

A Witness to Christ

I last saw Fr Xavier Thani Nayagam in 1958. When he returned from Europe to Sri Lanka, for a time we corresponded — indeed I planned, unsuccessfully as it turned out, to visit that country in the 1970's mainly with the intention of seeing Fr Thani Nayagam again—and I thought of him quite often, as one does when a close friendship has been formed, and, from time to time, without evident cause one recalls a face, a smile and a warm presence.

Some hours after learning, with sadness, of Fr Thani Nayagam's death, I looked up, on my shelves, a copy of one of his books which he had kindly given me. On the fly leaf of *The Carthaginian Clergy* I found this inscription, which I had quite forgotten was there:

To Vince, In remembrance of our first Greek lesson,
Father Xavier.

London, Jan 14th, 1957.

That must have been near the beginning of our friendship. It was characteristic of Fr Thani Nayagam that, already knowing Latin and several other languages, he should decide, in middle life, to go on to Greek. He was, in the best sense, an adventurer. What I taught him was probably just the rudiments, our time being limited, but I expect he went on to master the language in which the Evangelists wrote, and to read such authors as Plato in the original.

The inscription in the book was also generous. Fr Thani Nayagam chose to thank me for my lessons without mentioning his own lessons about Tamil culture to me. For we had become acquainted when I was researching my biography of Roberto de Nobili the Italian missionary who worked among the Tamil inhabitants of southern India and following Matteo Ricci's methods in China, adapted himself to the habits of thought of the people of Madurai.

In summer 1958 I went to stay in the British School of Rome to search in various archives for documents about de Nobili. It so happened that Fr Thani Nayagam was also then in Rome. He kindly offered to say Mass, at which my wife and I could be present, in one of the catacombs—that of St Cecilia I think—where immediately after his ordination he had celebrated his First Mass. We accepted gratefully.

In the catacomb during World War II a number of Jews had been hidden and cared for by Catholic nuns. In gratitude they afterwards gave the catacomb a beautiful modern mosaic reproducing the subject of one of the catacomb frescoes: the Last Supper. The mosaic was on the wall above the simple altar where Fr Thani Nayagam said

Mass. In the silent underground passage there were only the three of us. I could not help being struck by the unusual intersection of time and space. In a catacomb where early Christians of diverse ethnic origins had sheltered from persecution and where Jews too had sheltered, a priest from Sri Lanka, educated in Tamil values and speaking Tamil as his first language, was saying Mass in Latin in the presence of an Englishman and a Frenchwoman. Never before had I realized so forcefully the universality of the Catholic Church. And that was only one aspect of a memorable occasion. For Fr Thani Nayagam said Mass with such serenity and devotion that the mosaic on the wall seemed wholly appropriate.

After Mass the three of us breakfasted together. Fr Thani Nayagam's courtesy and humorous banter were much in evidence. If only I had noted down what he said, and his manner of saying it! One of our friends, a young lady half—Italian, half—American, who met Fr Thani Nayagam at this time, said to us later, 'He is the sort of priest who should be made Pope.' Certainly he radiated goodness in a way that made her tribute seem reasonable.

That was almost the last occasion on which I saw him. We met once again in London, where he gave me valuable advice for my book on Nobili, published as *A Pearl to India*. He himself was not destined to remain in Rome, nor to continue to radiate among his friends in Europe but rather, like Francis Xavier and Roberto de Nobili, he returned to the East and there by his presence bore witness to Christ among the Gentiles. In one of his letters to me I recall Fr Thani Nayagam expressing sadness that the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka was labouring under political and social discrimination. That must have pained him deeply, since he was sensitive to injustice as to every form of evil. Yet he had been born with a joyful temperament, and his religion had sharpened that joy, so I continued to picture him through the 1960's and 1970's as a man transforming tribulation into something positive for his neighbours in Sri Lanka, as he had done earlier for those who had the privilege of knowing him in England.

— Vincent Cronin