

Acad. Roy. Scienc. d'Outre-Mer
Biographie Belge d'Outre-Mer,
T. IX, 2015, col. 401-403

VAN REETH (*Jozef*), Missionary of the Society of Jesus, First Bishop of Galle (Antwerp, 06.08.1843 – Ceylon, 11.09.1923). Son of Petrus and Ceulemans, Maria.

Born in Antwerp on 6th August 1843, Jozef Van Reeth had his early education at College Notre-Dame in the same city. He entered the Society of Jesus on 25th September 1860 and was ordained priest on 8th September 1875. He was appointed Secretary to the Provincial in Brussels in 1877 and was professed in the Order on 2nd February 1878. Rev. Dr. Jozef Van Reeth was successively Provincial of the Society of Jesus in the Belgian Province from 31st July 1882 until 1888 and Rector of the Novitiate of the Society of Jesus at Drongen from 1888 until 1895.

On 19th March 1895, Rev. Van Reeth was consecrated Bishop of Galle and was entrusted with the charge of founding a new Belgian mission in Galle (Ceylon) by the Holy See. Though he was trained to direct a diocese by the high offices he already exercised, he encountered many difficulties when he landed in Galle in November 1895. He was confronted with a country with unfamiliar languages and people of a different temperament. Everything in Ceylon appeared different to the western way of life. In addition to administering his own diocese which included two provinces, South and Sabaragamuwa, he had to be in charge of the newly-set up diocese of Trincomalee as well. On his arrival in Galle, he addressed the people gathered to welcome him with the following words: “and no doubt, we shall have work in abundance. Of course, our first care will be to get familiarised with the sweet but difficult languages of our new home, the Sinhalese and Tamil. For we wish to be able to communicate, as soon as possible, with our flock and all the classes of people”.

Conscious of the important place which the education of youth occupies in the work of evangelization, he founded primary schools not only in each parish, but also in the villages visited by missionaries, and in the plantations where Indian coolies were employed. In the districts of Matara, Kegalle and Ratnapura, which came under his diocese, he founded English schools. He also initiated the setting-up of convents and boarding schools for girls in Galle, Matara, Kegalle and Ganegama, with an orphanage adjoining each school. It was Bishop Van Reeth who invited the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary from Ghent to start their missionary work in Ceylon in 1896. In a letter addressed to the Rector of College St-Michel in Brussels in January 1898, Bishop Van Reeth stated: “ce qui semble indispensable dès à présent — nous y parviendrons si les catholiques de Belgique veulent bien nous accorder leur charitable concours — c’est de fonder une vingtaine de nouvelles écoles, voilà l’œuvre évangélicatrice pour laquelle, évêque missionnaire, je voudrais faire appel non seulement aux élèves du Collège St-Michel, mais aussi aux jeunes gens de tous nos collèges de Belgique”.

During his tenure as bishop, he made a significant contribution to the development of the Jesuit school in Galle, St. Aloysius College. To quote from the *College Magazine* of 1922-23: “it is His Lordship who, from the first day of his arrival at Galle, expressed his intention of raising the status of the school and entrusting its destinies to a fully qualified staff of teachers. To the realisation of this plan he gave most of his thoughts, the best of his time — in a word his whole heart and a noble soul. Whatever church buildings were available at the time he devoted to this work and he never stopped

in his efforts till he saw the future of the college placed in safe hands”.

Bishop Van Reeth was also instrumental in building several churches in Ratnapura, Matara, Yatiyantota, Hiniduma, Ganegama, Elpitiya, Alutnuwara and in a number of other places. He was a bishop in every sense of the word.

Very Rev. Dr. Jozef Van Reeth passed away on 11th September 1923 in Ceylon and his mortal remains are interred in Galle. Bishop Van Reeth will be remembered among the pioneers who made important contributions to Ceylon in the fields of education and religious advancement.

22 April 2001.
Edward Perera.

Sources: Archief Society of Jesus (dossier Azië), Heverlee. — *St. Aloysius College Magazine*, 1922-23, Galle.