

The MEP Mission in Pondicherry: Milestones, Contributions, and the 250th Jubilee Celebration

The MEP Mission in Pondicherry has a glorious and inspiring history spanning 250 years. During these 250 years, from 1776 to 1955, the Apostolic Vicars and the Archbishops belonging to the Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP) faithfully shepherded the Pondicherry Mission with remarkable zeal and dedication. Thereafter, from 1955 to 2026, the Indian Archbishops continued to carry forward the missionary vision and ideals of the MEP Society, nurturing and strengthening the local Church while faithfully preserving its rich missionary heritage.

The presence of the Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP) in Pondicherry dates back to 1688, when its missionaries were expelled from Siam. Fathers de Lionne and de la Vigne transferred the MEP Procuration (Procure) to Pondicherry. During the eighteenth century, the MEP missionaries built the Church of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and developed the Procure into an important centre for missionary administration. In 1771, they transferred the renowned College General from Cochinchina to Virampattinam, near Pondicherry, for the formation of indigenous clergy destined for the missions throughout Asia.

The year 1776 marked a decisive turning point in the history of the Pondicherry Mission. Following the suppression of the Society of Jesus, the Malabar Mission was entrusted to the Paris Foreign Missions Society by King Louis XVI of France, with the approval of Pope Pius VI. Bishop Pierre Brigot was appointed Superior of the Mission, inaugurating a new era of missionary expansion and ecclesiastical organization.

In 1778, Bishop Brigot initiated the systematic formation of indigenous clergy. He founded the Grand Seminary at Oulgaret under the direction of Fr. Busson. This became the first diocesan seminary of the mission. The completion and dedication of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in 1791 marked another significant

milestone in the history of the mission. Originally begun by the Jesuits, the Cathedral was completed under the administration of the MEP missionaries and solemnly dedicated by Bishop Champenois.

The Growth and Consolidation of the Pondicherry Mission

The episcopate of Bishop Clément Bonnand (1836–1861) marked one of the most fruitful and significant periods in the history of the Pondicherry Mission. His profound missionary zeal, prudent administration, and farsighted vision laid a firm foundation for the future expansion of the Church in South India. A milestone of enduring importance was reached in 1838, when the Holy See formally erected the Vicariate Apostolic of Pondicherry, thereby providing the mission with a stable ecclesiastical structure and greater pastoral autonomy.

Bishop Bonnand convoked the First Synod of Pondicherry in 1844, one of the earliest diocesan synods held in modern India. Its decrees regulated priestly formation, the administration of the sacraments, catechetical instruction, missionary methodology, and ecclesiastical governance. In 1845, Mysore and Coimbatore were established as Pro-Vicariates, and in 1850 they were formally erected as the Vicariate Apostolic of Mysore and the Vicariate Apostolic of Coimbatore, respectively.

The persistent vision, prudent leadership, and untiring efforts of the MEP missionaries the Catholic hierarchy in India was established. On 1 September 1886, Pope Leo XIII, through the historic Bull *Humanae Salutis*, formally established the Catholic Hierarchy in India. On the same occasion, the Vicariate Apostolic of Pondicherry was elevated to the dignity of an Archdiocese, and Bishop François Jean-Marie Laouenan became the first Archbishop of Pondicherry.

The Fulfilment of the MEP Mission: Towards an Indigenous Church (1899–1955)

The remarkable growth of the Pondicherry Mission continued into the closing years of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. In 1899, the Diocese of Kumbakonam was erected, and Bishop Bottero was appointed as its first Bishop.

Subsequently, in 1928, twelve parishes situated in the North Arcot District were entrusted to the Archdiocese of Madras under the pastoral care of the Salesians of Don Bosco. Two years later, in 1930, the Diocese of Salem was established, with Bishop Henry Prunier appointed as its first Bishop.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, A significant milestone in priestly formation was reached in 1932, when Archbishop Colas established a new Minor Seminary at Cuddalore. Shortly thereafter, in 1934, St. Joseph's Major Seminary in Pondicherry was transferred to Bengaluru, where it was re-established as St. Peter's Regional Seminary.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the MEP Society increasingly entrusted positions of leadership and responsibility to the indigenous clergy. A particularly significant milestone was reached in 1948, when Bishop Mark Gopu was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Pondicherry and his subsequent appointment as Bishop of Hyderabad in 1953.

The year 1953 witnessed another important development when the Archdiocese officially assumed the title "Archdiocese of Pondicherry-Cuddalore".

The process of transition reached its historic fulfilment in 1955, when Archbishop Rayappan Ambrose was appointed the first Indian Archbishop of Pondicherry-Cuddalore. His appointment marked the successful realization of one of the principal objectives of the Paris Foreign Missions Society: the establishment of a mature, self-governing local Church under indigenous leadership.

The Significance of the 250th Jubilee Celebration of the MEP Mission in Pondicherry (1776–2026)

The celebration of the 250th Jubilee of the MEP Mission in Pondicherry is much more than the commemoration of a historical milestone. It is a sacred occasion to render heartfelt thanksgiving to Almighty God for the countless blessings bestowed upon the Church in this region through the dedicated ministry of the missionaries of

the Paris Foreign Missions Society. It is also a providential moment to remember with profound gratitude the extraordinary men whose lives of heroic faith, selfless sacrifice, and unwavering missionary zeal laid the foundations of our local Church.

The missionary journey of the MEP Society in Pondicherry was never easy. From its very inception, the missionaries encountered innumerable hardships, uncertainties, and trials. Their apostolate was marked by suffering, misunderstanding, rejection, and persecution. Yet, sustained by an unshakable faith in Divine Providence and an ardent love for Christ and His Church, they persevered with remarkable courage and unwavering hope.

Throughout their ministry, they confronted numerous challenges, among them:

- i. The jurisdictional disputes arising from the Portuguese Padroado system and the Goan clergy;*
- ii. The political conflicts between the French and the British colonial administrations;*
- iii. The religious intolerance experienced during the reign of Tipu Sultan of Mysore;*
- iv. The opposition encountered from Protestant missionary movements;*
- v. The challenges posed by various Hindu revivalist movements;*
- vi. The upheavals associated with the Indian freedom movement; and*
- vii. The far-reaching consequences of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the devastation caused by the First and Second World Wars.*

Despite these formidable obstacles, the MEP missionaries never wavered in their commitment to proclaim the Gospel. Their missionary service transformed countless lives and left an enduring imprint on the history of the Church in South India.

The Enduring Contributions of the Paris Foreign Missions Society to the Pondicherry Mission

Over the course of two and a half centuries, the missionaries of the Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP) rendered extraordinary service to the growth and development of the Church in South India, and particularly to the Archdiocese of Pondicherry–Cuddalore.

Among their most significant contributions are:

❖ **The formation of indigenous clergy**, preparing generations of priests who would eventually assume responsibility for the pastoral care and leadership of the local Church.

❖ **The establishment and promotion of Religious Congregations**, thereby enriching the Church with dedicated men and women committed to the ministries of evangelization, education, healthcare, and charitable service.

❖ **Their decisive contribution to the establishment of the Catholic Hierarchy in India**, culminating in the elevation of the Vicariate Apostolic of Pondicherry to the dignity of an Archdiocese in 1886.

❖ **The promotion of evangelization through education**, by establishing schools, seminaries, catechetical centres, and other institutions that fostered both intellectual formation and Christian values.

❖ **Their unwavering commitment to social justice and the upliftment of the poor and marginalized**, enabling countless people to live with greater dignity, equality, and hope.

❖ **The establishment of a self-governing and self-sustaining local Church**, which remains one of the crowning achievements of the MEP missionary enterprise.

❖ **The nurturing of a vibrant, faith-filled Christian community**, firmly rooted in the Gospel and enriched by the witness of generations of devoted missionaries.

The flourishing parishes, educational institutions, seminaries, charitable organizations, and vibrant Christian communities that enrich our Archdiocese today stand as living monuments to the extraordinary vision and sacrificial labour of these courageous missionaries.

A Call to Renew Our Missionary Commitment

As we celebrate the 250th Jubilee of the MEP Mission in Pondicherry (1776–2026), we are invited not merely to look back with gratitude but also to look forward with renewed hope and missionary enthusiasm. This Jubilee Year therefore offers each priest, religious, and lay faithful a privileged opportunity to deepen our love for the Church, to renew our missionary zeal, and to strengthen our commitment to the work of evangelization entrusted to us.

Entrusting this Jubilee celebration to the loving intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Patroness of our Archdiocese, and invoking the prayers of all those heroic missionaries who dedicated their lives to this sacred mission, let us move forward together with renewed faith, confident hope, and generous love, so that the rich missionary heritage we have received may continue to bear abundant fruit for generations to come.

May the Lord, who guided the MEP missionaries throughout the past 250 years, continue to bless our Archdiocese and make each one of us worthy instruments in carrying forward their noble missionary legacy.

இந்த ஆண்டு ஆகஸ்ட் மாதம் புதுவை-கடலூர் உயர் மறைமாவட்டத்திற்கு மிகவும் முக்கியத்துவம் வாய்ந்த மாதமாகும். ஏனெனில், 2026 ஆகஸ்ட் 25, 26 மற்றும் 27 ஆகிய நாட்களில், புதுவை-கடலூர் உயர் மறைமாவட்டத்தில் இந்தியாவில் MEP (பாரிஸ் அயலக மறைப்பரப்புச் சபை) சபையினரின் மறைப்பணியின் 250ஆம் ஆண்டு விழாவை நாம் கொண்டாடுகிறோம்.

இந்த விழாவிற்கு முன்னதாக, கடந்த எட்டு மாதங்களாக ஆன்மீகத் தயாரிப்புகள் மேற்கொள்ளப்பட்டு, குருக்கள், துறவியர், மற்றும் பொதுநிலையினர் அனைவரும் நினைவு கூருதல் (Remembering), மகிழ்ச்சியுடன் கொண்டாடுதல் (Rejoicing),