

Michael Rodrigo (1927-1987)

Martyr in Living the Interreligious Dialogue

by Philip Singarayar

Editor's Note: Philip Singarayar O.M.I. (1938-) is a Sri Lankan Tamil. He was born in Talawakelle Kandy District and received his early education in Kandy, Jaffna and Colombo. Priestly studies were at the National Seminary, Kandy. He was associate and pastor in the South Colombo Diocese Bilingual Parishes. He has served on the formation team in Kandy, Bangalore (India) and Washington, D.C., and as associate in the Bronx and Miami. He is now part of the formation team at The Oblate House of Theology, Chicago, IL. My thanks to Fr. Singarayar for this contribution, especially for insisting that Michael Rodrigo lived what he believed.

On the eve of November 10, 1987, Fr. Michael Rodrigo had come to the last part of the Eucharist when he heard a noise behind him. He turned, received the bullet of an assassin in his face, and his blood flowed into the chalice on the altar.

Michael Rodrigo was born on June 30, 1927 in Sri Lanka. His father came from a Buddhist family. He did his early studies at St. Peter's College, Colombo. He did his priestly studies at the Gregorian University in Rome from 1948-1955 earning his first doctorate: The Enlightenment of the Buddha (1959).

His first assignment was in 1955 to the staff of the newly begun National Seminary of Sri Lanka in Kandy, under the rectorship of Fr. Fred Sackett, OMI, from Texas. He taught Liturgy and Comparative Religion. On weekends he went to the parishes and conducted seminars on Liturgy, thus living with the people and living what he taught.

From 1971-1973 he did his second doctorate in Major Religions. The title was The Moral Passover from Self to Selflessness in Christianity and the Living Faiths of Asia (Institute Catholique de Paris, 1973). From 1973-1975 he was at the Centre for Society and Religion, working with Fr. Tissa Balasuriya, OMI.

In 1975 Bishop Leo Nanayakara of the newly formed Diocese of Badulla invited Fr. Michael Rodrigo to take charge of his new seminary. The seminarians lived with the poor people in the villages and received their formation and classes in Philosophy and Theology. Thus Fr. Rodrigo was a pioneer in challenging the traditional seminary formation. It was here that he heard the "Cry Of The Poor." In 1980, he took up residence at his new mission in Buttala, a strong Buddhist area, where the people were poor and neglected. He formed a small group of two religious sisters and lay people and worked for the spiritual and social betterment of the poor. In 1987 he gave a talk at the University of California at Berkeley on village dialogue and life, which reflected his work in Buttala. He called it "Christianity Living for Buddhism at the Village Level."

Near the end of his life, he received threats and began to discern the Will of God for himself. On that fateful November day, towards the end of the Eucharist, he was discerning with his little group about the continuation of his ministry. It was then that he heard the noise behind him. Thus he died a martyr, laying down his life at the altar.

December 7, 2011 UPDATE

AsiaNews interviewed a young Catholic professor, Meemana Anton, for the 24th anniversary of Father Rodrigo's assassination. The article may be read in Oblate Communications, 23/11/2011.

January 4, 2013 UPDATE

Oblate Communications, 12/28/12, "25 Years Ago: Assassination of Fr. Michael Rodrigo OMI" give more information about Father's legacy, especially in social justice and interreligious dialogue with Buddhists.

Feb. 28, 2013 Update

Father Michael's 85th birthday was celebrated June 30, 2012 and described in [Oblate Communications](#), "Remembering Fr. Michael Rodrigo," 16/07/2012. The 25th anniversary of his assassination was celebrated on Nov. 10, 2012 and described in [Oblate Information](#), Feb.2013, pp. 12-13. The first issue of [Samvada, A Sri Lankan Catholic Journal on Interreligious Dialogue](#), vol. 1, Nov. 2012 is dedicated to Fr. Michael and gives much information on his life and legacy (107 pages).

[Click here](#) for 10 photos of the Nov. 10, 2012 observance. Fr. Michael's sister in the green saree; I recommend pictures 1, 2, 8, 9, and 10, and thank Fr. Clement Waidyasekara OMI for sending them.