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Bishop Rayappu Joseph

16 April 1940 to 1 April 2021

A respected voice of courage and morality in Sri Lanka



The Tamil information Centre (TIC) joins the people in grieving the loss of Bishop Rayappu Joseph, who died at the age of 80 on 1 April 2021.

Bishop Joseph served as the Bishop of Mannar from 1992 to 2016, a period and place that experienced the brutality of the armed conflict in Sri Lanka and the devastation of the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. He was a frontline figure in the diocese, leading relief work, protesting against armed attacks and bombings of civilians, and comforting the displaced and dispossessed people. He was courageous and forthright in condemning all forms of human rights abuses by all sides in the Sri Lankan conflict. He was a moral compass when the Sri Lankan state failed in the responsibility to govern all the communities with equality, fairness and justice, and when other leaders were notably silent.

Bishop Joseph was born in Delft Island (Neduntheevu) in Jaffna District. He was educated at St Patrick's College in Jaffna and St Joseph's College in Anuradhapura. He began his seminary education at St Martins Seminary in Jaffna, and continued at the National Seminary in Ampitiya, Kandy, St Paul's Seminary in South India, Pontifical Urbaniana University in Rome and Gregorian University in Rome. He was ordained Priest on 13 December 1967. Bishop Joseph completed his doctorate in Canon Law awarded by the Pontifical Urbaniana University in 1984. He was appointed Professor at the St Francis Xavier Seminary in Colombothurai, Jaffna. After serving in different dioceses, he was appointed the Bishop of Mannar on the 6 July 1992.

Bishop Joseph served as the Vice Chairman of the National Commission for Justice, Peace and Human Development of the Catholic Bishops' Conference for seven years. He continued to work in association with the Vatican State and other members of the Caritas Internationalis Confederation, including agencies in Norway and agencies in countries of the European Union, for the promotion of peace in Sri Lanka. Upon the request of Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Bishop Joseph worked as the facilitator for peace initiatives between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government along with Archbishop Malcolm Ranjith. He worked with like-minded Buddhist clergy to

create awareness in the Tamil and Sinhalese communities about the importance of peace and harmony for the future of Sri Lanka.

He championed human rights through awareness programmes, campaigns and documentation of human right violations and worked to achieve free and fair elections. The Tamil Information Centre (TIC) regularly contacted Bishop Joseph for advice on human rights and peace issues. Following the armed conflict, Bishop Joseph repeatedly emphasised the importance of national reconciliation built upon trust and truthfulness. He was deeply concerned about accountability issues which adversely affected peace and reconciliation. The Bishop was troubled by the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution which failed to include provisions that would bring permanent peace and described the Amendment as “fundamentally flawed”.

For a question from a journalist of *Lakbima News* (5 August 2020), he said ***“I am standing for truth and Justice. We are taking about human lives and there is no ‘adjustment’ in human lives”***. Bishop Joseph went on to say that his dream was **‘to see a true statesman who would rise above party politics, who will work for the welfare of the people irrespective who they are, who would risk life to serve people and who would stand by the people’**. He emphasized that ‘till then this country will be in darkness’.

Nelson Mandela said, “Real leaders must be ready to sacrifice all for the freedom of their people”. Bishop Joseph was undoubtedly a ‘real leader’ for the Sri Lankan community, and the Sri Lankan people have lost a true humanitarian. Speaking about Sri Lanka he said, “It is one country many nations. It is similar to India which has many nations in one country”. Bishop Joseph called for the recognition of the Tamil people as a nation (meaning a people with their own heritage) which was crucial to bringing about peace in Sri Lanka.

Bishop Rayappu Joseph will be remembered and recognised for his contribution to social justice and human rights in Sri Lanka and his stand on the legitimacy of political rights of the Tamil people of Sri Lanka.

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