

# A short history of Kurunegala Hospital



The untiring solicitude and paternal care of His Grace, Archbishop Bonjean O.M.I for the suffering portion of His flock in fever stricken district of Kurunegala, obtain permission from the

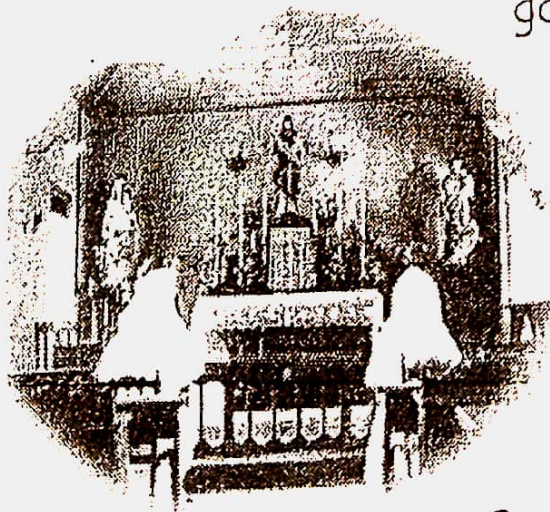
Ceylon government to employ religious Nursing sisters for the service of the sick poor in Kurunegala Hospital in 1891.

His Grace applied to the superioress General of the Holy Family of Bordeaux for sisters of Hope to General souls were selected, Mother Domitilla and Mother Celestine. They bade Adieu to La Belle France in October and arrived in Colombo in November. While waiting to take up duties in the hospital, they went to our Convent in Wennappuwa to acquire a

little knowledge of the language and customs of the people.

At this period the personnel of the hospital consisted of a couple of male and female attendants who looked after the poor Patients as well as they could under the direction of the Medical Officer, Dr. Schokman and his assistant, Dr. Gunesekara who acted as House Surgeon. There were only sixty patients at that time and Sir William Kingsley was the Chief Civil Medical Officer in Ceylon.

The installation of the Sisters took place on the First of January, 1892. Revd. Mother Celestine, Mother Suzanne, and Mother Stanislaus were also present. Dr. Schokman accompanied the Sisters round the hospital and assigned to each one, her wards and duties. This



good doctor was quite pleased with his new Nurses. He conversed amiably with them and accorded them a holiday for their first New Year's Day in Ceylon.

In later years we have often heard dear Mother Celestine relate the story of the first day and their impressions. The Sisters arrived at the Convent the previous evening. The Ceylon Government Railway in those days ended at Polgahawela and the remainder of the journey had to be done by bullock cart. As the Sisters passed the hospital that evening the building was pointed out to them, but they could scarcely distinguish it in the darkness. The front portion was dimly lit up by a bottle lamp placed in a plate of sand in a window. In passing (I may say it is now distinguished by electric lamps on the gates by the roadside).

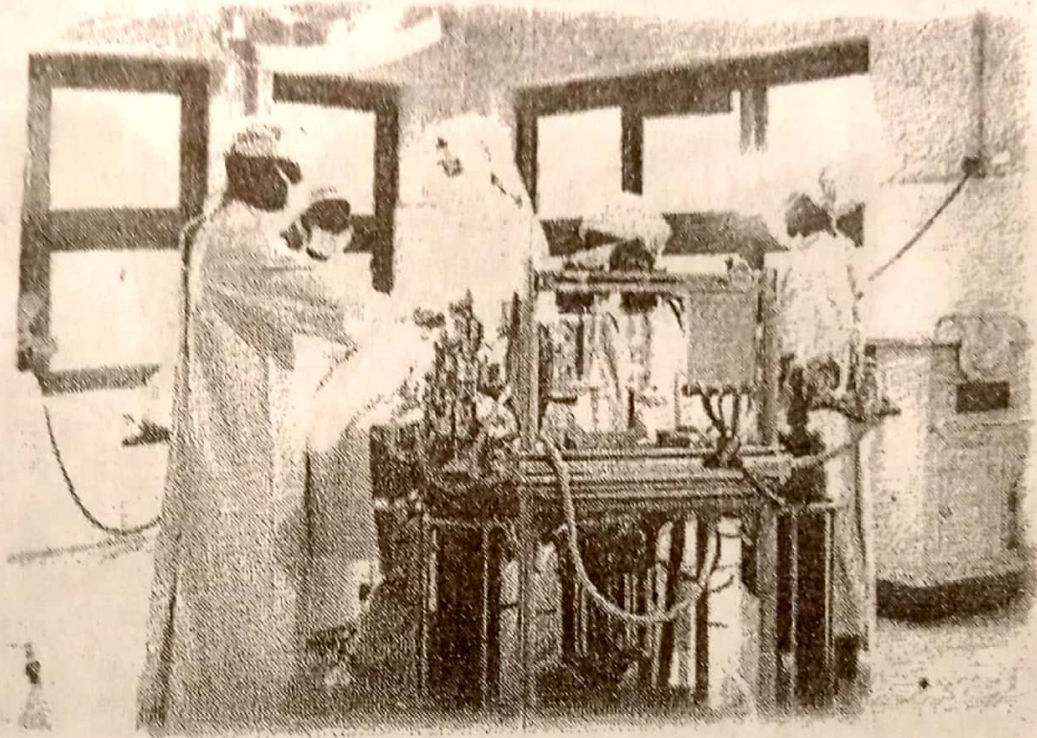


The Sisters found the hospital clean, but oh! so poor; the beds consisted of wooden planks, two feet high and five feet long, a mat, a straw pillow, a sheet and a blanket. Each patient was supplied with an enamel pint mug and a plate.

The most essential requisites for nursing the sick were missing, especially linen. The sanitary arrangements were very unsatisfactory; in fact everything was far

from the comparative luxury in which we work nowadays.

The doctor in charge realized the many needs of his Nurses and his patients too; he made a successful appeal to Government for more equipment.



At this time there was no accommodation on the hospital grounds for the Nursing Religious Sisters, so they had to travel daily to their duty from the Convent. Before they set out they assisted at Holy Mass and received the Bread of Angels. What mattered the sun or rain or the jolting of the cart! They joyfully fulfilled their Mission towards the sick and suffering.

God's works are marked with the sign of the Cross; for the new Nursing Sisters their first trial came from the



Government Agent who was opposed to the Religious Sisters taking over the hospital. He did all in His power to prevent Government from accepting them, but God permitted that on the day of their installation, He was transferred to another station and he was replaced by Mr. King, who appreciated his Religious Nursing Sisters.



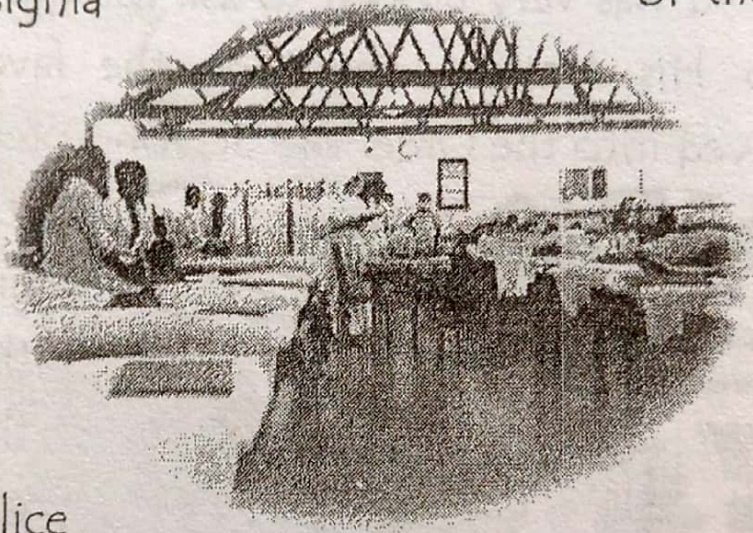
A month after their arrival in the hospital the Sisters were honoured with a visit from the Governor General, Sir Arthur Havelock. The Chief Medical Officer was absent and the Sisters had the privilege of showing His Excellency round the hospital. He visited every ward, and even the Sisters' Quarters which were then under construction. His Excellency asked if the bungalow were large enough and on being told that it was not very roomy, he enquired as to who occupied



were placed for the distinguished visitors. His Grace the Archbishop of Colombo and Rev. Mother St. Praxed, Provincial of the Holy Family Sisters, were also present, to enhance by their presence the ceremony which redounded to the honour of the whole Catholic Church in Ceylon.

At the appointed hour, Mr. Godrington presented to his Assistant the patent letters of His Majesty the King, conferring the insignia of the

Order of St. John  
of Jerusalem  
on Rev.  
Mother  
Celestine.



During the ceremony the Police

Officers hoisted the Union Jack, Mr. Godrington pinned the decoration on the recipient amidst the acclamations of the visitors. When calm was re-established, Mr. Godrington recorded in a few words the long services rendered to the hospital by the heroine of the day and that of her Sisters in Religion"

After a span of forty-two years laboring in the hospital she was struck down by the dreadful epidemic of Malaria and she passed to her reward on the 11<sup>th</sup>

December, 1934. She was followed two years later by Sr. M. Francis and Sr. M. Ernestine who were also victims of the same epidemic. Our plot in the Kurunegala Cemetery will prove the Holy Family Sisters have not been "Birds of Passage" in Kurunegala. Sr. M. Ernestine left behind her two of her sisters to mourn her loss. R.I.P.

In 1897, the number of Sisters was increased by dear Mother St. Michael, this dear Mother labored very



successfully for the relief of the sick poor until the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1936, when it pleased our First Superiors to place upon her shoulders the responsibility of Superior and Matron of the Civil Hospital of Nawalapitiya, worn out from her labours and old age, she retired from hospital work and took up her abode in the Holy



Family Convent, Kurunegala, where she spends her time, to the great edification of her Sisters in Religion, praying and knitting, the school children too are greatly edified by her. Two little boy Boarders have designated her as "The Old Mother who, sits in the sun and knits".

In 1936 the honour of being enrolled in the Order of St. John of Jerusalem was also accorded to Mother St. Michael while she was nursing in Kurunegala hospital, she still treasures her Decoration and she loves to recall



the event to her younger Sisters in Religion.

In 1921 the Staff was again strengthened by the arrival of Mother M. Francis (to whom reference has already

been made). Mother Marcella labored in the Vineyard of the Lord for 32 years. In 1949 she returned to her beloved Eire, for a brief holiday, where it was hoped she would recover her failing health, but our hopes were doomed to disappointment, she was able to carry on her work only for a short time after her return. The Lord claimed his worthy spouse for himself, and called her to her Heavenly Home. She awaits her resurrection in the General Cemetery of "Kanatte". R.I.P.

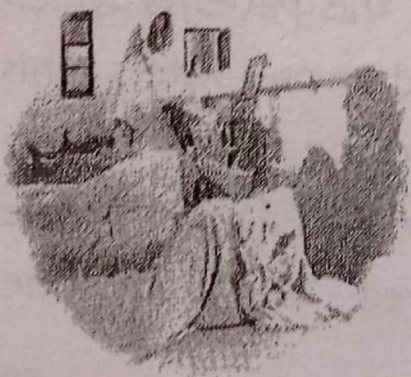


The words increased, anew with them the patients which necessitated more Sisters, this time help came in the person of mother Ursula de Marie who arrived in 1923. She

laboured in the hospitals in Kurunegala and Nawalapitiya for a number of years and on the death of Mother Marcella, she was appointed matron of the Kurunegala Hospital which post she filled until 1<sup>st</sup> may, 1954 when she was appointed Matron in Nawalapitiya to replace Mother Cecelia who retired from the government service and is now residing the Holy Family Convent, Jaffna. What is Kurunegala's loss of Nawalapitiya's gain?

The present member of the staff are Sr. M Hilda, Sr. Martha, Sr. M Bernard, Sr. M Lucy, Sr. M Clotilda, Sr. M Amelia, Sr. Alphonso Marie and Sr. M Bertrand who is in Eire at the moment enjoying a well earned rest. In 1950 three Tamil Sisters came to help the already overburdened little band of Nursing Sisters, unfortunately, the climate did not agree with them and early this year all three were obliged to return to their beloved Jaffna, broken down in health.

Owing to sickness, old age and so many deaths among our Nursing Sisters, our superioress General requested His lordship the Bishop of Chilaw to ask another Congregation to take charge of the Kurunegala Hospital.



His Lordship appealed to the superioress General of the Salvatorians to ask her to come to his aid and to send some Nursing Sisters to replace the Holy Family Sisters.

Five of these good Sisters took up duties on 1<sup>st</sup> March, 1954 and at the moment of writing this history they working hand in hand with our sisters mentioned above and will continue to do so until the end of the year, when the new order will be able to muster enough of their own sisters to take over completely and the Holy Family Sisters will sing their Nuns Dimittus from Kurunegala.

In many of the world-wide oblate missions, the Holy Family Sisters work side by side with the Fathers. To attempt the assess the value of the work being done by the sisters would be a futile task, because such work is literally priceless. In schools and church, in hospital and dispensary, in their convent and in the homes of the people the sisters labour without



ceasing, without notice or glamour, without thought of self or reward. The seldom or never hit the headlines, nor do they seek to do so.

But just at present, the Holy Family Sisters would very much wish to be able to get into the headlines. The reason is to make known their desperate need for more and more labourers in the Vineyard, the missions.

All over Ceylon the Sisters are crying out for reinforcements. The same sad story is true in South Africa. There hundreds of teaching and nursing sisters could be absorbed tomorrow and would still be room for hundreds more.

What are these heartbreaking problems? Who can solve them?

Only generous hearted, willing young women. If anybody reading these few words thinks she is fit to take up this challenge for the missions, she should sit down right now put pen to paper. If you have ordinary health and a willingness to work for our Loving savior so as to save your own soul, then you are just the person. If you have any or all Nursing Qualifications, then the door is already open to you.

The present medical staff of the Kurunegala Hospital is as follows-

7 visiting surgeons, 10 doctors, 7 Apothecaries.

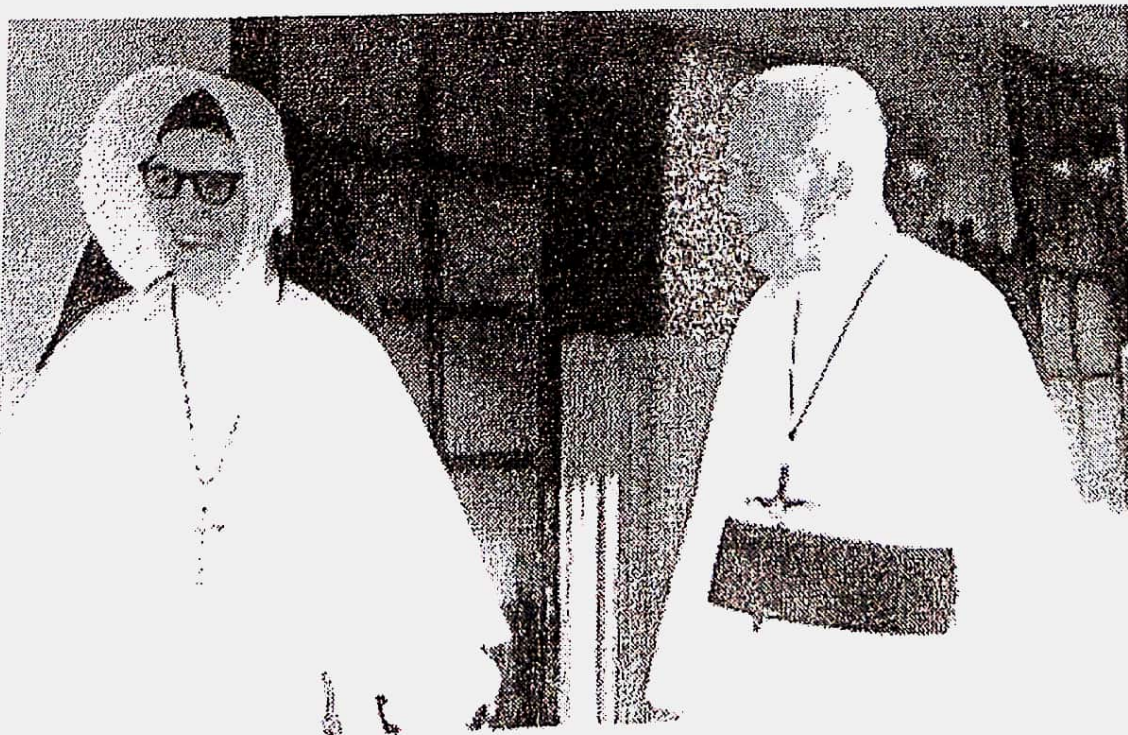
12 Nursing Religious sisters and 20 secular Nurses. The number of patients is from 700 to 800 and above.

There are 24 wards in all-

8 surgical, 7 medical, 3 maternity, 3 children's and 3 for the paying section.

There are 2 operation theaters, 1 for surgical operations and 1 for maternity operations.

There are 2 dispensaries: an Ear, Nose & Throat clinic and an Out Patients' Department.





*Later on, the Government took over the administration of the Kurunegala Hospital completely from the Holy Family Sisters & now the Sisters are not involved in the Hospital Ministry.*