

HEALTH SERVICES RENDERED BY HIS EXCELLENCY MOST REV. BISHOP LAWRENCE MAR EPHREAM IN MARTHANDAM REGION

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Abstract

A section of historians argue that it is but because of great men's thoughts and actions only history is being created. It is true that the thoughts and actions of the great men create political changes, social growth, economic improvement and cultural development. For instance, at the world level we can see a large number of activities of great men and their impacts on society. In the Marthandam region His Excellency Most Rev. Bishop Lawrence Mar Ephream served as a Good Samaritan among the needy. He was born in a poor family and opted for priesthood and selected Marthandam region as his mission field and through his thoughts and actions, he changed the health history of this region. This paper illustrates the services rendered by His Excellency Most Rev. Bishop Lawrence Mar Ephream for the promotion of health conditions in the Marthandam region.

Keywords: Consecrated, Elephantiasis, Franciscan, Health, Leprosy

Introduction

Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish historian rightly defined that "History is nothing but the innumerable biography of Great Men". It is true that all the political, social and economic changes are because of great men. For instance, in ancient India, the thoughts and actions of Lord Buddha, created a new religion that spread not only in India but also in countries across the world. Correspondingly, during the medieval period, it is because of Pope Urban II crusades were fought that killed lakhs of people and created so much destruction in medieval Europe. Likewise, in the modern period, the thoughts and actions of Martin Luther created reformation that spread in countries across the world and changed the course of modern history. In the same way in the history of Tamil Nadu, the thoughts and actions of Periyar E.V.R. initiated the self-respect and rationalist movements that spread throughout the state and changed the history of modern Tamil Nadu to a greater extent. Similarly, His Excellency Most Rev. Bishop Lawrence Mar Ephream by his thoughts and actions changed the health history of Marthandam region. This paper elaborates the details about the Health Services rendered by His Excellency Most Rev. Bishop Lawrence Mar Ephream in Marthandam region.

Life History

His Excellency Bishop Lawrence Mar Ephream was the first Bishop of Malankara Syrian Catholic Diocese of Marthandam hailed from a small village at Chani, Kanjiramkulam, in Trivandrum district of Kerala. He was born on 15th May, 1928 as an eldest son of Mr. Justus and Mrs. Victoria. He had two younger brothers. His original name was Lawrence. He was

baptized by Rev. Devadas in the Church of South India (CSI) faith. Most of his family members belonged to the CSI faith. But in the initial days of the Reunion Movement, his parents joined the Malankara Catholic Church by the influence of the Franciscan brothers. During his childhood he got better education and he was well versed in Malayalam, Tamil and Latin languages. After the completion of his education, the young boy Lawrence expressed his passion to become a priest to his parents. With the blessing of his parents, he joined the St. Aloysius Minor Seminary at Trivandrum in 1944. Then he was sent to the major seminary named St. Joseph Theological College at Mangalore in 1946. Where he learnt the Kongini language. Again, he was deputed to complete his higher education and he fulfilled the same in the Gregorian University at Rome. On 14th May, 1953 he was ordained by His Excellency Most Rev. Benedict Mar Gregorius, the Auxiliary Bishop of Trivandrum Archdiocese and became a priest. Following that, on 15th May 1953, he celebrated his first Holy Mass at St. Aloysius Minor seminary at Pattom in Trivandrum. Then he served for one and half years in St. Aloysius Minor Seminary. Soon after, he was appointed as the Rector of the seminary. Following that he was sent to Rome for higher education. He secured his Diploma in Missiology and Degree in Sociology from the Gregorian University. When he returned, he was appointed as the Director of St. Mary's Institute of Pastoral Studies at Palayam in Trivandrum.

Subsequently he was sent by His Excellency Most. Rev. Bishop Mar Gregorius, the Auxiliary Bishop of Trivandrum Archdiocese to do his mission work in Kanyakumari district. Thus in 1977 Rev. Fr. Lawrence came to the Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nadu as a parish priest of St. George church at Kirathoor. During the Golden Jubilee celebrations of the Malankara Catholic church's Reunion Movement, he was consecrated as a Bishop after the name Lawrence Mar Ephream by the Metropolitan Archbishop Benedict Mar Gregarious at Kottayam on 27th December 1980. He was chosen as an Auxiliary Bishop of the Archeparchy of Trivandrum at the age of 52. Then he was elected as the Administrator of the Archeparchy of Trivandrum after the demise of Archbishop Mar Gregorius on 10th October 1994. He was appointed as the first Bishop of the Metropolitan Eparchy of Marthandam, established on 16th December 1996. His enthronement ceremonies were held at the Christuraja Cathedral, Marthandam on 23rd January 1997. But unfortunately, he passed away on 8th April 1997 at 1.00 pm at the age of 69.

Immediately the news spread like a wildfire. People from different parts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu visited the Marthandam cathedral to have a last glimpse of him. After paying the last respect to the departed soul, his body was taken in procession and buried in the Christuraja Cathedral Church campus at Marthandam in Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nadu. But his physical absence through death did not put a full stop to his missionary zeal. His memory is still powerful, inspiring people to lead up to the ideals of their Christian calling. It inspired many people to take up different ways of missionary life. For instance, Rev. Fr. Peter Benedict Rajan, Rev. Fr. John.S, Rev. Fr. Devadas, Rev. Fr. Pathorse, Rev. Fr. Jose Sundavilagam, Rev. Fr. Jose Bennet and Rev. Fr. Eugene is the living example who got inspiration from the missionary life of His Excellency Most. Rev. Bishop Lawrence Mar Ephream. Thus, he earned name and fame as a greatest missionary of the Malankara Syrian Catholic Church.

The Condition of Marthandam Region at the Arrival of His Excellency Most. Rev. Bishop Lawrence Mar Ephream

Marthandam is a major trade centre in Kuzhithurai municipality across National Highway (NH 47) in the Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu. It is one of the largest towns in the district. Once it was under the control of the Travancore Kingdom. It derived its name from the founder and ruler of Travancore, Anizham Thirunal Marthanda Varma. In 1956, the Tamil speaking places were transferred to the neighbouring Madras State as per the State Reorganization Act of 1956 and forms the present-day Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu. It was added to the state of Kanyakumari of Tamil Nadu on 1st November 1956.

In the 1970s Marthandam region had so many disabilities. Particularly the health condition of the women and the children of this region were very pitiable in nature. Pregnant ladies suffered very much because of malnutrition. Hence the maternal mortality of this area was very high. Because of the lack of nutritious food, children also suffered a lot and it paved the way for the infant mortality in the society. In addition to that, dangerous diseases like elephantiasis, leprosy etc. added more fuel to the existing fire. In this juncture as an active missionary in the Malankara Syrian Catholic Diocese of Marthandam, His Excellency Most Rev. Bishop. Lawrence Mar Ephream emerged as a Good Samaritan and he tried his level best to improve the health condition of the people. Though he concentrated in the Marthandam region, because of the need his services extended in a few places of the present Kanyakumari and Trivandrum districts also.

The Health Services of His Excellency Bishop Lawrence Mar Ephream

His Excellency Most Rev. Bishop Lawrence Mar Ephream rightly understood the fact that, 'Sound body is essential for Sound mind'. Realizing that he turned his attention towards that field. For that he spent most of his time for the speedy recovery of the sick people. He knew the fact behind the occurrence of a disease. Because he had served in these capacities during his life span. He undertook the ministry to serve the lepers at St. John's Hospital, Pireppencode (near Trivandrum) in 1964. He served as its director till 1977. He worked as the Vice President of Catholic Hospital Association of India for three years and as its President for two years. He also worked as the Vice President of the Voluntary Health Association of India for 2 years. As a well-known person in the field of health he decided to initiate various efforts for the sound health of the needy people in and around Marthandam region.

The Establishment of a Leprosy Hospital

In those days the people of Pireppencode near Trivandrum area suffered much under a dangerous disease called Leprosy. Without any proper medical care, it was spread among many. In this critical juncture Rev. Fr. Lawrence, entered in that soil and he identified the pathetic condition of the affected people. The fruit was the establishment of a leprosy hospital at Pireppencode in Trivandrum. For that he brought a few nuns of the Little Sisters of Charles Deberco congregation from France. By utilizing these sisters, he gave training to the native people about the treatment of leprosy. After that the hospital became famous and it started to

function on 11th February 1963. Because of this leprosy started to vanish from the area and people started to get sound health and it paved the way for the creation of a sound society.

The Formation of a Clinic

Rev. Fr. Lawrence was always vigilant about the health condition of the common people. Because he knew the value of a healthy body. Knowing the needs of the people of Vempayam (near Trivandrum), he started a clinic at Vempayam in 1965. After the establishment of this clinic, he started to mobilize the people and created awareness among the common people regarding their sound health. Because of his efforts people started to realize the need for a healthy lifestyle. It created a healthy society at Vempayam.

The Founding of Mini Health Centre

“Wellness is the complete integration of body, mind and spirit”, realizing the importance of this quote, as per the direction and support of Dr. Kabir, Joint Director, Tamil Nadu Public Medicine Department, Rev. Fr. Lawrence started 10 Mini Health Centres in Kanyakumari district with the financial aid from the Tamil Nadu government in 1978. As it got success, the government also gave financial aid to start 17 Mini Health Centres too. Thus because of his efforts, a total of 27 mini health centres were established in Kanyakumari district. Through this, it gave needed medical help to the people and so it paved the way for the enrichment of the health condition of the common people.

The Health for One Million

Initially the Health for One Million (HOM) movement was fully based on women's development. During that time women were hesitant to come out of their houses. The promotion of Mother Child Health was the main intention of Rev. Fr. Lawrence. For that he started a unit at Pireppancode in 1977. Through this unit he provided nutritious food to the pregnant ladies and children. This unit later emerged as a health institution named the Health for One Million. The Health for One Million is a health programme initiated by Rev. Fr. Lawrence aiming for the total health development of the people. As per the proverb, 'Prevention is better than cure' it is doing health services especially for the betterment of women and children. The women playing the main role in the HOM programme. In the year 1977, Rev. Fr. Lawrence shaped this innovative and effective programme from his rich experience in the field of health. Initially the work area of the HOM was Trivandrum, Quilon, Pathanamthitta and Kanyakumari districts.

Now it is fully concentrated in Kanyakumari district and so its headquarters is situated at Kuzhithurai in Kanyakumari district. It is an ongoing health programme, in which people of all religion, caste, language, community get its benefits without any discrimination. Under this, a Mobile Palliative Care is running successfully. By using this mobile Palliative Care, HOM is providing medical and humanitarian assistance to the needy bedridden patients within the Kanyakumari district. In addition to that it recently launched a programme called Peter's Hand, in order to give financial assistance to cancer and bedridden patients. Currently by this scheme it is giving Rs. 1000/- per month to 50 Cancer and bedridden patients. In addition to this, it is

helping poor people to meet their educational expenses. It is also having two important ongoing projects called 'Go to the Green Life' and 'Anti- Plastic Movement'. Through the Go to the Green Life project, it is giving trees to the public for all special occasions. It is planning to give away 100, 000 trees. Anti plastic movement, it concentrates the eradication of plastics. For that it is concentrating the schools in and around the Marthandam area. By giving two types of Baskets, it is collecting plastic for recycling. HOM is also having so many ideas for the betterment of the society and it will be materialized in future.

The spark for the establishment of HOM was held in the minds of His Excellency Most Rev. Bishop. Lawrence Mar Ephream. That spark now is in the form of a wildfire that anyone cannot extinguish. All these happened only because of His Excellency Most Rev. Bishop. Lawrence Mar Ephream.

HOM Special School

HOM Special School was also running under the HOM programme. The idea of creating a HOM special school was the brainchild of His Excellency Most Rev. Bishop. Lawrence Mar Ephream. For that, Rev. Bishop, surveyed Marthandam and its adjoining places and identified the number of the mentally disabled children. He was astonished to see the total number and he started to enquire about its reason. Then he decided to give a big hand to the parents of those children by establishing a HOM Special School. This school is exclusively run for the mentally challenged children. But unfortunately, he could not materialize his dream, before that he lost his life. In this juncture one of the upcoming missionaries Rev. Fr. Maria Arputham emerged as a saviour and he fulfilled the dream of His Excellency Most Rev. Bishop. Lawrence Mar Ephream, through the establishment of HOM Special School. 'They are also to be cared for' is the motto with which the special school was established on 22nd July 1999. Now it is functioning at Kuzhithurai and it is having 47 mentally challenged students. It is providing snacks and lunch every day. And also providing all kinds of care to these children with love and affection.

Though the seed for the establishment of HOM Special School was sowed by His Excellency Most Rev. Bishop. Lawrence Mar Ephream, that seed grown like a banyan tree now and that is giving shelter to diverse birds. It happened only because of His Excellency Most Rev. Bishop. Lawrence Mar Ephream.

Some Health Improvement Works

His Excellency Most Rev. Bishop. Lawrence Mar Ephream never neglected any session of the society. For that he identified the disabled people at Ambilikonam (Kanyakumari District) and organized a medical awareness programme for them. Likewise, he checked the weight of newly born babies and if he found they were less than 3 Kg. He gave proper instruction and nutritious food to the mother of that child. Moreover, in Pudukadai (Kanyakumari District), he had identified so many people who were suffering from Elephantiasis disease. Hence, he conducted a detailed survey in that area and identified the reason behind the disease. Then he invited a team of eminent doctors and with their health he tried his level best to vanish the dangerous disease from the soil. Nevertheless, he promoted herbal gardens at Palavilai and

Thenikulam in Kanyakumari district. As per this he collected medicinal plants and planted them in these two places. Then he collected the leaves and roots of the plants and prepared medicine for several small diseases. It helped the native people for their speedy recovery.

Other Works

“A healthy outside starts from the inside”, as per this, His Excellency Most. Rev. Bishop Lawrence Mar Ephrem didn't concentrate in the field of health alone. He gave due importance for the development of spirit too. For instance, as a good priest he started the Christuvilagam church at Nagercoil. Through this church he earned so many people for God.

Understanding the meaning of the quote, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire”, he worked for the progress of education also. For the evolution of education, he started a high school at Kirathoor. Moreover, within Kanyakumari district he started around five primary schools and upper schools. For the advancement of collegiate education, he was responsible for the establishment of the Malankara Catholic college at Mariagiri. Thus, he proved himself as an allrounder and a great missionary during his lifespan.

Estimate

Marthandam region before the arrival of His Excellency Most. Rev. Bishop Lawrence Mar Ephrem was a very backward place with so many handicaps. But because of the health services and his concrete works undertaken in and around the Marthandam region made Marthandam as a centre of high literacy, highly cultured and became a developed area with all facilities. All these achievements happened but because of the Good Samaritan services undertaken by His Excellency Most. Rev. Bishop Lawrence Mar Ephrem at Marthandam region. Therefore, people recognized the efforts taken by His Excellency Most. Rev. Bishop Lawrence Mar Ephrem and they called him ‘Our Own Bishop’. In order to honour him and his services, the Pastoral Centre at Kuzhithurai of Malankara Syrian Catholic Diocese of Marthandam was renamed as ‘Mar Ephrem Campus’. Though he lost his physical body on earth still he is living in the midst of the people through his eternal services.

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