

A Brief History of the CATHOLIC CHURCH in Nagaland

DR. DAVID SYIEMLEH

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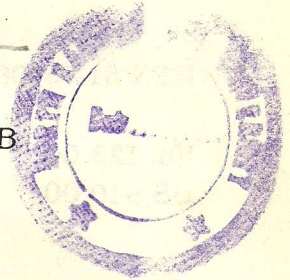
Shillong

A Brief
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CATHOLIC CHURCH
in Nagaland

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DR. DAVID SYIEMLIH

With an Introduction
by Sebastian Karotemprel, SDB



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Dedicated
to

*The Catholic Pioneers of the Gospel in Nagaland,
Mgr. E. Bars, S.D.B., Fr. L. Marocchino, S.D.B., Sisters
of Christ Jesus, Sr. Guadalupe Velasco, S.C.J., Sr. Mar-
garita Cifre, S.C.J., and their Catechist Collaborators
Mr. Paulus Keviprale, Mr. Philip Suosahie.*

Contents

Introduction		23
Chapter I	Nagaland and Christianity	27
Chapter II	The Beginnings among the Angamis and the Lothas	41
Chapter III	Into New Areas	60
Chapter IV	A Loving Service to God and Man	84
Chapter V	Conclusion	106
Appendix I	The Diocese of Kohima at a Glance	120
Appendix II	Parishes and Mission Centres	127
Appendix III	The Diocese of Kohima at a Glance 1989	128
Appendix IV	The Dioceses of Northeast India, 1989	129
Glossary of terms		130
Bibliography		147
Index		1151

Preface

Sometime in the middle of 1986 Father Sebastian Karotempel of Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong, asked me whether it would be possible to write short articles on the Catholic Church among the Angami and the Lotha Nagas. The plan was that I would be one among others to jointly present the history of the Church in Nagaland. In January, 1987 I made a tour of some of the Angami and Lotha missions, starting with a few days of discussion with Bishop Abraham and his staff at Bishop's House, Dimapur. The Bishop changed the scheme for which I had set out - he wanted me to write a short history of the Catholic Church in Nagaland.

The limitations in writing a contemporary history are many. For one thing the Catholic Church among the Nagas had its origins only in the early 1950s and many of the individuals who went out as missionaries in those early days are still alive. No doubt their presence was important in the writing of this history, but not sufficient time has passed to give a total view of their work. Many of the missions are only a few years old and though now out of that stage of experiment and trial, yet to critically assess their contribution to the socio-economic and political ethos of the Nagas will not be possible at this stage. This work, therefore, will principally pay attention to the beginnings, growth and development of the various Catholic missions among the Nagas. Any subsequent study may be both more exhaustive in content and critical interpretation.

A word or two about the source material. Much of what is presented here is taken from chronicles each

parish-centre maintains, either directly from the primary source or from secondary material in the form of souvenirs, pamphlets, reports and from typed and mimeographed material. A number of priests and their first converts were interviewed. They provided insights into the Church's work not provided in written material. There is as yet no dependable secondary source apart from S. Coelho's *EVEN TO THE NORTHEAST* (which highlights the role of the Jesuits in Nagaland) and Thomas Menampampil's *'CHURCH IN NORTH-EAST INDIA - A STUDY'* (which is something of a precursor to F. Downs' *Christianity in Northeast India*). This short history is, therefore, the first attempt to narrate the story of the various Catholic missions in Nagaland.

Two other visits to Kohima in 1987, unconnected with the writing of this book, made me more acquainted with the Nagas. The last tour in July 1988 enabled me to round off in a sense the remainder of the hills I had missed in the first visit. Contact was made with Lakhuti, Mokokchung, Tuensang, Tobu, Kiphire, Meluri, Chizami, Pfutsero and Jakhama. My guide on the first tour to Kohima, Tseminyu, Wokha and Lungsa was Dr. Anthony of the Resource Centre, Bishop's House, Dimapur. Dr. Anthony has over a two-year stay in Nagaland visited almost every Catholic family in Nagaland and made numerous enquiries of all aspects of their life. It was hoped that some of his research would be projected in this study. Unfortunately family problems have not made it possible for him to put his findings together. Father John Kavas most cheerfully accompanied me on the second tour.

This small book will be read, I hope, by Nagas and Church circles and others interested in Church and

mission history. Care has been taken to provide as many notes and references for the more inquisitive reader to follow the sources. The material used for writing this history will be given to the Documentation Centre at the Library of Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong.

I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Bishop Abraham, for giving me the inspiration to make this study. At no point of the study did he want his view to be presented. Consequently the conclusions reached are mine as well as whatever errors that might be in the book are mine alone. Frs. Sebastian Ouseppampil, Joseph Puthenpurakal and John Kavas and all priests, nuns and catechists in the different parishes and centres were kind enough to provide hospitality and the material on which this book rests. Fr. Larrea of the Pastoral Centre, Shillong, gave me all the material he had of the Lotha Mission. Father Sebastian Karotemprel provided me with some material, plodded me on, got the MSS typed and did all the editorial work and has seen it through the press. Fr. George Kottupallil gave me some source material and valuable suggestions. I am very grateful to Prof. Veronica Paul for the final correction of the MSS done so thoroughly and competently. To all these friends I owe a word of thanks. I also wish to express my gratitude to all my Naga friends with whom I stayed, shared meals on western style tables or sipped tea from glass tumblers or zu around a fire place. Grateful acknowledgement is made to Dr. B. S. Mipun, Lecturer in Geography, NEHU, for the two maps he has drawn.

The difficulties of the priests and nuns in the far-flung mission centres can hardly be imagined. They

work alone amid numerous hardships such as adjusting to the Naga people, their languages, customs and traditions, the distance they have to cover in their pastoral work and the financial constraints within which they must work - all, not for their personal gain but for their mission to serve the Nagas. This book is dedicated to these selfless men and women.

Department of History,
North Eastern
Hill University,
Shillong,
October, 1989.

Dr. David R. Syiemlieh

Introduction

In 1982 I conducted a Seminar on Evangelization for the diocese of Kohima which was attended by the Bishop, the Priests, the Religious and the Laity of Nagaland. The idea of preparing a booklet on each tribe among whom evangelization work was in progress along with a brief history of the origins of the Catholic Church among them was discussed at the seminar and was accepted by all.

Accordingly a number of priests working in various tribal communities began to make a study as suggested above. This was partly done during the course of the next two years. But, some of the studies contained much sociological and anthropological information but very little on the history of the beginning of the Church. Besides, the contributions received were also of unequal literary and methodological levels.

Despite these limitations, the material gathered was very useful. It was at this stage, that I approached Dr. David Syiemlieh, Reader in History in the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, with the idea of writing a history of the Catholic Church in Nagaland. The suggestion was welcomed and the work started.

In December 1986 Dr. Syiemlieh made a visit to most of the mission centres of Nagaland and was able to observe closely the Church's activities in Nagaland. Several interviews were held with priests, lay Catholics, Catechists and the Religious. The visit also offered an opportunity to gather photographs, chronicles, letters and other source material connected with the history of the Church in Nagaland.

A second visit was made in 1987 to complete the work of gathering material and cover centres not seen during the first visit.

The contributions made earlier by priests working among the tribes of Nagaland and the material gathered by Dr. Syiemlieh form the basis of the book on the history of the Catholic Church in Nagaland.

The study has a limited scope. To begin with it is contemporary history and hence it cannot be critical enough for the simple fact that personalities involved in the story are still alive.

Secondly, not all mission centres have taken care to maintain regular chronicles of events and even when maintained, they contain only a string of events, sometimes even secondary, and not a critical, contextual and evaluatory record of events, problems and personalities.

Thirdly, archival material that might be in Rome or elsewhere, and the correspondence of missionaries with their regional and international headquarters, obviously are not made available to researchers.

Despite these unavoidable limitations, this study is a great beginning. Certainly future historians will make further studies and complement and supplement this work. I may also express the hope that all missionaries and Religious communities will be greatly inspired by this story and also begin to keep meticulous and substantive record and chronicles of events, problems, personalities, their religious, cultural and social backgrounds and thus provide original source

material for the history of the Church. It will also highlight their individual and collective contribution to the growth of the Church, the impact of the Gospel upon the given society and the consequent spiritual and social transformation that takes place. Such histories are essential for the initiation of all young and new Church personnel into the work of evangelization and development in the given area. One may also fondly hope that this modest volume will inspire other dioceses to attempt to put on record the origins and development of the Church in their respective areas and among the various peoples.

This volume is published during the first centenary of the official establishment of the Catholic Church in Northeast India. I can only hope that the Church in Nagaland will grow fast and be of ever greater service to its people and perhaps beyond its borders.

This brief study is written by a lay Catholic scholar. It is a matter of pride for the local Church to have such scholars. We may recall here the role that must be played by the lay Catholic intelligentsia in the life of the Church and society in Northeast India and the duty of the whole Church to promote the emergence of an educated laity as Vatican II exhorts us :

For the gospel cannot be deeply imprinted on the talents, life, and work of any people without the active presence of laymen. Therefore, even in the very founding of a Church, the greatest attention is to be paid to raising up a mature Christian laity. (Ad Gentes, 21)

I place on record the appreciation of the whole Church of Nagaland and all those who have benefited and are still benefiting from the presence of the Church there for the work done by Dr. Syiemlieh.

Finally on behalf of Vendrame Institute Publications I want to express my gratitude to Bishop Abraham of Kohima for his constant interest, encouragement and assistance in the preparation and publication of this book.

This slender volume is dedicated to the first messengers of the Catholic faith to Nagaland and their immediate collaborators. May today's heralds of the Good News be inspired by their heroic spirit of sacrifice, trust in God and love for the people of Nagaland.

Shillong,
24 May, 1990.

Sebastian Karotemprel, S.D.B.

"This is a fascinating story of the rise of the Catholic Church in Nagaland during the past thirty years or so, despite the turbulence of the Naga insurgency, the bitter opposition of some members of the Baptist Church, the multiplicity of languages and tribal customs".

Dr. Sebastian Karotempel, SDB
Editor, Indian Missiological Review, Shillong

"This is a most welcome addition to scholarly works on Christianity and the tribal people in Northeast India."

Dr. J.B. Bhattacharjee,
Dean, Social Sciences,
North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong

"Christianity has made a significant contribution to the development of Northeast India. This book is yet another illustration of the above statement. Both the reading public and scholars will enthusiastically welcome it.

Dr. George Michael,
Pro Vice-Chancellor
North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong

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