

ST. JOSEPH VAZ, C.O.

1651-1711; CANONIZED IN 2015 BY POPE FRANCIS; FEAST DAY: JANUARY 16



Joseph Vaz was born in 1651 in Goa (the Portuguese colony on the western coast of India). After studying under Jesuits and Dominicans, he was ordained a priest of the Archdiocese of Goa in 1676. Fr. Joseph quickly gained a reputation for constant prayerfulness, simplicity, and love for the poor. He was sought after as a preacher and confessor. In 1685, he joined the nascent Goa Oratory, and briefly served as Provost.

On the island of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), the Dutch colonial government was spreading Calvinist propaganda and persecuting Catholics. When Fr. Joseph went there in 1686, there had not been a priest on the island in fifty years. He worked in secret under disguise, and had to move often to escape Dutch authorities angered by his success. When he tried to move his base of operations to the capital city of Kandy, Fr. Joseph was accused by the native Sri Lankans of being a Portuguese spy and imprisoned; even there, he worked to

convert the other prisoners to Christ. Eventually, he won over the king, who released him and encouraged his work.

In the late 1690s, several priests, including three Oratorians from Goa, arrived to assist Fr. Joseph, and he was appointed Vicar General of Ceylon. Their missionary work was enormously successful, resulting in conversions by the thousands. During this period, some fifteen churches, 400 chapels, as well as schools and hospitals, were built. The missionaries constantly defended the rights of Catholics under the Dutch Protestant government. When Rome learned of this success, there was talk of erecting a new Diocese of Ceylon with Fr. Joseph as its first bishop, but he himself opposed the idea, perhaps in part because of his rapidly declining health. Fr. Joseph died at Kandy in 1711.

Fr. Joseph's cause for canonization began in 1737 and many miracles were reported, but the cause was slowed, especially by political problems in Europe. The Oratory in Kandy was expelled in 1745, and in 1835 Portuguese anticlericalism doomed the Goa Oratory as well. The process for Fr. Joseph was not resumed until 1928.

Pope St. John Paul II issued the Decree of Heroic Virtues in 1989, and beatified Fr. Joseph in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on January 21, 1995. He was canonized by Pope Francis in Colombo on January 14, 2015. The feast day of the Apostle of Ceylon is celebrated on January 16.