

Life, Ministry And Social Contributions Of Bishop R. Anthonimuthu

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Bishop R. Anthonimuthu (1912–1980) was a visionary leader, compassionate pastor and social reformer whose life demonstrated the integration of faith and social responsibility. Born in Vellicode in the present-day Kuzhithurai Diocese, he devoted his life to serve God and humanity through spiritual guidance, education and community development. Ordained as a priest in 1936, he served in several parishes, including Mulakumoodu, Kottar, Maththiravilai, Manguzhi, Karangadu and Kurusady, where he combined pastoral care with initiatives to improve literacy, healthcare and social welfare. His ministry in Kurusady marked a turning point, as he played a key role in establishing educational institutions, empowering women and supporting the Congregation of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In 1971, Fr. Anthonimuthu was ordained as the Bishop of Vellore, where his leadership brought both spiritual renewal and social transformation. He founded the Vellore Social Service Society (VSSS) to coordinate development programs and collaborated with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to launch projects in agriculture, infrastructure and food security. Bishop Anthonimuthu's episcopal vision emphasized inclusivity, cooperation and faith in action. He believed that evangelization must involve service to the entire person — body, mind and soul. His pastoral model united spirituality with social engagement, making the Church a dynamic force for human development. Even during his final years of illness, he remained dedicated to his mission until his passing on December 19, 1980. This study presents a chronological account of Bishop R. Anthonimuthu's life and ministry, highlighting his contribution to pastoral leadership, community welfare and social justice.

Keywords: Catholic Church - Vellore Diocese - social service - pastoral leadership - community development - women's empowerment – education – healthcare - faith-based leadership.

Introduction

Bishop R. Anthonimuthu (1912–1980) was a pioneering figure in the Catholic Church in South India, whose life exemplified the integration of spiritual devotion with social service. Born in Vellicode, in the present-day Kuzhithurai Diocese, he was raised in a family deeply committed to moral and spiritual values. From an early age, he was nurtured with love, discipline and education, which shaped his character and prepared him for a life devoted to the service of

God and humanity. Ordained as a priest in 1936, Bishop Anthonimuthu served in various parishes, including Mulakumoodu, Kottar, Cheruvallur, Maththiravilai, Manguzhi, Karangadu and Kurusady, where he combined pastoral care with initiatives aimed at improving education, health and living standards¹. His leadership emphasized inclusivity, moral guidance and practical support for the poor and marginalized. Following his elevation to bishop in 1971, he expanded his impact through structured social programs under the Vellore Social Service Society (VSSS) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS), focusing on community development, women's empowerment, education and healthcare. This study explores Bishop Anthonimuthu's life and ministry, highlighting his contributions as a spiritual leader, social reformer and visionary administrator. By examining his efforts chronologically, it illustrates how faith and service can be harmoniously combined to create lasting societal transformation, offering a model of leadership relevant to both religious and secular contexts².

Early Life and Family Background

Bishop R. Anthonimuthu, originally named Anthony Muthu, was born on 7 April 1912 in the village of Vellicode near Mulagumoodu which is a part of the present-day Kuzhithurai Diocese. He was born into a family deeply rooted in the values of righteousness, humility and patience. His father Mr. Rayappan was a Public Works Department contractor and his mother, Mrs. Gnanapirakashi, was the guiding light of the family, nurturing her children with love, care and spiritual guidance. Anthony had two siblings: a brother, Gurusumikkel and a sister, Aloysius, who, along with their parents, played a significant role in shaping his moral and spiritual foundation. From his earliest days, Anthony Muthu received a nurturing environment that combined both affection and discipline, fostering a sense of responsibility, empathy and devotion to God³.

His father placed great emphasis on early education. Anthony began his primary schooling at R.C. Primary School, Vellicode, where he was introduced to foundational academic knowledge and moral values. He continued his secondary education at Kattathurai Government High School and later at Carmel High School, Nagercoil, where he excelled academically. In addition to his studies, Anthony developed a keen interest in swimming, though his passion for spiritual life eventually took precedence. His dedication to learning and spirituality prepared him for his future path in religious service. Recognizing his calling, Anthony pursued higher studies in theology and philosophy at the Child Jesus Theological Seminary in Kollam. Here, he distinguished himself as an exceptional student, known for his profound knowledge, wisdom and unwavering dedication to his studies. His education at the seminary equipped him with the theological foundation and pastoral skills that would define his lifelong ministry⁴.

Ordination and Early Ministry

With a deep conviction in the principle that "God's work is the work of God's people" and guided by the vision that "everyone should gain life", Anthony Muthu was ordained as a priest on 28th March 1936⁵. This ordination marked the beginning of a life dedicated to spiritual leadership and community service. His family celebrated his ordination as the fulfillment of both their hopes and his personal calling. His first assignment was at Mulakumoodu, serving at the St. Mary's Church (now St. Mary's Basilica). Even though he served here for only two

months, he immediately made an impact through his compassionate care for the poor and needy. He led prayers, taught moral and spiritual lessons and actively participated in community life. His humility, dedication and sincerity quickly earned him respect among parishioners and established his reputation as a devoted servant of God⁶.

Ministry in Kottar, Cheruvallur and Mullanginavilai (1936–1941)

Following his initial assignment, Anthony Muthu served as assistant Parish Priest in Kottar from 1936 to 24 April 1938. In Kottar, he worked closely with parishioners to deepen their faith through scripture reading, musical activities and religious education. His personal warmth and accessibility allowed him to provide spiritual guidance and reconciliation, fostering a close-knit and devout community. On 25th April 1938, he was transferred to Cheruvallur, where he faced his first major challenge by contracting with malaria. Despite the severity of his illness, he recovered through dedicated care and returned to serve his parishioners with renewed vigour⁷.

From 6th May 1938 to 23rd May 1941, he was assigned to Mullanginavilai, where he undertook extensive pastoral work. He visited homes, inquired into the welfare of families, promoted education and encouraged community cohesion. His efforts helped to raise the living standards of the local population while instilling a strong sense of faith and moral responsibility. Anthony Muthu's approach combined spiritual guidance with practical community support. He emphasized unity, devotion and public welfare, demonstrating leadership by example. His tenure in these early postings revealed his capacity for organizational work, pastoral care and social development⁸.

Ministry in Maththiravilai (1941–1951)

On 24 May 1941, Rev. R. Anthonymuthu began his third pastoral assignment at Our Lady of Assumption Church, Maththiravilai, where he served with remarkable dedication for nearly ten years. His ministry in Maththiravilai was characterized by his unwavering commitment to both spiritual enrichment and community development. He sought to strengthen the faith of his parishioners while simultaneously improving their social and material well-being. Rev. Anthonymuthu placed special emphasis on promoting religious vocations among the youth. He guided young men discerning the call to priesthood and encouraged women to participate actively in service-oriented and devotional groups. His pastoral encouragement bore lasting fruit, as several priests and nuns emerged from this parish, carrying forward the spirit of faith and service that he had instilled⁹.

Alongside spiritual formation, he actively worked for the betterment of the local community. He emphasized the importance of education, helped to construct houses for both the clergy and underprivileged families and supported the establishment of local associations to address social and economic challenges. His efforts during this period laid a strong foundation for his later contributions to social service and diocesan development. In his regular pastoral duties, Rev. Anthonymuthu maintained a disciplined and compassionate routine. On Sundays and during Lent, he celebrated two Masses—the first at Thundathuvilai and the second at Maththiravilai. He would travel to Thundathuvilai on Saturday evenings and, after the Sunday morning Mass, return to Maththiravilai by bicycle to conduct the second service.

His commitment to personally reaching out to parishioners in both areas reflected his sense of pastoral responsibility and tireless devotion¹⁰.

Rev. Anthonymuthu also organized several devotional societies to encourage active participation in church life. During his tenure, two significant construction projects were completed in Maththiravilai. A large hall was built in front of the church to provide comfortable seating for parishioners during services and gatherings¹¹. A new platform was constructed on the southern side of the church, improving the infrastructure and functionality of the worship space. When Rev. R. Anthonymuthu was transferred from Maththiravilai to Manguzhi, the parishioners expressed deep sorrow and gratitude. They bid him farewell with tears in their eyes, a testament to the love and respect he had earned through his years of selfless service¹².

Pastoral Work in Manguzhi (1951–1954)

Rev. R. Anthonymuthu continued his dedicated pastoral ministry at Manguzhi from 29 November 1951 to 21 February 1954. During this period, he placed great emphasis on sacred celebrations, pastoral guidance and social inclusivity. He welcomed individuals from all social, economic and religious backgrounds, offering counsel and support without discrimination. His ministry was rooted in practical spirituality, combining religious education with charitable activities and community development. As the parish priest of Manguzhi St. Xavier's Church, Rev. Anthonymuthu also supervised the spiritual needs of several branch churches, including Thirunainarkurichi, Mavilai, Thalakulam, Pattarivilai, Murasankodu, Konangadu, Arogyapuram, Varthanvilai, Kallukkootam, Padarnilam, Pilavilai and Iranial. Despite the vast geographical area under his care, he personally visited these branch churches, often traveling by bicycle to celebrate Mass, meet parishioners and administer the Holy Sacraments. His commitment and humility left a lasting impression on the faithful, who fondly remembered his dedication¹³.

His involvement extended beyond liturgical duties; he also paid special attention to youth development within the parish. He actively encouraged the participation of young people in both religious education and sports. To support this, he provided sports equipment such as balls and nets and arranged regular training sessions, thus fostering a healthy balance between faith and physical well-being. One of his notable contributions was the introduction of the Nativity hut tradition in the community¹⁴. During that period, huts were built only within church premises to commemorate the birth of Christ. Rev. Anthonymuthu encouraged families to build Nativity huts in their homes, promoting domestic devotion. To further inspire participation, he rewarded those who built creative and beautiful huts, turning the tradition into a parish-wide spiritual celebration¹⁵.

Pastoral Work in Karangadu (1954–1961)

From 21st February 1954, Rev. R. Anthonymuthu was assigned to Karangadu, where he continued his mission of spiritual and social transformation. His tenure in Karangadu, which lasted until 16th May 1961, was marked by dedicated efforts toward community development, education and the upliftment of marginalized families. He expanded his pastoral vision beyond the church, emphasizing the integration of spiritual growth with social progress. Through his compassionate leadership, he initiated educational projects, improved local infrastructure and

provided material and moral support to those in need. At that time, the Karangadu parish included seven branch churches in Mavilai, Alanvilai, Kuzhivilai, Nullivilai (St. Antony's and Carmel Matha), Alur and Mukkalambad. Rev. Anthonymuthu personally visited these branches, often traveling on foot or by bicycle. He celebrated Mass in each location, offered blessings and provided pastoral care. His frequent visits helped maintain close relationships among the parishioners, strengthening unity and faith within the community¹⁶.

Rev. Anthonymuthu's ministry at Karangadu reflected his deep understanding of both spiritual and human needs. Born and raised in a devout Christian family, he embodied humility, dedication and the values inspired by the Christian faith. His priestly vocation was marked by simplicity, sincerity and service. He worked tirelessly to meet the spiritual, educational and economic needs of the people in all his parish branches. Recognizing the importance of economic development in improving the lives of ordinary people, Rev. Anthonymuthu collaborated with government officials to implement various community projects. These included the establishment of cooperative societies and post offices, which provided essential services and employment opportunities for the villagers. His practical approach to social welfare reflected his belief that faith must be accompanied by action to bring about meaningful change¹⁷.

During his tenure, significant progress was made in the development of the Karangadu parish church, which also saw the addition of the Karampatrakku Chapel. Despite limited resources, Rev. Anthonymuthu purchased 95 cents of land needed for the church playground, demonstrating his deep commitment to the growth of the parish¹⁸.

Transformative Ministry in Kurusady (1961–1971)

On 17th May 1961, Rev. Anthony Muthu was assigned to Kurusady, which was then a rural area on the outskirts of Nagercoil. His arrival marked the beginning of a period of remarkable transformation. Through his dedicated pastoral service, he combined spiritual guidance with social development, fostering a model of holistic growth within the community. Over the next decade, Rev. Anthony Muthu focused on strengthening both faith and community life. He emphasized values such as forgiveness, inclusivity and ethical leadership, urging the people to embrace education, moral discipline and mutual cooperation¹⁹. His approach was deeply pastoral and people-centred, aiming to build a community rooted in Christian values and social responsibility.

A significant contribution during his tenure as Parish Priest of Kurusady was his involvement in the establishment of the first-ever women's college in Kanyakumari District.²⁰ When the then Bishop of Kottar, Rev. Roch Agnisamy and the Mother General of the Holy Cross Province of Trichy sought his assistance for this initiative, Rev. Anthony Muthu responded with great enthusiasm. Understanding the transformative power of women's education, he arranged for the necessary land for the college with the help of local leaders and the people of Melasoorangudi, Kurusady, Thollavilai and Vattakkarai villages.²¹ His efforts not only made higher education accessible to women in the region but also advanced the broader goal of social empowerment and gender equality.²²

In addition to his educational initiatives, Rev. Anthony Muthu provided essential support to the newly founded Congregation of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (SSHJ), which was facing challenges at Azhagappapuram.²³ The Mother Foundress, Rev. Sr.

Scholastica who was related to him by family ties sought his help. Rev. Anthony Muthu intervened on their behalf and obtained permission from Bishop Roch Agnisamy of Kottar to establish a convent at Kurusady. Consequently, the Kurusady Convent of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was founded on 24th October 1968.²⁴ This development marked a new chapter in the congregation's history, enabling the sisters to expand their educational, pastoral and social ministries.

Besides, Rev. Anthony Muthu worked tirelessly to enhance educational opportunities for children in Kurusady. He took concrete steps to increase student enrolment in St. Anthony's Primary School, ensuring that education became accessible to all sections of society, particularly the underprivileged. His initiatives helped to improve literacy rate and create a strong foundation for long-term community development.²⁵

Pastoral and Developmental Leadership of Bishop R. Anthonimuthu in the Diocese of Vellore (1971–1980)

After a decade of devoted pastoral service in Kurusady, Rev. Fr. R. Anthonimuthu was ordained as Bishop on 8th February, 1971,²⁶ and officially assumed charge as the Bishop of Vellore on 6th March, 1971.²⁷ His elevation to the episcopate was a recognition of his steadfast faith, tireless service and commitment to the spiritual and social advancement of his people. His leadership combined humility, vision and practical wisdom in addressing the social challenges of his time, reflecting his conviction that faith and service are inseparable dimensions of Christian life. During his episcopate, the Diocese of Vellore experienced remarkable progress in both spiritual and socio-economic fields²⁸.

Following his episcopal ordination, Bishop Anthonimuthu became a catalyst for social development initiatives within the diocese. In 1971, he founded the Vellore Social Service Society (VSSS) to coordinate the Church's social and developmental programs across the region. Under his guidance, the VSSS became an effective instrument for promoting social welfare, economic empowerment and community renewal. His holistic vision integrated pastoral care with social action, aiming to enhance both the spiritual and material quality of life among the people²⁹. Bishop Anthonimuthu believed that authentic Christian living required compassion to be expressed through action. His leadership thus fostered programs that addressed poverty, illiteracy and inequality, ensuring that the Church became a transformative presence in society³⁰.

One of Bishop Anthonimuthu's notable contributions was his assistance to the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (SSHJ) in establishing their congregation in Vellore. Rev. Fr. S. T. Thomas was appointed Superintendent of the congregation and with the help of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, several initiatives were launched in the hilly region of Aththipat. On 11th October, 1977, a new convent was inaugurated by the Indian Ambassador to the Holy See. The Sisters expanded their ministries into diverse areas such as handicraft production, mat weaving, silkworm cultivation and child welfare. Programs like the Children's Mercy Home and evening classes for rural children were established to serve underprivileged families³¹. On 12th June, 1979, another house was opened in Susainagar, Pathiyavaram, focusing on education, healthcare and women's welfare. On December 3, 1980, the congregation became an independent body under the title Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Archbishop Arulappa of Chennai supported this development and helped establish new houses at Bandiraveedu and Paramankeni in the Archdiocese of Chennai³².

Throughout his episcopate, Bishop Anthonimuthu lived by the guiding principle “that all may have life.” He remained close to the poor and marginalized, frequently visiting rural areas during holidays. His summer camps combined spiritual formation with cultural expressions such as literature, music and drama, making faith more accessible and vibrant for rural communities. He celebrated the silver jubilee of his episcopal ministry with gratitude and enthusiasm, marking decades of spiritual, social and institutional growth. Under his leadership, twelve new parishes were created and more than fifty churches were constructed. He also welcomed three religious priests, one religious brother and thirteen religious sisters to enhance pastoral and social outreach.

Bishop Anthonimuthu’s ministry was deeply rooted in service to the poor. He founded nine orphanages and three homes for the elderly, offering care and shelter to the most vulnerable. To promote self-reliance among the rural population, he established fourteen vocational training centres that equipped the underprivileged with skills for employment. Understanding the struggles of farmers, he introduced programs to provide pump sets, dig wells and support small-scale industries such as animal husbandry, match production, spinning and tailoring³³. In 1974, he collaborated with the Missionaries of Charity and invited them to serve the sick and abandoned. He also established thirteen dispensaries and rural clinics to provide healthcare to the poor and to address broader social issues affecting rural communities.

Under his leadership, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) became a powerful instrument of social change. Through its “food-for-work” programs, the diocese provided sustenance to poor families while improving local infrastructure. Projects such as the construction of rural roads and irrigation wells not only met immediate needs but also contributed to long-term economic growth. Bishop Anthonimuthu gave special attention to mothers and children, launching programs that provided nutritious food, medical care and educational assistance to impoverished families. These efforts improved child health, increased school attendance and strengthened family stability. Bishop Anthonimuthu was a strong advocate for women’s empowerment³⁴. He launched several programs to promote self-reliance among women, providing them with sewing machines, dairy cows and opportunities to form self-help groups. These initiatives increased women’s income, independence and leadership roles in their communities. His efforts contributed to lasting social change and enhanced gender equality in rural areas.

Bishop Anthonimuthu envisioned the Church as both a spiritual and social institution serving human dignity. Under his direction, the diocese has built orphanages, homes for the elderly, hospitals and schools to meet essential community needs. Each institution reflected the bishop’s belief that the Church must care for both the soul and the body. Alongside his development projects, he paid equal attention to spiritual formation. He ensured that catechumens received proper instruction before baptism and that married couples were strengthened through faith-based counselling. He also encouraged interfaith dialogue to promote harmony among communities of different religions. Due to ill health, Bishop R. Anthonimuthu passed away on 19th December, 1980.³⁵

Conclusion

Bishop R. Anthonimuthu's life and ministry stand as a remarkable example of how faith, compassion and social responsibility can be harmoniously integrated into Christian leadership. His episcopal vision extended far beyond the confines of the spiritual sphere, encompassing social, educational and economic transformation across the Diocese of Vellore. He viewed the mission of the Church as a service to the whole person body, mind and soul and through his initiatives, he demonstrated that faith could serve as a powerful catalyst for sustainable human development.

His concept of development was inclusive and participatory. Believing that real transformation must emerge from within the community, he encouraged lay participation, local leadership and cooperative effort. The establishment of institutions such as the Vellore Social Service Society (VSSS), vocational training centres, schools and healthcare facilities reflected his commitment to long-term structural change. His initiatives in women's empowerment, rural welfare and education created enduring pathways to self-reliance and dignity for the marginalized. Spiritually, Bishop Anthonimuthu brought renewal by uniting pastoral care with community service. His humility, simplicity and deep concern for the poor embodied the essence of servant leadership. Even during his final years of illness, he remained steadfast in his mission, inspiring others through quiet perseverance and unwavering faith.

Overall, Bishop R. Anthonimuthu's life and ministry illustrate a rare synthesis of spiritual devotion and practical social action. From his early pastoral service to his transformative episcopal leadership, he consistently promoted values of compassion, justice and inclusivity. His holistic approach demonstrated that spiritual guidance and social development are not opposing forces but complementary dimensions of true Christian service. The Diocese of Vellore and its surrounding communities continue to benefit from his vision and dedication. His legacy endures as a living model of faith in action proving that genuine evangelization lies not only in preaching but in embodying the Gospel through love, justice and service to humanity.

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