Columns
Spirituality



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The Catholic Church observes the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on Dec. 8. Like any part of the world, Indians have a great devotion to Mother Mary.

Non-Catholics in India do not venerate her and ask what makes her special. Yes, what is so special that our Heavenly Father has chosen her to be the mother of God? He could have planned to send Jesus into the world without the help of Mother Mary. But God had already planned for Mary to assist Jesus in salvation history.

I recently visited a shrine of Our Lady of Refuge in Elakurichi for the first time. Italian Jesuit Fr. Constantine Joseph Beschi (1680–1747), known as Veeramamunivar (Valiant Sage) by the people of Tamil Nadu, south India, built a church for the Blessed Virgin Mary and installed a statue that he brought from Manila, Philippines.

Gazing at the statue, I noticed that it has an extraordinary feature: the statue resembles a woman from Tamil Nadu, the southern state of India.

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History says that he brought two statues of Our Lady to be retained in Elakurichi or Thirukavalur (now in Kumbakonam Diocese in the southern state of Tamil Nadu), the location where he worked. He preached all throughout Tamil Nadu, and while he was on his way home, he happened to pass this woodland. Tired, he fell asleep under a tree beside the two Mother Mary statues.

Boys who were watching after livestock nearby playfully concealed one of the sculptures behind a bush. When Beschi learned that one of the statues was missing, he was horrified and dejected.

After a few years, he went again to the place where he lost the second statue and found it in a village called Konankuppam in the Cuddalore district of Tamil Nadu.

Veeramamunivar was born on Nov. 8, 1680, in Italy and reached Elakurichi in 1716, remained in Tamil Nadu for 36 years and wrote Thembavani, Thirukavalur Kalambagam, and Kitheriammal Ammanai, which are famous literary works. Thembavani is the first Christian epic, which means the unfading garland, an ornament of poems as sweet as honey. It is 3,615 stanzas long and covers salvation history and the life of St. Joseph.

I was wondering about the devotion and dedication of Veeramamunivar, who had to adapt himself fully to the Indian culture by wearing a saffron dress, imitating Indian sages, traveling around many villages, and converting people to Christianity.

The two statues Veeramamunivar brought from Manila have great significance in the history of Christianity in Tamil Nadu. The Italian sage was the first person to adorn Mother Mary with sarees and jewels to resemble a woman from Tamil Nadu.



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The two statues of Mother Mary are not only beautiful and unique in nature but also help the Tamil people see Mother Mary as a woman from their own land. His devotion to Mother Mary and preaching the gospel to the locals in Tamil Nadu helped the ordinary people accept Mother Mary as their own mother.

People from faraway places come to these two shrines, Elakurichi and Konankuppam, to pray to Mother Mary and to thank her for all the favors they have received.

The two shrines have a special devotion to Mother Mary as the devotees come from different places in and out of India. When Tamil families visit the churches, they cook pongal, a South Indian dish made of rice, lentils, coconut, cashews and raisins. Pongal is offered by Tamils during the harvest festival, which is celebrated by all Tamils irrespective of religion. The devotees cook in an earthen pot and offer it to our Lady as a symbol of gratitude or petition.

At the shrine of Our Lady of Periyanayagi (Mary Major) in Konankuppam, the devotees visit, invoking favors for childbirth. The church has a cradle inside where barren women tie a smaller cradle. They believe that Mother Mary will grant them children. They also tie an auspicious thread seeking good marriage proposals.

In Tamil Nadu, many Catholic villages have minor basilicas, churches, shrines and grottos honoring Mother Mary, such as Our Lady of Good Health in Velankanni, in Thanjavur district, where Our Lady has performed numerous miracles.

From my childhood, I was taught to love Jesus more than Mother Mary. I knew Mary as the mother of Jesus but did not develop a private devotion to her until the last five years.

I had many moments of praying to her, asking for her intercession or her protection in whatever I did. Even when I leave the house, I pray to her to take care of the house and for my own protection.

> Mary's dedication and willingness to do the will of God and attend to the needy are what we need today.
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I often meditate on Mother Mary’s haste to help her cousin Elizabeth. How she reached out to help the needy. I think she came to the aid of my friend when she was in trouble and could not see any way out, and thought of taking her life. When she went to the kitchen to find a knife, she noticed the image of Mother Mary in her prayer room and fell and wept. When my friend told me the story, I was moved. From that day, I began to have more faith in Mother Mary and realized her love for me. I knew that being a woman, she could understand us and intercede for us before Jesus. I can connect with her.

Her dedication and willingness to do the will of God and attend to the needy are what we need today. There is something special in her gaze, her serene face and the way she holds her child, that teach me a lot. Sharing in Mary's motherhood makes me happy. I never begin my day without speaking to her. Even in utter loneliness and pain, I experience her comfort and love.

There is no one like her in the world to protect and care for us. The faith of ordinary people has taught me to rely on her for everything. She accompanies us in all our struggles, distress, and pain and always grants everything we ask of her. That is why she is the mother of us all.