can be seen in Myanmar Alphabets and Grammar, prescribed texts and school books all printed in Myanmar. It would be incomplete to learn the history of printing in Myanmar without the scholarly enterprise of Barnabites since early 18<sup>th</sup> century in the country.

Fr. G. Mantegazza was consecrated as Bishop in 1788 and returned to Myanmar. He died after a short stay in Amarapura. Fr. Vincenzo Sangermano was counted among the missionaries of upper Myanmar. In Nabet village he taught at the school donated by U Myat Kyaw known as

donor of “nine ecclesiastical edifices”. He transferred to Yangon in 1788 and took care of St. John’s parish church. He upgraded the parish school into a college with boarding house. The boarder students had to wear school uniforms.

The syllabus covered Grammar, Philosophy, Arithmetic, and Navigation. The students had to follow the time-table. Fr. Marcello Cortenovis took care of the Assumption Church and built a school for the education of orphan girls. The care for the girls had been entrusted to Myanmar women superiors.

On his return to Italy in 1806, Fr. V. Sangermano brought along with him Ambrozio de Rosario from Myanmar to study medicine. He was the first Myanmar to go overseas for surgical degrees.

Political situations in Europe impeded Fr. V. Sangermano from sending more missionaries to Myanmar and he himself could not go back. In the year 1808, he found himself in his native place, Arpino. He made a good use of his free time by writing “*A Description of the Burmese Empire*” on Myanmar history. He did not live to see it published but William Tandy translated into English and Oriental Translation Fund published it.

The book is composed of Burmese Cosmography, Burmese History, Constitution of the Burmese Empire, Army and Military discipline, Moral and Physical Constitution, and Burmese Laws and Courts. His untiring labor revealed 18<sup>th</sup> century Myanmar to the world.

He mentioned that Myanmar Kings were the most important supporter of Buddhism. At the same time they guaranteed the freedom of other faith. Key to success of the Kings was the disciplined army and of the monks, observance of the code of conducts, said Fr. V. Sangermano.

The last two Italian Barnabites remained in Myanmar were Fr. Luigi Grondona and Fr. Giuseppe d'Amato. Being an accomplished scholar, Fr. L. Grondona was loved and venerated tenderly by the Kings Bodawphaya and Bagyidawphaya. He was appointed as royal tutor to teach Human Science to the princes and youth of the palace. At his death he was buried at the expense of the King Bagyidaw and the Queen went to the Church for three days during the funeral ceremonies.

Fr. G. d'Amato, while working in upper Myanmar, studied her natural sciences for 27 years and described the mines of precious stones at *Kyatpyin* in the district of Mogok.

A Burmese born Barnabite, Fr. Ignatius de Brito wrote Burmese pharmacology with Italian and Latin nomenclature. Furthermore, he compiled the "*Pawtugi Yazawin*" co-authored by the Collector of Revenue, Thiri Zaytarekyaw.

Political situation in Myanmar was not the same after the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1824-1826 when the British took over Rakhine and Taninthari coastal lines.

The Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide directly took charge of Myanmar mission for a decade in 1830. Msgr. Frederick Cao from Pius Schools had been assigned to Moulmein(Mawlamyaing). Other priests sent by Propaganda Fide namely; Fr. Domenico Tarolli and Fr. Antonio Ricca worked in Ava, Nabek and Chaung Oo. Fr. A. Ricca had been loved and cherished not only by the Catholics but also by the Buddhists; not only by the local inhabitants but also by the authorities and noble descendents. The Mayor of Chaung Oo granted him a plot of land to build the church.

Upon his return to Myanmar in 1840, Msgr. F. Cao brought a letter from Pope Gregory XVI for King Tharawaddy. The letter assured that the mission works would not harm but greatly contribute to the development of the nation.

Myanmar mission had been entrusted, in 1840, to the Oblates of Virgin Mary from Turin in Italy. For this reason Msgr. F. Cao handed over the papal letter to Fr. Gaetano Boccahi and Fr. Francis Bertelli who were proceeding to Myanmar.

In 1844, Fr. Domenico Delprino opened boarding houses for both sexes and prepared a convent for the nuns. After the second Anglo-Burmese war Moulmein in lower Myanmar became headquarter of the mission. The first six nuns of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition from France came to Moulmein in 1847. The Sisters took over the education of the girls. Besides orphanage for young girls they opened a school both for boarder and day students.

The Oblate missionaries in Myanmar promoted a friendly relationship both with the King in the upper and the British in the lower for the smooth functioning of mission works.

Since 1721, Italian missionaries began to arrive in Myanmar and established the relationship between the two countries. In the past, the contact was based on trade and travel. The missionaries transformed this point of contact into education and evangelization.

Furthermore, through the efforts of the Kings and Italian missionaries in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the relationship had been matured into political and diplomatic. The two nations exchanged their diplomats and could able to sign treaties of friendship.

After the second Anglo-Burmese war in 1852, His Majesty King Mindon had deputed Fr. Paolo Abbona and Fr. D. Tarolli to act as the interpreters of his inmost sentiments on the

situation. The two Catholic priests were ready to render him any kind of service in the King's dealing with the outside world.

King Mindon sent, through Fr. P. Abbona, a golden chalice and a cross adorned with precious gems to Pope Pius IX as a token of friendship and goodwill. Holy Father responded, through the same priest, to the King with a gift and a letter dated 12<sup>th</sup> January 1857 which read;

*We are now writing this friendly letter as a clear testimony and proof of the deep gratitude of our heart, both on account of the precious gifts, ..... We were overjoyed when we learned that You extended your kind favours to the Catholic Christians living there, ...etc.*

Again, His Majesty replied to the Pope in a letter dated 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1857;

*As I love my people and the subjects of any other country, assisting them and protecting them; ..... and the Catholics so helped and favoured, living and staying tranquilly, serve me their own Sovereign faithfully as soldiers and are most faithful, content, satisfied and happy subjects. .... I, from the goodness of my heart, love, protect and assist any foreigner or merchant who comes to my Kingdoms, and promise that in the future I shall protect and help any Catholic missionary coming into my Kingdoms and also all the Catholic Christians in my territories.*

In the year 1856, Bishop Paul Ambrose Bigandet from Paris Foreign Mission received the delegation and duly arrived in Myanmar.

Fr. Nicolo Polignani, working in Chanthaywa in the north-west of Ava, strived to educate the children. Besides normal lectures, he concentrated more on moral and spiritual formation of



the youth. With gentle persuasion he intended to generate ethically and physically distinguished youth. His work on “*Compendious History of the Old Testament with Moral Reflections*” in Myanmar had been twice published at the Catholic press in (Bassein)Pathein. He served both as a missionary and a teacher for 27 years in Myanmar. He passed away on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1859 and was buried in Chang Oo. He was one of the missionaries whose generosity knew no bound.

In 1857, Bishop Bigandet began to build an orphanage and girl school in Yangon. When ready in 1861, the school was named St. John’s Convent and entrusted to the Sisters of St. Joseph. It was bi-lingual for the normal students. In addition to school lectures, vocational trainings such as weaving, sewing and tailoring were inserted for the orphans.

Kanaung, the Crown Prince and brother of the King, in 1863 offered two thousand Kyats to Fr. P. Abbona for the expansion of the school. It had been the first Anglo-Vernacular school for girls renowned as St. Joseph’s. Girls, who were excluded in monastic education in those days, had benefited a right to an education no lesser than the boys of their age.

Fr. P. Abbona requested again some donation from His Majesty since the number of unaided children had been increasing. New buildings emerged with the equal contribution of the King and the mission. Sons and daughters of King Thibaw learned English and French from St. Joseph Sisters who had been privileged to appear before the Chief Queen, Su Phaya Latt every Thursday.

In 1867, Sisters of Good Shepherd accepted to carry on St. John’s Convent in Yangon. Kanaung Prince enrolled some of the royal girls from Mandalay in the same convent in order to profit from the Western education.

Catholic missionaries had sown and nurtured the seed of Western education in Myanmar. Their hard work of introducing new sciences in Myanmar produced a great impact on education.

In 1859, Fr. Xavier Ducoty extended his school in Moulmein, known as St. Patrick's male school and handed over to De La Salle Brothers. It was the first school undertaken by the Brothers. They moved to Yangon in 1860 and began to teach at an old school, after some renovation, near the Bishop's house. It was entitled St. Paul's male school in honor of Bishop Paul A. Bigandet.

King Mindon had invited Fr. Augustine Lecomte to his palace to tutor his youths. After the model of colleges in Europe, he taught them English and basic sciences. It was obvious that the royal descendents had already been informed of Western education through the missionaries.

In 1868, Catholic mission territories in Myanmar had been divided into three regions such as North, South and East. The French missionaries took the responsibility of northern and southern regions while the eastern was shouldered by the Italians. To begin their work, Msgr. Eugene Biffi and Fr. Tancredi Conti from Italy arrived at Taungngu.

In upper Myanmar, the Crown Prince Kanaung tried to upgrade the nation by founding some factories and sending some Myanmar youths to study up to date sciences in Western countries. Catholic priests played an important role in this national project. The Prince Kanaung began his scholarship program with the help of an Italian priest, Fr. Paolo Abbona. The four youth who were being chosen and sent to study in Italy were Maung Tha Htar, Maung Khet, Maung Phoe Chone and Maung Si.

In the year 1876, another five youths were being sent to Italy. They were Maung Own Pwint, Maung Kan Htoo, Maung Ba O, Maung Htun Oo and Maung Hla Baw.

In the same vein the French missionaries lobbied the diplomatic relationship between the Myanmar and French Kings. Myanmar team of goodwill mission, carrying special gifts, was sent to Paris in the year 1856. The French government responded by a well-wishing letter and augmented the diplomatic relationship between the two nations.

In 1859, King Mindon and Prince Kanaung received Count Henri de Sercey of France in an audience. Upon his return the King entrusted him three young men: Maung Nyunt, Maung Shwe Oh, and Maung Htun Aung. They were the first scholarship holders to study in France. The second group, Maung Myu and Maung Aung Thu in 1863, had been sent through the help of Bishop Bigandet. Fr. Pere Albrand assisted them to meet their needs in a foreign country.

While working in Myanmar, the missionaries tried to convince the Myanmar people of the correlation between national and world affairs. The benefit what the Myanmar kings gained from the Italian missionaries was the idea to keep abreast with the world.

The style of teaching in Catholic mission schools by the French missionaries in late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Myanmar was being affected by the industrial revolutions in Western Europe. Mission schools which started to distribute technical sciences in a wide range played the leading role in nation's building. It is evident that the Catholic priests introduced Myanmar to Europe by means of education.

In addition to educations the missionaries did not neglect the charitable works. For the lepers, Fr. John Wehinger founded an asylum, in 1896, dedicated to St. John at Manawayaman

garden in Mandalay. His church and the hospital offered spiritual and medical assistance to the lepers and inmates.

The main building comprising the chapel and convent were declared open by Lieutenant Governor of Burma and the seven wards by the Viceroy and Governor General of India.

The Sisters of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary arrived at St. John's Leprosarium in 1895 and rendered their selfless services to the least fortunate.

De La Salle Brothers opened St. Peter's high school for the boys on 20 December 1897 in Mandalay. The school's fame was prestigious and immortal in upper Myanmar due to good discipline and excellent method of teaching.

The Sisters of St. Joseph divided their St. John's convent into two: English convent and Anglo-Vernacular school. Mother Josephine was appointed as superior in 1874 and the new buildings were ready in 1894. Another new school for the orphans had been erected in 1901. The students were good in English and well-disciplined. The Sisters looked after and educate the orphans for gratis. Catholic nuns were the first to open girls' school on Myanmar soil. Vocational trainings conducted by the nuns for Myanmar girls were the prototype of the schools of domestic science and handiwork by Myanmar social community.