

## **Experience of peacebuilding in Sri Lanka**

**J.M. Joseph Jeyaseelan, CMF (Major Superior, Sri Lanka Claretian Delegation)**

Many countries in Asia have gone through or are going through conflicts of various kinds: international, inter-state, inter-ethnic, communal, tribal, etc. Therefore, here in Asia, just as in Africa and Latin America, the need for peacebuilding activities, conflict prevention mechanisms, conflict transformation strategies, and reconciliation projects can never be underestimated. The need is ever present. Unfortunately, in most cases all evidence shows a lack of commitment from the side of the responsible parties (especially, the elected governments) to mobilize enough efforts and resources to build peace among the conflicted parties, whether it be in an ongoing conflict or in a post-conflict scenario. Peace education is yet to gain ground as an important component of national education systems. The Church too could embrace a broader scope with ministries aimed at peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in Asia have taken on the responsibility of doing independent work in the area of peacebuilding and conflict transformation, or they are complementing efforts undertaken by the governments and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). There is a unique contribution that faith-based NGOs can make toward peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives. This unique contribution can be expressed in two ways: a) Christian faith-based NGOs initiating programs involving the Christians, and b) inviting and involving the leaders of other religious faiths to do the same on a collaborative platform. There is a dearth of faith-based NGOs taking on this role. There is need for new initiatives that can fill this gap. In Sri Lanka, the National Caritas, along with its diocesan counterparts, is among the few faith-based NGOs that undertake some peacebuilding activities. Some religious congregations have initiated some low-scale projects and initiatives aimed at peacebuilding.

Sri Lanka—though it is a cradle for the world's four major religions, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism—had the experience of a civil war for nearly three decades (1983-2009) and the religions have not done much to contain the spread of violence during the war, or to initiate reconciliation activities in the years that have elapsed since the war came to an end through a controversial military solution in May 2009.

As Claretian Missionaries, our commitment to peacebuilding and reconciliation has been quite consistent and active. JPIC concerns have always occupied a central place in our ministry initiatives. Various Claretians have committed themselves for the work of reconciliation and issues related to justice and human rights.

The ability of the Sri Lankans in 2022 to come together beyond all differences to overthrow an oppressive president and a government is a good example that the Sri Lankans have the capacity to make things happen if they unite on a common platform. Peace is a possibility. But the lack of willingness and partisan politics have become blocks. The church has to be more prophetic in post-war Sri Lanka calling different stakeholders to come together to work for national reconciliation. Being “divided” as “northern church” and “southern church” and being too much identified with the “cause” of one’s ethnic group is not being faithful to the gospel imperative. The tiny minority working actively within the church circles (bishops, priests, nuns, and lay people) needs recognition, encouragement, and resources to do more.