

Friar's Upstream Odyssey



Rev. Fr. Sarath Iddamalgoda
Idde

Translated into English by
Saviour Shanthalal Hettiarachchi

Cover Story: "Idde"

Rev. Fr. Sarath Iddamalgoda

"Idde" is an endearing nickname formed by blending the first three letters of his last name. It's a name fondly used by many who know him well, a name that's become popular among his associates.

Amidst the crowd, he stands by the roadside, framed against the backdrop of lush foliage and swaying coconut palms. Beside him, a group of friends proudly holds a banner with his nickname prominently displayed, just off the lens. With a genuine smile gracing his lips, he radiates warmth and authenticity, immortalizing a fleeting moment.

Translator's Input:

"Friar's Upstream Odyssey" encapsulates the journey of an individual who, despite encountering challenges and opposition, steadfastly upholds Christian principles and actively seeks to make a positive impact on others.

While there are alternative translations for "yathiwaraya," I have opted for "Friar" as it resonates more effectively with the context of the narrative.

(Friar: A religious priest serving within society and the Church, typically living under vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.)

The term "odyssey" denotes a lengthy and eventful voyage, often fraught with adventures, obstacles, and significant experiences. Hence, the title "Friar's Upstream Odyssey" aptly captures the trials faced by a Christian priest in his endeavour to bring about positive change in the world.

It has been a privilege to translate this book, striving to capture its profound message and metaphorical depth. My aim is that this translation effectively conveys the essence and spirit of the original work to readers.

Shanthalal Hettiarachchi

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Aruna Shantha Nonis

(first Edition April 2021

Author's Note

Idde" (a booklet published in the Sinhala language) is the realization of a dream I have harboured for many years. When the idea of publishing a book about Father Sarath was proposed, there was a suggestion that it should be a collective effort, but this was not realized. Reverend Father Sarath Iddamalgoda is not merely a figure who can be encapsulated within the pages of a book; he embodies a philosophy of life. Therefore, it would be erroneous to confine him to a limited number of pages. I view it as a beautiful mistake.

When it became known that I was preparing to write this book, many individuals who knew Father Sarath better than I did suggested that instead of merely praising his character, this book should serve as both a challenge and a guide to those committed to the noble mission of constructing a better society.

However, I tend to be a bit persistent when I write. Since 1980, I've gleaned a wealth of information about Father Sarath from Brother Jerry (Shelton), who was a fellow seminarian with him at the National Theological Seminary.

While I was writing this book, commemorating the 40th anniversary of "Janavaboda Kendraya", a suggestion arose to publish a book focusing on Father Sarath as its founder. Many approached me, considering my existing commitments, to take on this responsibility.

However, it wasn't my intention. Instead, my friend, the accomplished writer Sidney Marcus, accepted the task.

He released the book titled "Father Sarath" better than any of us expected at the 40th anniversary event. But I didn't give up on my dream. I discussed with him from time to time to capture the beautiful challenging and unique opportunity of Father Sarath's life. Information about him from others too I collected.

Instead of simply recounting life events, I crafted a narrative inspired by those experiences. This approach led to the creation of the short novel titled "Idde." Many individuals contributed to the realization of this work, and I hold each of them dear in my memories.

I extend my gratitude to Shehani Colombe's sister for her invaluable assistance in the computer work involved in preparing this book, including the letters, cover, and inner pages. This book is presented as part of the activities of the Journalist Training Program at the "Born to Win Relationship" Training Institute.

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Fr. Sarath Iddamalgoda

(Friar's Upstream Odyssey)

Sarath Iddamalgoda, who hails from the village of Hanwella, Waga, ventured into the outside world at a young age by enrolling in the "Borella Minor Seminary." His time at the minor seminary was unremarkable, as he led a typical life during that period.

Some students were meticulous, ensuring their freshly laundered shirts stayed crisp all day to avoid wrinkles. Others excelled academically, shining in exams and earning prizes. Then there were the bookworms, immersing themselves in volumes of knowledge. Some chose to stand out through their wit and mockery, while others seemed burdened, wearing serious expressions as if carrying the weight of the world. Seeking solace, they frequented chapel for meditation. Among them, some remained isolated, while others enjoyed popularity among their peers.

But Sarath Iddamalgoda defied categorization within these groups. He seemed to navigate through these various layers like a snake, eluding definition. While he didn't stand out prominently in any particular category, there was an absence, a sense of something missing, where he wasn't present. Sarath Iddamalgoda participated in various sports teams such as football, handball, and basketball, although not as a team leader. Despite his dynamic and lively nature, he didn't seek the spotlight but rather preferred to break barriers and move forward, always abiding by the rules of the game.

His presence was invaluable to the sports teams for these qualities. Additionally, he represented his house in the annual athletics competitions, although victories were rare. During the annual prize-giving ceremony, it's uncertain whether he stood proudly among the students receiving awards amidst the crowd of parents and guests.

In everyday life, Sarath was unassuming, not given to loud laughter, yet his face wore a perpetual smile. Even as he maneuvered the ball towards the opponent's goal on the football field, this smile remained, undeterred even when faced with challenges such as being tackled by an opposing player and falling to the ground.

He did not speak loudly or incessantly. Sarath Iddamalgoda did not gauge someone's worth based on their high heels. He possessed the ability to articulate his thoughts without considering hierarchy. He didn't shy away from expressing what he believed was right, even to his elders and teachers. Despite this assertiveness, Sarath Iddamalgoda never sought to silence others' opinions or arrogantly assume his own correctness. He was perceived as a modest and unassuming individual.

When someone in need approached him, they did so with confidence rather than hesitation. If he didn't have the knowledge or resources himself, he sought guidance from others who did, ensuring that those in need received the necessary assistance. Helping others became his primary goal and source of happiness.

Sarath Iddamalgoda, upon completing his training at the Little Seminary, enrolls at the Ampitiya National Theological Seminary to pursue studies in philosophy and theology. During the initial three years, he encounters unfamiliar subjects previously unheard of in his life.

As he adapts to this new academic environment, he becomes somewhat confident in grasping the profound concepts he encounters. These include the philosophical perspectives of ancient Greek philosophers on the nature of the world and the divine, the history of philosophy, ancient cosmological beliefs regarding the origins and existence of the universe, outdated notions in anthropology, ontology (the study of being), logic, ethics, epistemology (the theory of knowledge), social sciences, and philosophy of nature. He navigates through diverse viewpoints, even those suggesting outdated notions like the Earth being a flat disc, while summarizing the array of beliefs put forth by various philosophers.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Sri Lanka experienced significant social and political upheavals. Particularly, the younger generation began to contemplate issues from fresh perspectives. Individuals like Sarath Iddamalgoda found themselves pondering how these subjects could empower them to address the multitude of challenges faced by the populace, including poverty, educational issues, unemployment, and housing shortages. Rather than engaging in deep philosophical debates within the confines of classrooms, he dedicated himself to devising plans to enhance the lives of the impoverished residents of Ampitiya village.

His passion lay in practical endeavours such as repairing dilapidated huts, constructing roads, and actively engaging with the local community through visits and interactions.

As he delved deeper into the study of Dharma, his convictions and concerns grew more pronounced. Rather than being drawn to antiquated ideas found in outdated texts, he found himself captivated by the theology of liberation championed by Latin American theologians, a movement gaining traction globally during that period.

Father Michael Rodrigo fell victim to violence during the terror season of 1988-89, while Father John Pillay was compelled to leave the country due to his outspoken views.

Liberation theology exerted significant influence on the socio-political landscape of Latin American nations. The active participation of priests in the Nicaraguan revolution, alongside the presence of bishops such as Romero who stood in solidarity with the people, contributed to the rise of democracy in countries like Chile, reflecting the impact of these theological currents.

Sarath Iddamalgoda, who harboured doubts about the practical applicability of the subjects taught at the national seminary, found himself caught in the fervour of the new revolutionary political movement sweeping Sri Lanka at the time. While this wave had a significant impact, Sarath Iddamalgoda did not condone the violent methods employed by the revolutionaries.

His steadfast opposition to these violent tactics, as witnessed in his discussions with activists of the JVP at that time, served as an inspiration. He firmly believed that fairness in pursuit of justice must be accompanied by fairness in action.

Over time, social thinkers like Sarath Iddamalgoda began to assert themselves as a significant presence within the church. They advocated for education and teachings that were relevant and beneficial to the country and its people. Their conviction lay in aligning their lives with the common folk rather than seeking comfort and privilege.

Leadership played a crucial role in any reform movement, and in the church, it was individuals like Sarath Iddamalgoda and Grantham Fernando who steered the course of these revolutionary ideas.

In contrast to this progressive movement, opposing groups also surfaced within the church. These groups aimed to maintain the status quo and safeguard their positions within the institutional framework. The emergence of divergent ideologies led to a crisis within the church, causing confusion in the broader society. In response to this situation, Sarath Iddamalgoda and Grantham's prominent group delved deeper into their ideologies, unwavering in their commitment to their cause. Tensions escalated, leading to a food boycott during the Seminary's annual feast day. The group then presented their demands to church leaders, including the Apostolic Nuncio, who were associated with the feast.

The group of independent-minded priests and several teachers from the National Seminary rallied behind this cause, receiving steadfast support from Badulla Bishop Leo Nanayakkara. At that time, Bishop Nanayakkara was a staunch advocate of liberation theology, offering his strongest endorsement to their efforts.

As the situation intensified, the bishops made the decision to expel the free-thinking priest students from the Seminary. Additionally, bishops from the Tamil provinces relocated their priest students from Ampitiya Seminary to India for further training. Subsequently, some of these individuals' names surfaced in connection with support for the separatist movement.

Until then, Sinhalese and Tamil priest students coexisted and studied together, fostering a sense of unity. However, in 1972, during the annual vacation period when all priest students had returned home, the free-thinking priest students were summoned to the Bishop's house and informed of their expulsion from the seminary. This action effectively quashed the "dharma" (religious) revolution that had begun to emerge in the 1970s, as it was suppressed by the church leadership.

However, the ideas put forth by that group proved resilient and continued to influence numerous changes within the church (which warrants a separate discussion).

Despite efforts to silence them, Sarath Iddamalgoda and Grantham, the leaders of the struggle, managed to maintain their presence within the church. Their position as deacons at the time afforded them a level of protection. Although the church leaders lacked the authority to abolish the deacon post, they resorted to other measures, such as denying them priesthood and subjecting them to various forms of retaliation.

As time passed, Grantham came to the decision that if he couldn't find happiness within the confines of his clerical role, it was best to relinquish it. Consequently, he returned his cloak to the church and opted for a lay life. His departure marked yet another instance of the congregation losing talented individuals—both lay and clerical—who had embarked on the path of following Christ. Regrettably, it wouldn't be the last time such departures occurred.

Sarath Iddamalgoda remained steadfast and unwavering in character. Despite facing various tests, he met them all with his customary smile. As the number of his supporters gradually grew, the bishops eventually had to confer priesthood upon Sarath Iddamalgoda. From then on, his narrative diverged significantly from the life of the common people. He walked alongside them in their fight against social injustices and inequality, raising awareness and living among them.

Sarath Iddamalgoda's white robe could often be spotted amidst factory workers enduring labour struggles and among the poor affected by various disasters, illustrating his commitment to their cause.

This is a new experience for Christians in our country, one that may seem strange to those accustomed to priests confined within the four walls of the church or the mission house..

However, for Sarath Iddamalgoda, this path was not unfamiliar. He had been advocating for this type of service since his early days in the church. Sarath Iddamalgoda heeded the call of Christ, who urged his disciples to seek out the lost sheep. Who could resist such a call? Sarath Iddamalgoda forged ahead against the current, facing formidable obstacles along the way. He found no place in established institutions, but this posed no hindrance to him. Just as Christ brought salvation and liberation through sacrificing his life, Sarath Iddamalgoda's commitment echoes that sacrificial spirit..

Authored by : Shelton Peris



Fr. Sarath Iddamalgoda

After pausing the lesson momentarily, the teacher began to read the message on the small piece of paper that Peter had left in his hand upon entering the classroom unexpectedly. As the teacher examined it with curiosity, the students in the class began chatting with their nearby peers, filling the classroom with noise. The chatter ceased abruptly when the teacher's voice boomed out loudly.

"Sarah"

In an instant, the students redirected their gaze to their notebooks, and the classroom fell silent once more. Upon hearing his name, Sarah promptly rose from his seat and glanced at Peter, realizing that he bore a message concerning him.

Sarah felt an immediate sense of reassurance. He sensed that there was no cause for pessimism in the message. Yet, a compelling curiosity drove him to uncover its contents.

"Sarah, the Father Principal requests your presence in his office."

Shortly after Peter left the classroom, Sarah approached the teacher, greeted him, and then proceeded to follow Peter.

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During that period, there was little competition for school admissions, as many families preferred schools close to their villages. Consequently, the renowned city schools experienced minimal congestion in terms of student enrolment.

Spanning an area of more than five acres, the school was nestled amidst rolling hills, its buildings neatly arranged. It comprised two sections: primary and secondary.

The principal's office occupied a slightly elevated floor positioned between the two sections. It took about 3-4 minutes to walk from Sarath's classroom to the principal's office. Due to the constant traffic of students, a narrow footpath had formed on the grassy ground..

Despite receiving a message from the headmaster requesting a meeting, Sarath felt no urgency to respond.

While Sarath, who cherishes the environment deeply, never failed to revel in its wonders during his brief moments, Peter was already ascending the front steps to enter the principal's office.

At this moment, the time before the break was slipping away in the school. In a matter of minutes, the school bell would chime, prompting all the students to exit their classrooms.

Arriving a few minutes late, meeting the Principal during the break seemed improbable, as he was certain to retreat to his quarters for morning tea. Consequently, Sarath would need to linger near his office for a while.

Realizing the urgency, Sarath quickened his pace and soon found himself standing by the door of the principal's office.

Upon spotting Sarath, the principal, addressing him warmly, said, "Sarath, please come in and take a seat." He gestured towards a chair positioned in front of his desk.

Even though Sarath was unaware of the reason behind the meeting, he gleaned from the Principal's facial expressions that it must be something of utmost importance.

Typically, students don't frequent the Principal's office without a significant reason. Such visits are uncommon.

Sarath has only visited the principal's office once or twice throughout his time at school. It's a solemn space. As he glanced around at the aged cupboards and assorted mementos in the office room, the principal began speaking, drawing his focus.

Judging by the side-winding clock hanging above the comfortable chair where Father Principal sat, the bell for recess would surely ring in just one minute.

But judging by the behaviour of Father Principal, he doesn't seem inclined to leave the office during breaks.

As the principal rang the small bell on the desk, Peter dashed into the office.

"Peter, please bring two slices of cake and two cups of tea." Father Principal instructed Peter.

Throughout the break, the principal recounted stories from his priestly career and the remarkable experiences he had during that time, occasionally laughing so boisterously that the sound echoed throughout the entire school.

Sarath listened closely, intrigued by the stories because he was naturally good at paying attention.

Sarath isn't much of a talker. He excels in listening attentively to others, showing deep respect for their words and opinions.

At the end, the Father Principal firmly grasped Sarath's hands, offering him well wishes and advising him to meet the priest at his church later that afternoon.

By that time, Mother had finished her teaching duties at the village school and had returned home. Father served as the principal of the same school.

Mother typically arrives home promptly after school, while Father usually comes home around 3:30 to 4:00 in the afternoon. As the principal of the village school, father stays behind for a few hours after students and fellow teachers have left, as many villagers come to see him then. His role as principal commands special respect from the local community.

The villagers referred to him as "Chief." He held the position of Chairman in the Village Development Society and served as a committee member for several other welfare societies.

Sarath was deeply intrigued by his father's social engagements, finding them genuinely stimulating. Frequently, the meetings of the Village Development Society took place on the veranda of Sarath's house.

Sarath's grandfather migrated from Ratnapura to the village of Kahahena Waga in the Hanwella area, where the family resides today. He, having accomplished much through his own endeavours, passed down significant wealth and property to Sarath's father and the rest of the family.

Sarath's father also inherited the house where Sarath's family currently resides. He was the final proprietor of the property, which boasted extensive rubber and coconut tree plantations sprawling across the area. Thus, while the teaching profession presented an opportunity for him to fulfil his social mission, it did not constitute his life strategy.

Sarath's father, a firm believer in people organizing themselves to tackle their problems, demonstrated this principle through his actions. Sarath observed how he shared his resources for this very purpose.

As the principal of the school, Sarath's father's authority often discouraged debates about his ideas among the people. Nevertheless, he never sought to impose his dominance.

"This is your problem, so it's up to you to discuss it and make a decision. What I say isn't important; what matters is doing the right thing. That's why we should always make decisions collectively." Sarath observed closely how his father would gently prompt people to engage in meetings when they remained silent.

Meetings beginning at four in the evening typically conclude around eight thirty at night. It's the mother's duty to light the chimney lamp in the house. In that moment, Sarath, assisting his mother, assumed the responsibility of carrying lamps to the meeting venue, driven by his fervent desire to bring enlightenment to the community.

"Tomorrow, Sarath is starting his studies at Borella minor seminary to become a priest."

As she spooned vegetable curry onto her husband's rice plate, Mother remarked that everyone at the dining table would be aware of the news. Although most of the family was already informed, Mother harboured a strong desire to officially announce it during dinner.

In Sarath's family, there were ten children, including the parents. At that time, it was common for families to have eight or ten children.

Supporting ten children wasn't much of a challenge for Sarath's parents, thanks to the property inherited over generations and their stable careers as government teachers.

Despite the large family, many members were raised outside the house. Both sisters attended Gampaha 'Holy Cross School. Since the school was located far from Sarath's family home in the Hanwella Waga area, they stayed with one of Sarath's aunts.

Another aunt of Sarath's father lived nearby in a house close to Sarath's. Both she and her husband were teachers in public schools and had no children of their own. Consequently, the eldest brother spent most of his time with them, essentially living as their adopted child. This aunt had a strong passion for education, and together with Sarath, she conducted additional classes for her siblings after school in the evenings, which were mandatory for all to attend.

Sarath's father was one of the top two scorers in the area in the government teacher selection exam. Consequently, he was confident of securing a teaching appointment. During that time, most schools were under the administration of the Catholic Church, and many preferred appointments in these schools due to the stability they offered with fewer transfers. However, despite his willingness to work in a Catholic school, did not receive the appointment he hoped for. The position went to the other candidate who had passed alongside him, who happened to be the brother of a Catholic priest. He recognized this as nepotism at play.

Nonetheless, he did secure a position as a substitute teacher in a government school, subject to the regular transfers dictated by government regulations. Following their marriage, any transfer affecting father also impacted mother, as she too was a government teacher.

As a result, the two eldest children of the family, the older brother and sister, resided with their grandparents and did not accompany their parents on their moves. However, Sarath and his younger siblings were fortunate to travel with their parents. Each time father received a transfer, it meant a move for mother as well. For Sarath, it also meant the chance to change schools and enroll in a new one.

By the time Sarath reached sixth grade at Hanwella John Bosco School, he had already attended numerous schools in various parts of the country.

Sarath is delighted by this. It allowed him to reside in diverse locales, providing him with insights into various living conditions and lifestyles. Teaching in rural areas and villages, where elephants roamed, presented a unique opportunity for Sarath to connect with nature.

These enchanting encounters deepened his affinity for the natural world, fostering a profound love for the green environment and its inhabitants.

The entire family gathers at home during school holidays. Despite being together, the eldest brother primarily stays at the aunt's house.

Sarath shares a close bond with his sister, Indrani, whom he affectionately refers to as "older sister" or "podi akka."

Throughout the holidays, the children often spend their time with their grandparents. Grandfather's residence is situated in Mavalgama, merely two kilometers away from Sarath's home.

Sarath harboured an insatiable eagerness to walk with his older sister (*podi akka*) to their grandfather's house, a memory that still fills him with immense joy.

Setting out from home, Sarath, accompanied by his "Podi akka" the sister elder to him strolls along the asphalt road. After about two hundred meters, they reach the Kelani Valley railway line.

From that end, Sarath has been walking between the two rails of the railway track, counting them by stepping on each one. His sister joins him in this activity. However, when they finish counting, they often come up with different results. Sarath insists that he has counted accurately only once, knowing well that he doesn't have much interest or skill in mathematics.

However, the snails moving around in the middle of the rails didn't escape his notice. Some unfortunate ones were crushed beneath the weight of passing trains, which saddened Sarath. The sight of snails crossing the rails with their shells filled his heart with compassion, as it seemed to fear being squashed under the train wheels.

"Hey brother, throw that junk away," the *podi akka* exclaims.

But for Sarath, nothing in nature is worthless. He respects the right of all beings in the environment to live out their lives to the fullest.

If a railway is not constructed and trains do not operate, there is no danger to the lives of snails. However, Sarath observes that the railway, constructed by humans, has become a threat to this natural habitat. Despite his sister's protests, Sarath continues to remove the snails from the rails to safeguard their lives.

Trains rarely traverse the Kelaniveli railway line, with most consisting of small wagons transporting coconuts and rubber. Thus, walking along the railway tracks isn't particularly hazardous.

After proceeding a short distance along the railway track, they halt at a small stream cascading through the expansive coconut grove on the left-hand side. Sarath delights in spending his time wading through the knee-deep water.

"Hey brother, come quickly," the sister shouts.

But Sarath doesn't hear her. The gentle flow of the stream beneath Sarath's feet envelops him in a soothing coolness, feeling as if it's rejuvenating his entire body. Sarath desires to bask in this refreshing sensation for hours.

Grandfather's house sits amidst a sprawling five-acre coconut grove. It takes just a couple of minutes to walk from the small canal to reach the house. However, the brother and sister remain by the canal, despite the sister's urgent call for her brother to hurry. She too is still standing in the canal, the water reaching up to her knees.

Neither of them is willing to traverse the canal.

A group of women are stacking coconut branches in the canal to create a barrier, causing the water to stagnate as the sister and brother, emerging from the canal, move forward parallel to its course.

When the coconut fronds that have been floating in the water for days are picked up, the coconut fronds come ashore with *ayirawo* (a small fish - similar to a bittern) and shrimp. This is truly beautiful. Collecting the *ayirawo* and shrimps is truly an inspiring experience.

Now both of them have no idea that they have to go to their grandfather's house. Sarat begins to collect *ayirawo* and shrimp together with her sister.

A group of women are stacking coconut branches in the canal, creating a barrier that impedes the water's flow as the sister and brother emerge from the canal and continue along its path.

These women are familiar with the two children, as they often visit this area during school holidays.

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As hundreds of coconut branches are gathered in this manner, there's enough *ayirawo* and shrimp to feed four or five people.

They fashion their clothing like a pocket and tuck shrimp and *ayirawo* inside.

"So, you got your clothes wet again, jumping into the canal, didn't you?" the grandmother scolds, pretending to be angry.

She then instructs the woman doing housework to clean the shrimp and *ayirawo* for a delicious broth. Sarath eagerly longs to enjoy rice with this flavourful *ayirawo* and shrimp broth.

Excitedly, Sarath rushes back to the canal to play with the neighbourhood children until lunchtime.

Before joining John Bosco College in Hanwella, Sarath attended his village school, Kahahena Government College. This institution was established under the leadership of Mr. Philip Gunawardena, a prominent figure in the leftist movement in Sri Lanka at that time.

W S Fernando, who was labelled a communist by the Catholic Church due to his involvement in the social movement in Negombo, served as a teacher in Sarath's school.

Due to the political and cultural changes in the country after 1956, many Catholic schools, which had previously conducted classes exclusively in English, transitioned to teaching in Sinhala. John Bosco School, which had long been an English-medium institution, also made the switch to Sinhala language instruction by the time Sarath reached sixth grade. Sarath was fortunate to receive his education in his mother tongue, Sinhala.

As previously mentioned, due to an unclear reason, Sarath's father was not appointed as a teacher in a Catholic school, so he had to find work at different schools in various areas. This was quite challenging for a father with children. Sarath's father held some resentment unknowingly. As a result, he was hesitant to take part in the church's activities and rituals.

Another contributing factor was the social environment in which Sarath and his family resided. In the entire village, there were only a handful of Catholic families, including Sarath's own family and their close relatives.

As a result, Sarath's family members primarily lived within the Buddhist culture, occasionally participating in Buddhist customs. However, Sarath's mother made a point of ensuring that her children were raised according to the customs and practices of the Catholic religion, which she believed in.

She had established the habit of praying together every evening, and she had accustomed her children to this routine. Although Sarath's father was not particularly interested in this practice, he never interfered with mom's daily schedule or the way she raised the children.

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The villagers referred to him as "Chief." He held the position of Chairman in the Village Development Society and served as a committee member for several other welfare societies.

Participating in the Sunday divine service was always an intriguing experience for Sarath, as it provided the perfect opportunity to reconnect with many friends from the village. It was during these gatherings that the French priest Rev. Fr. Pleiber (O M I), who was actively involved in his church's service, guided Sarath's journey with the church onto a new path.

Observing the social service initiatives led by Sarath's father within the village, Fr. Pleiber recognized that the "seed of service," the desire to make a meaningful impact in the community, had taken root in Sarath.

Sarath believed that aligning himself with individuals such as Father Pleiber would undoubtedly nurture the growth of his aspirations. It was this conviction that led him to join the altar servers' society at the church. Through this involvement, Sarath frequently engaged with the church community, affording him the chance to familiarize himself with the sacred prayers recited during the Divine Liturgy in Latin—an honour bestowed upon those assisting at the altar. As a result, Sarath found himself integrated into a distinct group within the village.

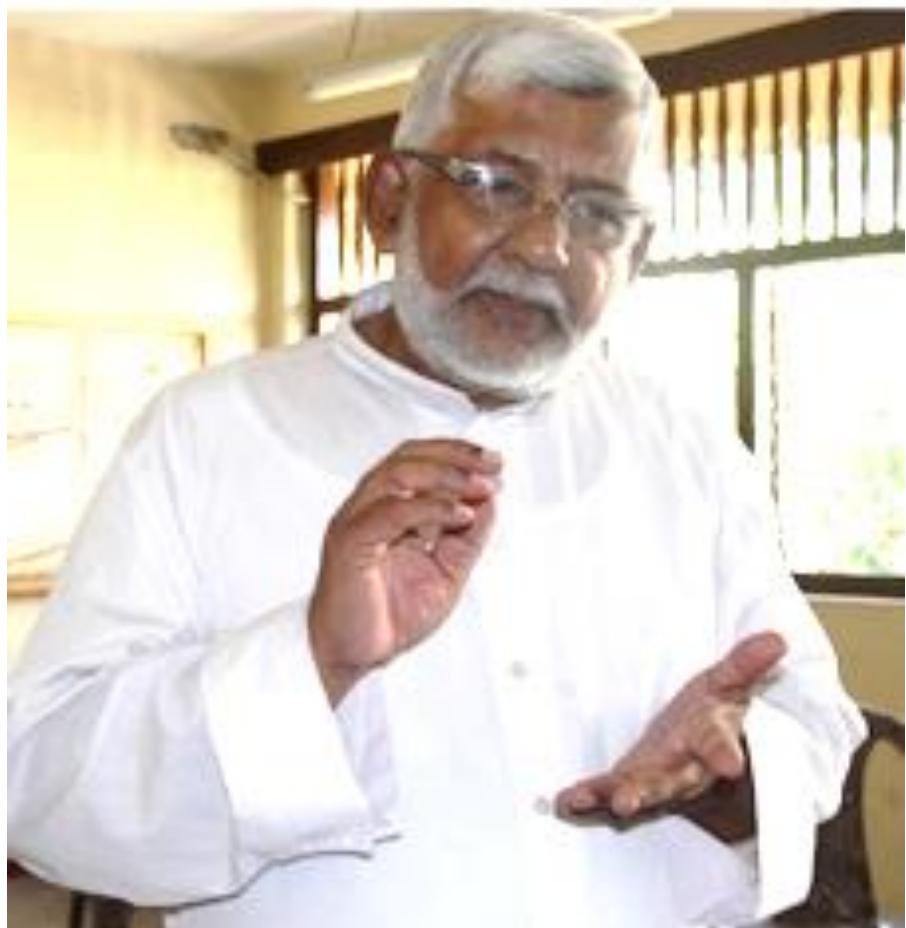
During the Divine Liturgy at the church, two or four individuals clad in robes akin to those worn by the priest are given the privilege to assist with the proceedings. Positioned beside the altar where the priest officiates, they inevitably become the focal point for all attendees of the mass, drawing their attention throughout the service.

Consequently, they attain a distinct recognition within the Catholic community of the church. However, Sarath found himself less enthralled by such distinctions. Instead, he delved into contemplation on the Gospel passages delivered by the priest, pondering how they could be applied to enhance people's lives beyond the rituals enacted by the priest at the altar.

Sarath's heart was deeply moved by Father's dedication to visiting families in his church community after the Divine Liturgy. Father would engage with them, discussing their challenges and offering assistance wherever possible. Sarath recognized that the teachings of the Gospel could truly come to life within society through these personal interactions with families, rather than solely through participation in the Divine Liturgy at the church.

Sarath frequently listens to the Gospel in church and observes the priest's profound social engagements, which extend beyond surface appearances. Through these experiences, he contemplates spirituality and gradually discerns a transformation within his inner being.

In his quest to grasp the deeper essence of God's word, Sarath finds himself drawn to discern its true meaning, rather than simply echoing the words spoken by the priest. Through this introspection, he recognizes a spiritual calling urging him to dedicate himself to serving the people.



Fr. Sarath Iddamalgoda

No one usually sent letters addressed to Sarath. However, when he returned home from school that day, there was a distinctive envelope and paper resting atop the stool in the living room, bearing Sarath's name.

Clad in his school uniform, Sarath swiftly retrieved the letter addressed to him, tearing it open with anticipation, and began reading it impatiently.

Mother suddenly sensed Sarath's presence as he arrived home. She called out to him from the back of the house.

"Son, go wash up and eat."

But Sarath didn't hear his mother's voice. He was too curious to find out what the letter contained.

The pamphlet had arrived in the mail from Reverend Father Berad, a French priest. The letter and paper were sent from the Borella seminary.

The paper contained numerous photographs of the Reverend Fathers assisting people in various afflictions and troubles, particularly focusing on children and the elderly.

At the end of the paper, there was an invitation to commit oneself to the service of God and to serve the people as a priest in the Catholic Church.

Sarath felt that the right path is being prepared for him to truly experience the spiritual transformation that is taking place within him.

For Sarath, his father's role as the school principal, his immense dedication to the children, and his special interest in the humanitarian work outside of school activities were significant. Moreover, the Reverend Father's acts of mercy and grace in the church served as a special inspiration.

Now, with the invitation to become a Catholic priest and engage in such activities full-time, Sarath made a decision without knowing which direction to take in his future life.

Sarath made the decision to confide in the priest of the church about his desire to become a Catholic priest. Before doing so, he shared this idea with his younger sister (podi akka), but she didn't take it seriously. Nevertheless, she neither encouraged nor discouraged Sarath from pursuing his aspiration.

It appeared that the father didn't hold any strong opinions about it. Perhaps due to the injustice he endured from the Catholic Church when he was appointed as a teacher, he might not have harboured much desire for his own child to become a Catholic priest. However, he adopted a silent policy of deferring the decision-making authority to the mother.

"I don't want my little brother to become a priest. Just look at how handsome he is! If he becomes a priest and stands at the altar during mass, the young girls will be mesmerized and won't pay attention to the service. They'll only have eyes for him. Little brother, stay home, focus on your studies, and pursue a good career."

When Sarath informed his elder sister, who had just returned home, that he had sent an application to Borella Junior Seminary to become a Catholic priest, she burst into laughter. Everyone else in the house joined in, except for their mother, who refrained from laughing. Instead, she approached Sarath and gently stroked his head, indicating the start of a conversation.

"Sarath , (podi putha) possesses a profound understanding of life. His selflessness consistently prioritizes others over himself, ensuring he only brings goodness and never harm to those around him".

Sarath recognized that these sentiments were silently voiced by Amma, even though they remained unspoken. He adeptly interpreted her unspoken thoughts through the language of her eyes.

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Sarath arrived at Aloysisus Seminary in Borella, Colombo, accompanied by his parents from their home in the picturesque village of Hanwella Waga nestled in the scenic Kelani Valley. Despite transitioning from the rural charm of Hanwella Waga to the urban setting of Borella in Colombo, the serene surroundings of Aloysisus Seminary made Sarath feel at ease, eliminating any sense of unfamiliarity with leaving his village and entering the city.

On that particular day, nearly twenty-five boys of Sarath's age arrived to begin their journey at the seminary. Most hailed from neighbouring areas like Negombo, Pamunugama, and Moratuwa, while Sarath stood as the solitary candidate who had travelled from Colombo, a considerable distance away.

Every boy displayed remarkable obedience and docility. It was evident that each one strived to respect one another, recognizing that they would be sharing their lives together in the future.

Rev. Don Peter, the rector of the junior seminary, was renowned for his strict discipline and remarkable educational abilities. Despite the stern demeanour apparent in his administration, he was recognized as an exceptional educator.

With a meticulous eye for detail, he carefully observed the expressions and behaviours of the children, discerning the most suitable subject streams for each individual.

Adjusting to the disciplinary system of the seminary wasn't challenging for Sarath, as he was already accustomed to strict rules from his education at John Bosco College in Hanwella, where he also participated in extracurricular activities while adhering to rigorous discipline.

Upon completing the registration and admission procedures, every student was to be escorted to the hostel within the Seminary premises. Sarath's elder brother, who attended St. Joseph's College in Maradana and resided in its hostel, also visited the Seminary on that day.

In the dormitory, each student's personal belongings were neatly tucked away in the small cupboards provided, holding their clothes and everyday necessities. Sarath's bed was meticulously arranged with blankets and pillowcases. His gaze rested upon mother, marvelling at her exceptional knack for organization and tidiness.

Since their arrival at the seminary, conversations flowed freely between them, touching on various topics. However, upon stepping into the dormitory, Mom fell silent, not uttering a single word thereafter. Sarath couldn't help but feel a sense of unease settle over him in response to her unusual silence.

Meanwhile, Dad remained outside the dormitory, engaged in conversation with his elder brother.

Mom meticulously arranged everything she had brought from home in their designated spots before tenderly placing them atop the pillow with her own hands. With a gentle shrug, she remarked, "Everything is in its place now."

Sarath glanced at Mom, but she avoided meeting his gaze. He sensed she might be holding back tears, and he felt his own eyes welling up. As he looked around the hostel, he noticed new students organizing their belongings alongside their parents. However, his vision was blurred by tears.

Finally, Mom enveloped Sarath in a tight embrace. "When we have the chance, we'll come to visit our dear son," Sarath anticipated her saying, but her words took a different turn.

"Strive with purpose, my son," she advised, assuming a more instructive tone rather than that of a mother.

Sarath understood that it wouldn't be easy for his parents to visit him frequently. Still, he harboured a simple hope that they would come to see him.

"Even your elder brother is in Colombo now. We'll inform him to come and visit whenever he's able," said Mother.

Sarath was painfully aware that there were no immediate prospects of anyone coming to visit.

Sarath emerged from the dormitory with his mother and joined his father and elder brother, who were engaged in conversation.

"I've asked your elder brother to visit *podि putha* regularly," Father said, casting a glance at Sarath, as if he and Mother had reached an understanding.

Lunch was arranged for all visitors in the seminary's refectory that day. However, the elder brother did not stay for the meal. Since St. Joseph's College was only about 2 km away from the seminary, Sarath remained hopeful that *loku ayiya* would visit him whenever he found the time.

Though mother wished to linger a while after lunch, father proposed they depart soon, noting the time it would take to travel from Colombo to Hanwella. Sarath watched Mom and Dad until they exited the main entrance of the temple. Mom glanced back several times, but Dad did not.

Borella St. Aloysius Seminary, or the minor seminary, didn't feel entirely foreign to Sarath. He was indeed a remarkably obedient and disciplined seminarian, fostering strong friendships with all his peers. The routines within the seminary were meticulously structured and disciplined, which suited Sarat's nature well. Living in such an environment posed no challenge for a student so dedicated and obedient.

In the seminary, every student was required to learn Latin since, at the time, a significant portion of the Catholic Church's divine liturgy was conducted in that language. While grasping the immediate meaning of the words could be challenging, Latin was revered for its musical beauty. Consequently, there was a shared desire and enthusiasm among students to master this elegant language.

Sarath's father was a highly skilled Sinhala teacher, while his mother's family had a strong affinity for the English language. Several of her relatives and siblings received their education in English, and English was frequently spoken in their household. Consequently, she possessed a proficient command of the language.

Sarath's elder brother, elder sister, and second sister (podi akka) were also educated in English. During their vacations home, they frequently conversed with each other in English. However, Sarath received his education in Sinhala.

Furthermore, he seldom had the opportunity to practice using the English language. As a result, while Sarath possessed a basic understanding of English, he lacked proficiency in using it effectively.

Many of the children entering the minor seminary for their first year hailed from village schools in their respective areas, making them akin to Sarath.

The little seminary categorized students into two sections: junior and senior.

To become a Catholic priest, one must acquire a broad spectrum of knowledge, making extensive reading imperative. However, much of this literature is in English, necessitating proficiency in the language. Yet, upon assuming the role of a priest, one predominantly serves communities fluent in Sinhala or Tamil. Hence, why invest more time in mastering English than the languages of those you'll serve?

However, English dominated all activities within the minor seminary. A strict rule prohibited speaking Sinhala during meals, enforced by appointing one senior student for every five to ensure compliance. For Sarath, this rule seemed as absurd as it was burdensome.

Reverend Father Don Peter, the director of the minor seminary, acknowledges the talents of the students and guides them into various fields alongside their regular academic pursuits.

Fr. Rector assigned Sarath to music among other extracurricular activities.

Although Sarath lacked skill in playing musical instruments, he possessed a good sense of musical appreciation. These additional music classes took place in the evenings, a time typically reserved for sports activities.

While Sarath wasn't particularly enthusiastic about sports, he still participated, but he approached the music classes with keen interest.

The music teacher who conducts the classes is known for being very strict. He expects all activities to be carried out according to his instructions. At the start of each class, he typically quizzes the students on the previous day's lesson, often focusing on classical music and renowned musicians.

On this particular day, Sarath found himself unable to answer any of the teacher's questions.

"Out!" the teacher barked.

Sarath felt helpless as he swiftly exited the classroom and positioned himself near the door.

As he stood there, Sarath noticed Reverend Don Peter approaching along the corridor.

"Today's done," Sarath muttered to himself.

In a matter of moments, Fr. Don Peter was beside Sarath. Sarath lifted his head, which had been bowed towards the ground, to meet the rector's gaze.

"Why are you standing outside?" Sarath was taken aback by the father's solemn tone.

However, he felt no sense of fear.

I'm outside because I'm not allowed inside..." Sarath pondered whether to say this, but such bravery didn't occur to him at that moment.

"You need to put in effort to excel in music."

There was no harshness in the director's words. Sarath was aware of the Fr. Rector's unique talent for discerning each student's disposition and guiding them accordingly.

"What is your name?"

Father spoke.

"Sarath."

"Sarath what?"

Father Rector wanted to know the full name.

"Sarath Iddamalgoda," Sarath responded, with a subtle sense of pride in his name, surname, and ancestry.

At Borella St. Aloysius Seminary, Sarath was known as Iddamalgoda.

However, over time, many people shortened it to "Idde."

Senior students addressed him as Sarath, while those in his year and many newcomers referred to him as "Idde."

The seminary had a structured program aimed at providing comprehensive training and skills in various fields to every student. Special programs were available, including sports activities, music, and literature. Sarath realized that this holistic approach fostered the complete development of each student.

Reverend Father Anselm Croos oversaw the spiritual growth of the students at the minor seminary, diligently striving to address every challenge they faced.

Whenever a student fell ill, he stepped in as a compassionate father figure, offering care akin to that of parents. Reverend Anselm Croos, deeply committed to fostering social awareness among students, organized outings to various locations, facilitating their exposure to the world outside. A noteworthy occasion was when he took the children to the Aquinas Institute, a prestigious higher education institution affiliated with the Catholic Church.

"Sarath becomes the monitor of the seminary because the methods that are present in a typical school are also implemented here. Sarath exhibits exceptional leadership, consistently fulfilling any responsibility assigned to him with strong will,

The minor seminary follows the standard curriculum of regular schools in the country.

Hence, like students in other schools, they should also pursue a standard academic curriculum, with oversight from the rector.

Being a law-abiding and obedient student, Sarath Iddamalgoda earns the position of monitor by setting a true example for all other students to follow.

While "idde" may not have displayed exceptional proficiency in subject-related activities, he cannot be deemed an incompetent student. He possessed adequate knowledge in every subject he studied.

Francis was destined to teach; he possessed a remarkable talent for it. This gift was evident in his subject, Geography, which became a favorite among many students.

Idde harboured a profound interest and passion for geography.

Currently, the G.E.C. is equivalent to the ordinary level examination, serving as the senior examination. Sarath Iddamalgoda passed this examination in the usual manner, yet he excelled remarkably in geography.

It appeared that Sarath Iddamalgoda contributed sparingly to discussions and conversations held at various times in the seminary. However, he adeptly laid the groundwork for other students to articulate their ideas. Sarath, who attentively listens to the diverse opinions expressed during discussions, possesses a unique talent for succinctly summarizing all the points raised.

He is always dedicated to protecting the Earth, recognizing it as a special result of God's creation. Sarath finds himself pondering how long it will take to comprehend the reality behind the various narratives Francis taught him about the world's creation during their geography lessons, and how long it will take for the world to undergo transformation.

Sarath consistently endeavours to comprehend the parallels between nature's actions and the process of God's creation, displaying a keen interest in engaging others in discussions on this topic.

God created the world and marvelled at its magnificence. Afterward, mankind came into being, entrusted with the stewardship of the world. However, God did not grant ownership to humanity.

Therefore, it is humanity's responsibility to protect this world and refrain from abusing it as it wishes. Every living and non-living entity on Earth requires a conducive environment for existence, and this right belongs to all inhabitants of the Earth.

As a child, Sarath often visited his grandfather's house with his little sister. They would spend many hours marvelling at the beauty of the water flowing down the canal that bordered his grandfather's garden. From those experiences, Sarath developed a strong belief that no one should have the right to alter or rearrange anything created by nature in this world.

After five years of studying at the minor Seminary in Borella, Colombo, priest students finish their general education and proceed to the specialized education and training necessary for becoming a Catholic priest. This involves a six-year course developed by various Catholic scholars and intellectuals over time. It encompasses both academic learning and practical training, making it an educational and practice-oriented period.

Sarath Iddamalgoda, a young student priest in the prime of his youth, now has to move to Ampitiya for the next phase.

Sarath enrolls in the historic Ampitiya National Seminary, situated amidst the picturesque hills in the Ampitiya area of Kandy.

This institution is Catholic, overseen by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka, and dedicated to the training and education of Catholic priests.

Students who have been studying in Catholic seminaries across various parts of the island for approximately five years proceed to the Ampitiya National Seminary to complete the final stages of their priestly education.

Sinhala and Tamil students from various regions such as Jaffna, Colombo, Batticaloa, Galle, and Kandy converge at this institution. Undoubtedly, Ampitiya National Seminary stands as a beacon of national unity.

All educational and supplementary activities, including administrative tasks within the National Seminary, are carried out in English. English serves as the primary working language for these endeavours. Priest students receive training in English medium at the minor seminary to facilitate their participation. Although informal conversations and interactions may occur in languages more convenient for the individuals involved, the official language remains English for the purposes of education and administration.

Sarath, having completed his education at Borella minor seminary, returns home briefly to spend time with his parents and siblings during the short vacation before commencing the second phase of his studies at Kandy national seminary. This brief reunion holds a special significance for Sarath, infusing his life with genuine beauty.

Sarath finds great inspiration in reuniting with his family after a prolonged absence. With the siblings dispersed for educational pursuits, the family home had remained empty for quite some time. Upon Sarath's return to prepare for entry into Ampitiya National Seminary, the household once again bustled with life as all family members gathered together.

This reunion brought immense joy to their mother, who revelled in having her children under one roof again. However, with everyone now adults, the dynamics had shifted from the playful conversations of their youth to more serious discussions, often revolving around adult responsibilities and concerns, much to the mother's nostalgia.

Sarath's qualities extend beyond his aspiration to become a Catholic priest; his innate calmness and decency since childhood have deeply endeared him to his elder brothers and sisters. Despite being younger, Sarath's opinions are met with respect by his siblings, who value his perspective. Despite occasional differences of opinion, they stand united on matters of mutual agreement, fostering a strong bond among them.

The national seminary was indeed a sanctuary for philosophical education, situated just a few kilometers from Kandy city. Tucked away in a scenic forest amidst mountainous terrain, the seminary stood out with its unique architectural design.

It offered all the necessary amenities for priest students to engage in residential education.

As previously mentioned, the final stages of education required to become a Catholic priest are conducted at this institution, overseen by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka.

An experienced and specially trained Catholic priest, appointed by the Bishops' Conference, assumes the role of director. Through meticulous research and preparation, priest students are immersed in a unique curriculum designed under the full supervision of the Vatican.

Initially drawn to the seminary by its appealing environment and facilities, Sarath soon began to doubt whether it could provide the comprehensive training and guidance he sought for his priestly journey. He had hoped that the National Theological Seminary would furnish him with the theoretical knowledge and practical skills necessary for ministering effectively to others.

However, within a year of his enrolment, Sarath came to the realization that the seminary would not fulfil his expectations in terms of education and experience.

Over the course of six or seven years, Sarath and his fellow students are expected to undergo a prescribed education mandated by the Catholic Church. This curriculum likely draws from materials prepared by theologians at the Vatican in Rome, established many years ago.

He began seeking information about the subjects he was required to study at this juncture.

It dawned on him that he now had to delve into a plethora of conceptual topics seemingly irrelevant to everyday life. To navigate through these complexities, he had to consult towering volumes written in English, akin to *Pettagam*. Sarath came to the realization that these subjects would hardly benefit ordinary individuals, except perhaps for scholars seeking to flaunt their intellectual prowess.

Sarath contemplated that he should now delve into the realms of philosophy, logic, cosmology, physics, metaphysics, as well as the teachings of Christianity of Saint Thomas.

Sarath, in turn, engaged in a debate within himself regarding the benefits of these subjects and their relevance to the priestly life he aspires to lead in the future.

He pondered how these teachings would enrich and nourish his journey toward priesthood.

The primary purpose of a priest's life is to embody the true essence of Christ's teachings among people, exemplified by the commandment to "Love others as I have loved you." However, some subjects learned in the seminary may lack the motivation, guidance, or meaningful connection to this central mission.

However, Sarath found himself lacking the ability or strength to directly oppose these teachings. He observed that all the other students studied these subjects with strict obedience, consistently participating in lectures and classes.

Despite his reservations, Sarath diligently studied these subjects and attended the lectures and classes held for them. He kept his thoughts about these subjects to himself, not yet sharing them with anyone else. Recognizing the lack of a core foundation, Sarath also began studying these subjects in a conventional manner.



Fr. Sarath Iddamalgoda

Priest students are permitted to wear white robes during their studies at the National Theological Seminary.

For Sarath, this was a significant moment in his journey towards priesthood, as he harboured the innocent desire to proudly wear the white robe, symbolizing his identity as a future priest.

Situated amidst several small villages, Ampitiya National Temple primarily serves communities consisting of Sinhala Buddhists and Tamil individuals, including Indian plantation workers who have integrated into Sri Lankan society. Many of those who were originally brought to this country to work on tea estates have now departed from the plantations and are leading normal lives by engaging in various jobs.

To familiarize the priest students with social work, the Social Service Association, established within the seminary, organized trips to villages with its members for various programs and collaborated with villagers to implement various social service initiatives. Sarath had the opportunity to participate in various activities such as giving, which provided him with a valuable chance to serve the community. Despite the lack of relevance to his priestly role, Sarath felt compelled to learn these subjects at the seminary. However, he believes that the work program of the Social Service Association has paved a path towards his goals.

Therefore, Sarath resolved to engage more earnestly and dedicatedly in the activities of the social service association.

If Sarath found any interest in certain subjects at the Seminary, it was not due to the inherent importance or usefulness of the subject matter. Rather, it stemmed from the skill and talent of the teachers who imparted those subjects and the engaging manner in which they delivered their lessons.

During this period, it became possible to study theology in various aspects, and for that purpose, Fathers like Reverend Joakim Pille, Reverend Dudley Perera, Reverend Hilariyan Disanayaka, and Reverend Bob (a Canadian) started teaching this subject in an attractive way.

In the context of belief in one God, Sarath must delve into the concepts of the Holy Trinity and the Holy Eucharist, as well as the laws, church history, Catholic customs, and teaching methodologies of the Catechism. Through his studies, Sarath comes to understand that the sole provider of creation, salvation, and eternal life throughout history is the one true God.

During the journey of salvation, the liberation of slaves as recounted in the book of Exodus, the arrival of Moses, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the journey to the Promised Land emerge as the most profound teachings for Sarath's life.

He endeavours to grasp the true essence of the Bible accurately.

By 1962, discussions about political ideologies had proliferated worldwide, leading to a division of nations into two predominant camps: capitalist and socialist. Many countries with predominantly Catholic populations found themselves under socialist governance, prompting scrutiny of Catholic teachings. There was a growing expectation for the Catholic Church to adopt a more populist stance. The Universal Catholic Church could not evade confronting this reality.

This encapsulates the essence of what the Catholic Church addressed during the Second Vatican Council. The theological discussions of the Council were deeply intertwined with direct social realities, ensuring that philosophy transcended mere abstract concepts to engage meaningfully with the challenges of the world.

In examining the revolutionary teachings outlined in the Bible and the role of Christ in human affairs, a significant number of individuals began to embrace his role as the Son of Man, transcending the notion of him solely as the Son of God. Concurrently, the winds of socialist revolutions sweeping through North-Eastern Europe and South (Latin) American countries began to influence Sri Lanka. By the years 1964 to 1970, this ideological wind had transformed into a veritable whirlwind within Sri Lanka as well.

In the realm of Catholic theology, it is imperative to delve into discussions regarding both the teachings of the book of Acts in the Bible and the importance of embracing equality of opinions.

The concept of socialism is rapidly gaining ground worldwide, and our country is witnessing controversial changes as a result. Educated young people have played a significant role in driving this shift. The book "11th Hour," authored by a Catholic priest engaged in guerrilla warfare, offers a fresh and realistic perspective on the contemporary social role of Catholic fathers. Additionally, Pope Paul VI's publication, "Development of Peoples," is a topic of discussion among seminary students.

Amidst this transformation, moral theology has begun to be viewed as antiquated, prompting discussions about the need to revise the current subjects and syllabus of the seminary.

The discourse unfolded at a highly professional level, with proposals emerging to integrate diverse new themes into the current subjects and syllabi for priestly students.

The Second Vatican Council prompted a thorough questioning of the subjects and teaching methods entrenched in the seminary at that time.

During this period, Reverend Father Dalstan Forbes, who served as Rector of the national seminary, played an active role in numerous seminars and conferences organized by the Catholic Church. These gatherings united in advocating for the implementation of these proposed changes.

Sarath and numerous others, alongside him, seized the opportunity to express their views openly. However, some students opted not to participate in the event due to concerns that any dissent against the existing system might adversely affect their prospects of becoming a priest.

Sarath Iddamalgoda harboured no such doubts, as his experiences had led him to the firm realization that the priestly training and education offered in the seminary were not conducive to producing genuine Catholic priests. He held a strong conviction that immediate change was imperative.

There was no need for Sarath to destroy priestly education. But it must be really different based on the biblical truth. Therefore, he presented his views directly and openly and some of the church leaders were not ready to accept some of his comments.

While it might have been conceivable to suppress the burgeoning unrest through force, the seminary's Father Rector maintained a keen awareness of the potential adverse repercussions. Consequently, the national director of the seminary appointed a special commission, known as the 'Commissio Technica', to address this issue. Through this commission, all students were afforded the opportunity to provide their input on the methods and curriculum deemed suitable for the training of priestly students.

According to Sarath's recollection, there was a potential for a crucial conference to be convened for this purpose. It was anticipated that all bishops in Sri Lanka at the time, along with the responsible fathers for national education and priest students, would participate. Recognizing the significance of unity among the bishops, Sarath and his team contemplated reaching out to each bishop, sending telegraphic messages urging their attendance at the conference.

However, only a handful of bishops participated in the conference. Sarath and his team understood that even if they could reach an agreement with the attending bishops, implementing any decisions would be challenging if the absent bishops opposed them. Nonetheless, the students felt compelled to engage with the visiting bishops, recognizing that they had no other viable option.

Sarath is pleased that there is at least a discussion surrounding the ideas he put forward.

Only those with a profound understanding of the authentic role of a Catholic priest based on biblical principles will recognize the timeliness and relevance of the ideas discussed regarding the potential need for amendments to the existing priest training.

There exists a profound disparity between a priest serving a church established by Rome to uphold its state authority and an authentic Christian priest who bears witness to the truth as guided by the teachings of the Holy Scriptures. Presently, the priest training programs primarily focus on producing leaders tasked with managing the mentioned church, rather than fostering genuine Christian testimony.

Ultimately, the ideas presented to testify to the truth could not be refuted or overcome on biblical grounds. As a result, it was concluded that the Catholic Church of Sri Lanka should institute significant changes in the process of training priests. This transformation must involve greater integration with society, requiring priests to reside within communities and allowing them ample opportunity and time to engage with society. Just as a snail cannot survive without its shell, we must examine the hypothesis that the growth of a snail is intricately linked to its shell.

In addition to imparting knowledge, it is essential to provide students with a practical foundation to effectively apply the knowledge they receive.

It was also emphasized that the contents of the existing syllabus should be fundamentally changed.

During this period of struggle, Sarath Iddamalgoda was a theology student at the National Theological Seminary, esteemed as a senior among his peers. Many individuals closely affiliated with Sarath stood prepared to support him in navigating the ideological differences among like-minded individuals and to confront any ensuing challenges.



Fr. Sarath Iddamalgoda

The church's governing council consisted solely of the coalition of Reverend Fathers present. With a fresh vision for the future of the Catholic Church, the Sarath's group proposed that students should also have representation in this governing body, a suggestion that was ultimately accepted.

Furthermore, in managing the daily operations of the seminary, a culture was fostered wherein students were delegated diverse responsibilities to promote cooperation. This arrangement was facilitated through student leaders. Previously, the appointment of student leaders was at the discretion of the seminary director and the governing council.

The situation underwent a transformation when the governing council embraced the proposal put forth by Sarath and his team, advocating for students to have the opportunity to elect their own leaders through a formal poll.

Following the acceptance of the proposal, a poll was conducted to elect the student leaders of the seminary, marking the first democratic process within its walls. This inaugural poll proved to be a remarkable and gratifying experience for the students, as it granted them the right to select their own representatives for the first time.

Grantham Fernando spearheaded the group that advocated for these necessary changes. Grantham is exceptionally intelligent and remarkably talented, earning the admiration and respect of all who knew him. He possessed a genuine vision and operated without personal agendas. Grantham spoke only when necessary, with impeccable timing, demonstrating a deep understanding of his actions. It's worth noting that due to his clarity and steadfastness, some bishops and reverend fathers within the Catholic Church found themselves challenged by his approach, leading to occasional friction.

However, many students recognized the sincerity of Grantham's cause, which is why he garnered the highest number of votes in the first poll for student leaders. Despite this, he humbly declined the position. Similarly, Sarath Iddamalgoda, who received the second-highest number of votes, also refused the position. Consequently, Leo Perera, who secured the third position, was selected as the student leader.

Leo was widely admired and possessed a remarkable knack for earning the favor of all.

Sarath and Grantham, who proposed holding a poll to elect the student leader of the Seminary, declined to accept the position when the students chose them as their leaders through the poll. Some may interpret this as a deceptive practice between them.

"We are proposing and advocating for the democratic right of the students to choose their leader, not for us to lead."

Sarath answers.

Sarath Iddamalgoda never discounts the necessity of having positions in various strata of society. However, he strongly opposes appointing individuals from above to fill these positions. Instead, he emphasizes that people should have the democratic right to choose the most suitable candidates within a fair democratic system.

Sarath would openly discuss any topic that required attention within the Seminary , knowing that many others were eager to join him for such discussions. However, only a few individuals fearlessly stepped forward to offer leadership to the students. Among them, Sarath Iddamalgoda emphasizes that Grantham Fernando stands out as a particularly exceptional individual

There are various governance structures within the Catholic Church. Primarily, the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka is organized into several dioceses, each overseen by a bishop who leads it.

The Colombo diocese is home to the highest number of Catholic Church members in Sri Lanka, earning its prestigious title of archdiocese and distinguishing it from other dioceses in terms of significance within the Catholic community.

The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka maintains a direct connection with the Vatican in Rome and operates under the oversight of the Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka, comprising all bishops in the country. This conference serves as the primary body for policy formulation and decision-making concerning the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka.

Decisions regarding Catholic education and priest training are made by the Bishops' Conference.

Ampitiya National Seminary, historically the training ground for priests until the 1970s, was overseen by the "Oblates of Mary Immaculate (O M I)maintaining direct ties with Rome. During this period, the directorship of the national seminary was appointed by the "Oblates of Mary Immaculate."(OMI). Subsequently, recognizing the need for change, a proposal was put forward to transfer the administration of the National Seminary directly under the authority of the Catholic Bishops' Conference.

Various ideas and suggestions were tabled during discussions at the seminary, leading to the formation of two distinct groups, each advocating different perspectives. One group voiced support for the proposal, while the other group opposed it.

As a result, two factions emerged within the seminary. The contingent opposing the management of the seminary by the bishops' conference was notably large, indicating a significant level of opposition.

During this period, an unusual variety show took place in the seminary. Subsequently, another group of students reportedly informed the bishops that some students were planning to express dissenting views against the bishops' control of the seminary through a specific short play scheduled for the variety show.

Therefore, Father Rector summoned the team responsible for creating the play to his office and posed a crucial question. It was widely known that this particular team, consistently advocating for substantial changes within the seminary, was behind the production of the play.

"Who intends to stage a play critical of the bishops?" Father Rector inquired, addressing the group of students before him.

Sarath Iddamalgoda, Grantham Fernando, and their companions gathered in Father Rector's office, exchanging uneasy glances as they remained silent in response to Father Rector's inquiry.

"Hey, why the silence?" Father Rector's tone carried a note of urgency.

"Who shared that calumny with Father?"

Sarath Iddamalgoda, previously silent, directed a question to Father Rector.

Father Rector was taken aback by Sarath's unexpected inquiry.

"Are you here to question me?"

Sarath and his team anticipated being questioned by the director, yet they remained composed as they observed the group of students before them. The director rose from his seat, walked over to the window behind his chair, gripped its bars with his hand, and gazed out at the surroundings.

Even though the potential outcome of a conflict with the students was uncertain at this juncture, Father Rector sensed it could undoubtedly lead to a detrimental situation for both the seminary and the Catholic Church.

Speaking calmly from the window, Father Rector expressed his thoughts.

"As aspiring priests of the Catholic Church, you are currently in a phase of learning and growth. While it's natural to have differing opinions, remember to express them constructively. Let's avoid situations where opposition leads to conflicts."

Despite the Rector's efforts to prevent any issues through meticulous and calm conflict resolution techniques, Sarath and his team were determined to uncover the source of the slander.

They felt compelled to reveal the individual or group responsible, recognizing that their quest for change could not succeed if they allowed the flames of discontent to smoulder unnoticed.

"We should convene the student council to address this matter," suggested one student, and the proposal garnered unanimous agreement from the group.

Although the students initiated the process to convene the student council, the Vice Rector intervened and suspended the meeting. Undeterred, the students proceeded to hold a Student General Assembly to address the ongoing situation. Within the assembly, conflicting opinions were expressed, highlighting a clear division among the students.

The following morning, a group of students travelled to Colombo to meet Bishop Edmond Fernando at the Colombo Archbishop's House. Their purpose was to report that Sarath Iddamalgoda and Grantham Fernando were allegedly instigating unnecessary conflicts within the seminary. They urged Bishop Edmond Fernando to swiftly address the matter.

At that time, His Eminence Cardinal Thomas Cooray served as the Archbishop of the Colombo Diocese, while Edmond Fernando held the position of assistant bishop responsible for overseeing seminary regulations.

In the midst of the current situation, it's evident that there is conflict within the seminary. . Bishop Edmond Fernando initiated a special investigation to uncover the individuals responsible for this unrest. Meanwhile, Grantham Fernando and Sarath Iddamalgoda had fulfilled all the educational requirements to become priests and had also made commitments to pursue priesthood.

To attain the title of priest, individuals must undergo another examination held in the third quarter of the preceding year. Following successful completion, priest students undergo training at a selected parish within their respective diocese for a year. Ultimately, the bishop of their diocese officiates their consecration as a priest at the cathedral of that diocese.

Grantham Fernando and Sarath Iddamalgoda stood on the threshold of this consecration. According to the traditions of the Catholic Church, any sacrament conferred upon a Catholic is irrevocable.

To ascend to the priesthood, one must undergo mandatory education spanning several years. Following this, there are various additional blessings required, with the ordination as a Deacon holding particular significance.

However, if the leaders of the congregation wish, they can postpone ordination as a priest. There must be valid reasons for such a decision.

By preventing Sarath and Grantham from appearing in the final quarter of their last year, the council leaders clearly signalled their reluctance to grant them priesthood. It was an unmistakable message to both individuals.

Choosing not to sit for the final quarter exam this year would undeniably postpone their priesthood by several years. Sarath and Grantham now faced a crucial decision.

"Idde, I relinquish this journey," Grantham solemnly declared, clasping Sarath's hands tightly. They stood on the meticulously arranged lawn in front of the seminary's main entrance, gazing at the towering massive trees reaching towards the sky.

Sarath, having shared close quarters with Grantham at the National Seminary for nearly six years, had a deep understanding of their friendship.

Grantham, ever willing to make sacrifices to enrich the environment for himself and his peers, possessed a readiness to depart from any setting that did not embrace him, seeking a new world where he could thrive.

"I am pleased that we've laid the groundwork for significant change in the training of Catholic priests. However, I'm uncertain about the future, Idde. We're a group willing to challenge the privileges entrenched in priest training. Yet, it seems they're not prepared to embrace us. Perhaps it's wiser to seek out those who accept and embrace us, rather than remain among those who reject us."

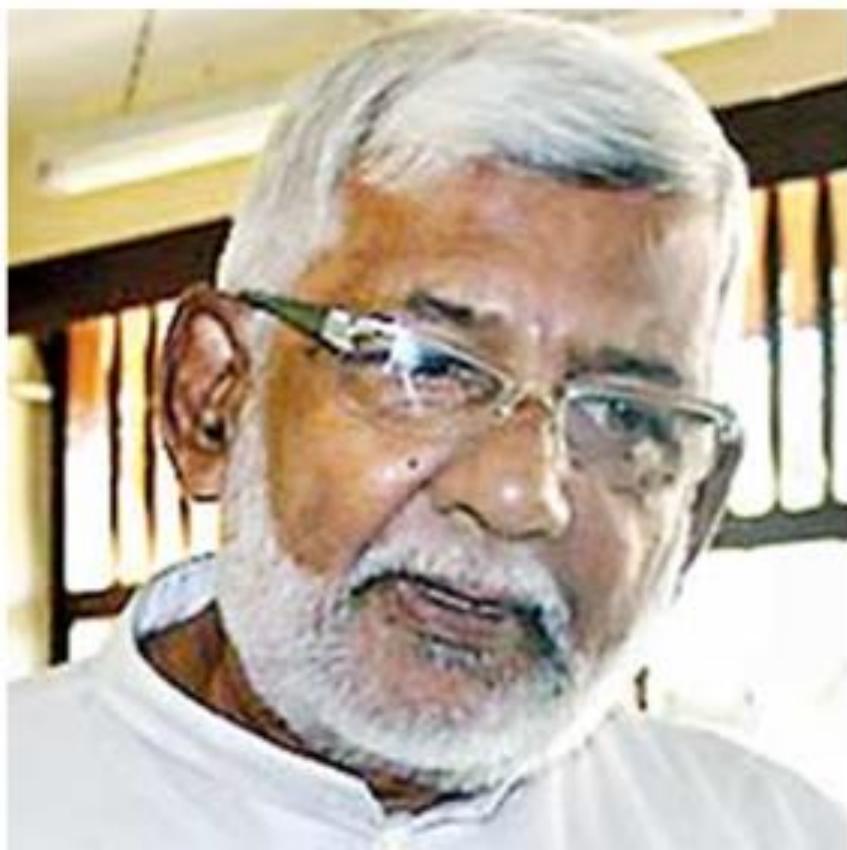
Releasing Sarath's hands, Grantham look around the imposing structures of the seminary grounds. Despite the satisfaction of contributing to the dissemination of the true teachings of Jesus alongside his colleagues within these grand edifices that had loomed over him for six years, Grantham knew that if he pursued priesthood in the Catholic Church, he would encounter numerous challenges ahead. It would be a life fraught with conflicts.

"Gantham's decision aligns with your thoughts. However, I am determined to become a priest. I will don this robe and continue the necessary struggle from within its folds."

Gantham gazed at Sarath's expression until the latter conveyed those sentiments. Yet, Sarath's lips remained sealed, but it didn't surprise Grantham.

Sarath Iddamalgoda, though sparing with words, embodies unwavering determination, demonstrating his clear sense of purpose in life.

During this period, Reverend Tissa Balasuriya (OMI) was actively engaged in impactful social justice initiatives. Grantham, inspired by this dedication, joined an organization overseen by Father, where he began his own pursuit of truth.



Fr. Sarath Iddamalgoda

Sarath's parents were oblivious to the crisis brewing in the seminary. However, he sought counsel from his elder brother and sister regarding the conflict. They imparted their wisdom, advising him to navigate the situation with intelligence and care, avoiding entanglement in any confrontations.

During that period, it became apparent that the seminary administration had barred Brother Sarath Iddamalgoda from participating in the third quarter of his final year. Nevertheless, behind the scenes, arrangements were made to assign him to parish ministry. Consequently, he was directed to the Kibulapitiya parish under the guidance of Reverend Father H. D. Antony. This decision remained confidential, known only to the church administration.

Sarath's friends at the seminary believed he was residing at the 'Kahahena Waga' house. Consequently, during the seminary holidays, a cohort of Sarath's friends visited his home to check on him.

In the course of their discussion with Sarath's parents, it became apparent that there was tension within the seminary community. This tension led the council director to postpone Brother Sarath's ordination to the priesthood.

Due to this, despite Sarath's mother enduring significant emotional distress, the father didn't give much heed to it, recalling the injustices he had experienced in the past due to the Catholic Church.

Nevertheless, amidst these challenges, Brother Sarath diligently prepared during his stay in Kibulapitiya and achieved excellent results in the third quarter examination held at year-end, fulfilling all the requirements for priesthood.

Even after acquiring specialized knowledge and undergoing years of education in the seminary, every seminarian must join a Catholic parish within his diocese. There, he works under the guidance of the parish priest for a certain period, receiving fundamental training in the rituals and duties integral to priesthood.

As intended, Brother Sarath Iddamalgoda arrived at St. Mary's Church on Negombo Grand Street. At that juncture, Reverend Father Antony Fernando (OMI) presided as the parish priest, recognized for his disciplined ethos and steadfast commitment to strict principles.

Sarath, leading a disciplined life, finds no difficulty in handling a father of such demeanour. Under Father Antony's guidance and leadership, Sarath Iddamalgoda is actively engaged in all the duties as a seminarian undergoing training at the parish.

Sarath learns that His Eminence Cardinal Thomas Cooray, the Archbishop of the Colombo Archdiocese, has decided to ordain him into priesthood immediately after completing his parish training. This news comes as truly unbelievable to him.

Sarath was deeply intrigued by the sudden decision, especially considering his awareness of a significant opposition group. Despite their strong dissent, none of them chose to voice their opposition openly.

In the meantime, numerous individuals had recommended to the Archbishop the ordination of Brother Sarath Iddamalgoda. Key figures in this advocacy included Reverend Father Antony Fernando OMI, Sarath's former spiritual director at St. Aloysius Seminary in Colombo, Reverend Father Anselm Croos, and the founder of 'Kithudana Pubuduwa' , Reverend Father Oscar Abeyrathna.

All three of them highly recommended Sarath Iddamalgoda as a deserving candidate for ordination.

Sarath Iddamalgoda, hailing from the Mawalgama church in Hanwella, was ordained as a priest of the Colombo Archdiocese on the 24th, January 1973, receiving the sacred sacrament of Priesthood in the Catholic Church. The majority of them were obedient priest students who opposed the struggle for real change in the seminary, readily complying with any decision or action taken by the elders of the Catholic Church without questioning.

Reverend Sarath Iddamalgoda understood that he would need to collaborate with such a group of individuals to advance his Christian mission.

Reverend Sarath Iddamalgoda possessed a profound comprehension of Jesus' call to serve in His Garden of Redemption.

For his inaugural missionary assignment, he commenced his service in 1973 as an assistant priest at the Negombo Grand Street St. Mary's Church, where he had received practical priestly training.

The most demanding phase of a priest's vocation is the formative period spent as a seminarian. If one's gaze falls upon the striking young man Sarath Iddamalgoda and doesn't return to him repeatedly, that individual must be exceptional indeed.

As previously noted on numerous occasions, he is a man of few words with a remarkable capacity for attentive listening. It is through this skilful practice of listening that he can more accurately comprehend what others are expressing.

The majority of fishermen residing in areas like Negombo Grand Street are known for their loquacious nature and tendency to listen sparingly. Consequently, his initial assignment in such a location proves to be most fitting for him.

Father Sarath Iddamalgoda reflects with optimism on every incident and experience that shaped his journey towards priesthood. He finds contentment in every struggle he has endured, remaining steadfast and unyielding in his commitment to persevere through any challenge, regardless of the time required or the outcome attained.

"People ought to strive not solely for victory. If there exists any anti-people or anti-environmental action in society, it is imperative to oppose it. This way, the world will recognize that you stand apart from such detrimental deeds," Father Sarath frequently emphasizes.

Recognizing the importance of conducting divine worship rituals on the church altar with genuine reverence, Father Sarath endeavours to experience the true essence of this worship amidst the poverty-stricken shanties where people reside.

While undergoing education and training at the Ampitiya National Seminary, Father Sarath encountered the residents of the surrounding villages. This experience afforded him a profound understanding of the arduous struggle for survival faced by the people. It also led him to the realization that the true mission of a Catholic priest lies among the people themselves.

Hence, following the rituals conducted on the church altar, it is imperative for a Catholic priest to descend from it and immerse himself among the people. Only through such engagement can the true Christian vision be authentically manifested and brought to life.

A segment of individuals, failing to grasp this reality, traditionally educate and train Catholic priests, emphasizing the grandeur of God's temple as a magnificent marble structure and endeavouring to gather people around it. However, they overlook the harsh realities of people's lives because they fail to venture into the communities to witness this firsthand. It is not solely the fault of the priests; rather, it reflects a systemic issue within the Catholic Church. The Church persists in maintaining traditional priest training rooted in strict traditionalism, a paradigm that urgently requires reform.

Sarath and his team successfully invited Reverend Tissa Balasuriya (OMI) for a special dialogue program focusing on the crisis in the priesthood. Additionally, they organized and led a discussion on youth crises with the collaboration of Reverend Reginald Perera during Sarath's studies at the National Theological Seminary.

These programs posed genuine challenges for the priest students striving to approach issues realistically. Father Sarath Iddamalgoda gained firsthand insight into the bitter realities discussed that day, extending beyond the confines of Negombo Grand Street and into the lives of people elsewhere.

Amidst the barrage of questions, there was a noticeable silence, as if no one dared to respond. Their breathing laboured, they resembled lifeless figures. For years, they have inhabited cramped, makeshift coconut shacks in a slum environment, spaces unfit for human habitation. They lack even the most basic amenities in their dwelling, and the prospect of owning a proper home remains an unattainable dream.

Despite a lifetime spent in the fishing trade, they do not possess the tools of their labour, trapped in perpetual servitude to fishmongers. Unable to afford proper education, many children's schooling is abruptly halted, with young girls forced into early marriages devoid of legal recognition. By ages 15-16, they become mothers, their health rapidly deteriorating, making them appear far older than their years.

Boys aged 15-16 face various forms of abuse and find themselves entangled in illegal activities, making them liable under the law. Indeed, every individual residing on Negombo Grand Street seems to endure a living hell on earth.

They lack the sanitary facilities that the municipality should provide. Garbage dumps are widespread, drains overflow, and water spills onto the roads. During the rainy season, distinguishing between roads and drains becomes impossible.

Politicians who ascend to power repeatedly approach the populace with a plethora of election promises, only to deceive them. Despite being duped not once, but countless times, the public still chases after these politicians who profess to represent them like their own. Yet, once in office, elected officials often neglect these very constituents.

Religious leaders persuade them that the suffering they endure is the will of God, portraying it as the cross they must bear due to their own sins. Consequently, they accept it as their divine fate, leading lives perpetually burdened by oppression.

Father Sarath Iddamalgoda contends that without recognizing their true purpose and acknowledging the suffering inflicted by living in bondage, individuals will not aspire to attain freedom.

The initial step must involve establishing a supportive system for them. Our task is to create the necessary infrastructure within the social environment. In this endeavour, Reverend Father Sarath Iddamalgoda steps forward to aid in the pursuit of freedom and liberation for the people. This approach is comprehensively grasped, prompting a gathering of committed young individuals in Negombo.

“JANAWABODA KENDRAYA” commences with this approach.

Following his tenure as an assistant priest in Negombo Grand Street Parish, Father Sarath Iddamalgoda was granted the opportunity to serve in Negombo Pitipana. Within the Pitipana parish, encompassing the Negombo-Pamunugama peninsula, are the churches of Talahena, Basiyawatta, Pitipana, and Mankuliya. Alongside the parish priest, a youth assistant priest is designated for mission service.

In 1976, during his parish ministry, Father Sarath Iddamalgoda was committed to the Paul VI Center for the Christian Worker Movement.

During his tenure there, Father Sarath Iddamalgoda actively participated in the Christian labour movement, assuming a leadership role in addressing the professional concerns of the workers. Subsequently, he resumed parish service and relocated to Katunayake in 1978.

By that time, a society of women selling "aluwa" (a Sri Lankan sweet) had been established in the Katunayake area under the guidance of Reverend Godwin. Father Sarath Iddamalgoda, with the assistance of Mr. Anthony Perera from the organization "Kitunu Guru Ekumetuwa," introduced a microfinance concept to organize the women who produce and sell Katunayake Aluwa. This initiative aimed to develop their leadership skills and enable them to start their own savings, thereby fostering a more systematic growth within the society.

As a result of this initiative, the transformation in the lives of approximately 40 families who earned their livelihood by producing and selling "aluwa" in that area became evident. This opportunity enabled them to stand on their own feet, liberating them from the clutches of moneylenders and providing the necessary capital to sustain the production of "aluwa."

Following the passing of Very Reverend Thomas Cooray Cardinal, Reverend Father Nicholas Marcus Fernando was appointed as the new Archbishop of Colombo. Hailing from the Negombo Munnakkary area, he was associated with the Negombo-Grand Street parish and possessed a degree of familiarity with the social initiatives undertaken by Father Sarath Iddamalgoda through his direct engagement with the community during his tenure in this parish.

Additionally, having served as the director of Ampitiya National Seminary when he ascended to the title of Archbishop, he possessed insight into Sarath's challenges during his seminary days.

This background deepened the Archbishop's admiration for Father Sarath Iddamalgoda. He viewed with great optimism the emancipatory ideas and endeavours of young priests like Sarath Iddamalgoda.

Father Sarath Iddamalgoda, who frequently pondered the significance of sacramental services for the people, now finds himself presented with an opportunity to depart from parish ministry.

With the Colombo Archbishop extending an invitation to join the community care programs of the Catholic Church, Father Sarath Iddamalgoda has the chance to shift his focus towards more impactful service to the people. This opportunity is like releasing a turtle into the water. By accepting the Archbishop's invitation, Father Sarath Iddamalgoda is given the chance to travel to the Philippines for a six-month special training program on social and community development.

Father Sarath Iddamalgoda seizes the opportunity to acquire both theoretical and practical education on community organizations and development. This offers him a chance to explore new avenues of working alongside the people, unconstrained by the rituals typically associated with parish service, and to truly embody the priest's authentic role.

Father Sarath Iddamalgoda, upon his return to the island following the training, is granted permission by the Archbishop to dedicate himself full-time to community organizations and development activities.

"Every Christian is a shepherd, a priest, a king, and a servant. Indeed, we must nourish the people; it is the responsibility of every Christian. In one instance, Christ asked Peter if he loved Him. This dialogue concluded with 'Peter, if you love me, feed my sheep.' According to God's teachings, our spiritual life is inseparable from our physical existence."

In reflecting on this principle, Father Sarath Iddamalgoda describes his experience with the Katunayake "Aluwa" production and sales women's society as follows:

"One day, during a meeting of the Aluwa Society, three individuals requested a loan on the same day. However, only one loan could be granted at a time. Disappointed, all three left the meeting. Later, two of them returned, expressing that they could forgo their loan request and insisted it be given to the third person, recognizing their urgent need. This act of understanding and cooperation exemplified their solidarity as members of the society."

"People should cultivate a profound spirituality, and we must aid them in achieving this. Creating platforms for people to share their knowledge, skills, and resources through group initiatives can facilitate this process. We should guide individuals towards deeper spiritual contemplation. Through collective efforts, human potential, economic resources, and diverse ideas converge, fostering strength and resilience within communities."

They stood there, at a loss for what to do next, their hands held in despair. The fire that erupted the previous night had not only consumed their homes, but also all their possessions, reducing everything to ashes. Now, all they possessed was their future.

The formation of the Land and Homeless People's Group in Negombo was spurred by a pivotal event: the devastating fire that razed all the neighbouring houses in Paradise Place, adjacent to the 'Muhundiram' Field, in the heart of Negombo, on the day after Christmas in 1981.

After the row of shacks in Paradise Place, Negombo, was destroyed by fire in 1981, the residents came to the stark realization that they had been dwelling in temporary shelters on land they had no rightful claim to.

These Catholic individuals, belonging to the Grand Street parish, sought refuge with the priest of their church. He directed them to Christ Homes at No. 64 on the Negombo-Challow road, where the displaced families found sanctuary. They gathered at Christ House, seeking assistance to rebuild their devastated dwellings.

Father Sarath Iddamalgoda met with this group and discussed with them, having obtained permission from his superior, the Colombo Archbishop, to fully dedicate himself to social development activities.

A special meeting for the homeless was convened at Christ House. Father Sarath Iddamalgoda came to realize that these individuals faced far more challenges beyond the loss of their homes due to the fire, extending to various other pressing issues.

Therefore, he did not inquire about how the row of huts they lived in caught fire and was destroyed. Instead, he posed a different question to the group: "Why have you not had your own land or house for so long?" No one among them had an answer to this query; all they could do was gaze at each other in silence.

"Are you the only ones in Negombo without land?"

Father Sarath Iddamalgoda poses yet another question to them. Once again, no one responds. Despite the numerous inquiries that could have followed, he comprehended that these individuals were unlikely to answer any further questions.



Fr. Sarath Iddamalgoda

Sunday, February 9th, 2020, marked a significant day not just for the members of the Negombo "JANAWABODA KENDRAYA" but also for its affiliated People's Organization. A special ceremony commemorating the 40th anniversary of J "JANAWABODA KENDRAYA" took place at the main hall of the Negombo City Council, attracting a full attendance of distinguished guests and well-wishers.

To commemorate the " "JANAWABODA KENDRAYA" forty-year journey of service to the afflicted, this occasion also presents a valuable opportunity for introspection. In this regard, its chairman, Rev. Sarath Iddamalgoda, expresses great joy at the substantial turnout of individuals not just from Negombo but also from other cities, reflecting a broad support base.

The commemoration ceremony program encompassed various elements, with a notable highlight being the ceremonial release of two books: "New Sky - New Earth," documenting the forty-year journey of the "JANAWABODA KENDRAYA" and "Fr. Sarath," which delves into the social mission of Reverend Sarath Iddamalgoda alongside his biography.

As a result, many attendees directed their special attention towards Father Sarath Iddamalgoda.

However, the Reverend Father remained humble, attributing the achievements to the collective effort of everyone involved, emphasizing that the forty-year journey was made possible by the collaboration of a large group of individuals.

Additionally, he took the opportunity to acknowledge and express gratitude to all those who stood alongside him through both difficult and joyful times, through victories and defeats.

The journey of the past 40 years was undoubtedly challenging. Father Sarath Iddamalgoda emphasized that it was fraught with obstacles, false accusations, and adversity. Furthermore, he reiterated his social mission, urging us to embark on the task of awakening people from their innate strengths, which often remain concealed under the weight of oppression.

The grassroots movement, which began with community action to compel the government to construct new homes in place of those destroyed by the fire in Paradise Estate near Muhundiram Pitatania in Negombo, must persevere. On that day, numerous individuals stepped forward to lend their support to the grassroots movement spearheaded by the guidance and leadership of Reverend Father Sarath Iddamalgoda and the people's coalition.

At the same time people and groups of various ranks started gathering around "JANAWABODA KENDRAYA"

Their rigorous social analysis led them to identify numerous other issues causing suffering among people and environmental degradation.

Father Sarath Iddamalgoda made significant contributions to the battle against the loss of sea and beachfront areas to the fishing community. He actively campaigned against the haphazard construction of hotels on the shoreline, advocating for proper planning. Additionally, he worked tirelessly to safeguard the lagoon from pollution caused by waste accumulation from factories in the free trade zone and construction activities around its vicinity.

In his commitment to collective endeavours, Father Sarath Iddamalgoda consistently stressed the importance of unity across all segments of society, including Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu communities. He advocated for transcending not only racial and religious divides but also the political ideologies associated with different parties, encouraging collaboration among all.

Father Sarath Iddamalgoda emphasizes the significance of recognizing the humanity in everyone. One notable outcome of uniting the people of Negombo to address land and housing issues is the establishment of the Negombo People's United Organization.

Within this organization, community members began exploring solutions to various other challenges they faced.

Leadership was provided by members of "JANAWABODA KENDRAYA" including Father Sarath Iddamalgoda, alongside other stakeholders. The activists of "JANAWABODA KENDRAYA" adopted a strategy of bringing together residents from diverse communities into smaller groups, implementing development theories with the guidance of the **Paulo Freire** coalition.

By creating social spaces, people were empowered to address their questions and concerns, drawing upon their collective wisdom. To encourage savings among these groups, small loans were made available.

The response of "JANAWABODA KENDRAYA" extended beyond the Negombo area. Rev. Fr. Sarath, an advocate for land and housing rights, collaborated not only with the Sinhalese community in the south but also with Tamil and Muslim communities in the north and east.

Father Sarath frequently emphasized the importance of collaboration, stating, "Whenever we were networked together, we were stronger as a people, but whenever we were alone, we were weaker."

Father Sarath opposes the destructive so-called development programs initiated by existing governments, which often cater to the interests of their allies and foreign associates without clear, thoughtful plans. He recognizes the potential future devastation that such programs may bring about and actively opposes them.

Regardless of the ruling political party, Father Sarath remains indifferent. This stance makes him a challenge to every government. His protest stems from a profound spiritual foundation, drawing upon the potential and liberating essence found within the Bible.

Father Sarath Iddamalgoda found himself in an exceedingly challenging situation during the turbulent period of 1988-1989 as he steadfastly pursued the liberating principles he espoused. At a time when liberation groups were embroiled in armed resistance against the government's imperialist and anti-democratic rule, the government unleashed a deeply frightening wave of repression.

Due to Father Sarath's outspoken opposition to both the groups perpetrating relentless killings in the name of their political ideologies and the government's repressive programs, he received death threats from both sides. Consequently, Father Sarath and members of his group were compelled to flee the country for their safety.

During this period, the leaders who had long been involved in active community development activities within "JANAWABODA KENDRAYA" persevered without pause. Following the resolution of the crisis situation in the country, Father Sarath returned to the island in 1991-1992 and resumed his mission.

For an extended duration spanning from 1977 to 1994, the country was governed by a single political entity.

Under the Executive Republic system introduced in 1978, the democratic rights of the people were gradually being restricted, while Tamil youths in the North initiated an armed struggle aimed at establishing a separate state in the North-East.

The government's response to this struggle with weapons escalated into a severe war situation in the North-Eastern areas, resulting in the loss of thousands of lives. Father Sarath, firmly convinced that there is no military solution to the quest for the right to self-determination, advocated for a political resolution.

Additionally, he made peaceful efforts to construct a bridge connecting the North and South, inspiring stakeholders to seek solutions to the issues facing the Tamil community. Simultaneously, he advocated for the formation of a new government in 1994 as a prerequisite for implementing political reforms in the country. Father Sarath took great care to ensure that none of these initiatives were co-opted by any political party or group's agenda.

With the government change in 1994, the anticipated positive transformation failed to materialize. Instead, the conflict in the North and East persisted, spreading to different areas in the South with frequent occurrences of attacks and bombings.

Throughout its history, the Negombo area, where Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims coexisted, has remained free from racist riots. This peaceful coexistence can be attributed to the active reconciliation programs implemented under the leadership of figures like Father Sarath Iddamalgoda.

Father Sarath sensitively engaged with the evolving political landscape of the country, consistently advocating for the needs and struggles of the people.

He actively campaigned against the transient destructiveness associated with the Colombo Port City project, recognizing the potential damage it could inflict on the coastal communities. His efforts extended to street-level activism, demonstrating his commitment to mitigating the project's adverse effects.

Father Sarath Iddamalgoda, observing the seed he planted growing into a towering tree providing shade for others, poses a thought-provoking question: "Today, I pose a question that you should reflect on in twenty-five or forty years. What transformations have unfolded in our lives during this time?"

He further said:

"When you and I embarked on this mission, it was driven by noble purposes and objectives. However, the opposing forces of differing values that emerged in the seventies persistently worked against us. If the neoliberal economic system managed to fracture our unity, diminish our strength, and sow division among us, it likely occurred through the very programs we initiated."

Father Sarath Iddamalgoda, who has stood steadfastly alongside the people for many years, possesses an acute understanding of the challenges they encounter. Today, he foresees what tomorrow may bring.

As we anticipate the myriad challenges awaiting us tomorrow, it's crucial to strategize how to confront the negative forces that lie ahead. We must earnestly seek answers to these pressing questions. Have we yielded to the influences of neoliberalism? And more importantly, do we possess the capacity to overcome these formidable forces?

Reverend Father Sarath Iddamalgoda poses a poignant question: Are we still aligned with the original objectives of empowering our people, or have we inadvertently become victims of those very objectives?



GLOSSARY

Friar - term used to refer to a member of certain religious orders, particularly within the Catholic Church, who is typically ordained as a priest and lives a communal life dedicated to prayer, service, and ministry. Friars often engage in various forms of pastoral work, including preaching, teaching, and providing spiritual guidance, and they may also be involved in social outreach and community service initiatives.

grassroots movement - collective effort that originates from the community level grassroots movement initiative that emerges from the community level, driven by the efforts and concerns of ordinary people.

"JANAWABODA KENDRAYA" - Public Awareness Centre public awareness centre serves as a hub for disseminating information, raising consciousness, and educating the public about various issues, ranging from health and environmental concerns to social justice and community development

Podi Akka - "older sister" or "second eldest sister" : (She is older than you but younger than the eldest sister)

ayirawo - small fish that shares some characteristics with a bittern or inhabits similar environments

podi putha - little son of the family

Pettagama - Also known as the ' Dutch Box' . piece of old Sinhalese furniture, which is used as a decorative piece while also doubling as a storage compartment.

Introduction to the Author: First Edition

Aruna Shantha Nonis consistently emphasizes truth over personal opinion in his written works, comprising books and articles. He collaborates with others to inspire individuals to advocate for truthfulness.

He opted to write a book portraying a spiritually enlightened Christian who, like Reverend Sarath Iddamalgoda, swims against the tide during a time when religious dogma suppresses righteousness.

He frequently mentions, "I haven't formally studied Sinhala language or literature, which makes it challenging for me to articulate the thoughts in my mind." However, he persists in the craft of writing to convey his liberating perspectives. "Idde" marks his fifth book.

He writes in a distinctive language that is uniquely his own, encapsulating the essence of his thoughts. In "Idde," Father Sarath Iddamalgoda delves into his arduous journey as a student priest in the seminary, confronting entrenched religious establishments that stifle spirituality. To initiate change in the world, one must commence from somewhere, and Aruna Shantha Nonis is undertaking this endeavour.



Aruna Shantha Nonis

Dileepa Vanniarachchi

"Word about the Translator"

Shanthalal Hettiarachi's literary prowess may well be an inherited trait. Inspired by his father, a member of the esteemed 'Hela Hawula', and his mother, a dedicated teacher, Shanthalal has honed his craft through unwavering dedication and practice. He has composed numerous poems and short stories, transforming his thoughts into literature rather than mere words. Expanding his literary repertoire, he delves into investigative literature, a notable example being his acclaimed work, "Mary of Magdalene".

In this piece, Shanthalal reinterprets the knowledge and beliefs surrounding Mary Magdalene, a pivotal figure from the Bible, presenting her story in a new light. Originally written in Sinhala, he undertook the translation into English himself, recognizing the need for its international reach. Shanthalal is currently engaged in an investigative study on the character of Judas Iscariot, which promises to provoke discussion among biblical scholars worldwide, extending beyond Christian circles.

Upon encountering my book 'Idde', which chronicles significant moments in the life of Rev. Fr. Sarath Iddamalgoda, Shanthalal was compelled to translate it into English, believing that Fr. Sarath Iddamalgoda's legacy should not be confined to the island of Sri Lanka. Several readers of the English translation of 'Idde' have attested to Shanthalal's success in overcoming the challenges of translation.

Aruna Shantha Nonis
2024.05.16

