“You have to bring hope”

More than a decade after the death of Fr Pierre Ceyrac SJ, those words remain part of the legacy he left behind. But they tell only a small part of his story. Hope was not simply something Fr Ceyrac spoke about. It was at the heart of the work he undertook throughout his life and the way he chose to stand alongside communities experiencing poverty and exclusion.

Fr Ceyrac and his life-giving work were first introduced to Australian Catholics through *Catholic Missions* in 1966, and his work would again feature in connection with World Mission Sunday in 1967. At the time, he was a 52-year-old French-born Jesuit priest who had already made India his home and dedicated much of his life to its people.

The 1966 article, *Jesuit Among Untouchables*, offers a remarkable window into those early years. Fr Ceyrac was then leading the All India Catholic University Federation (AICUF), encouraging young university students to move beyond the classroom and encounter communities living on the margins of Indian society.

This was not simply about providing assistance. Students worked alongside communities on practical projects responding to local needs, from roads and housing to wells, irrigation and sanitation.

One of those communities was Tondiarpet. There, the article records how around 450 families had found homes, while a dispensary, school and kindergarten were helping a community take shape. More than 100 children were already attending the local school.

Looking back at these photographs and words sixty years later, they capture something that would come to define Fr Ceyrac’s life: his belief that hope could be made tangible.

And what was taking place in the 1960s was only the beginning.

In the years that followed, Fr Ceyrac continued to work alongside some of India’s most marginalised communities. His work expanded through agricultural and community development initiatives, including the farm at Manamadurai and the Thousand Wells initiative, responding to poverty, drought and water insecurity.

The scale grew considerably, but the principle remained remarkably similar: listening to communities, working alongside them and helping create the conditions for people to shape their own future.

His mission would eventually take him beyond India. From 1980 to 1993, Fr Ceyrac spent 13 years in refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border, accompanying Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees displaced by conflict. It was, in his own recollection, one of the deepest experiences of his life.

Eventually, he returned to India and to the communities that had been at the heart of his mission for decades.

As he grew older, Fr Ceyrac also turned his attention to ensuring that this work could continue beyond his lifetime. In 2007, he entrusted the Association Père Ceyrac with the responsibility of continuing to support the projects he had initiated, for as long as his Indian partners sought that support.

Today, the association continues to support development initiatives for vulnerable communities in India, including work connected to the Manamadurai farm and other projects with which Fr Ceyrac had been closely involved.

Fr Ceyrac died in Chennai in 2012, at the age of 98.

Sixty years after Australian Catholics first encountered him in the pages of *Catholic Missions*, his story offers more than a glimpse into the history of mission. The photographs from 1966 capture one moment in a life that would span countries, generations and communities, and a legacy that continues today.

The places changed. The scale of the work grew. But at its heart remained a remarkably simple conviction:

“You have to bring hope.”

For Fr Ceyrac, hope was never simply an idea. It was something lived, shared and built together.

Additional visuals:

https://files.catholicmission.org.au/images/uploads/1966-67-Fr-Ceryac-1.jpg

https://files.catholicmission.org.au/images/uploads/1966-67-Fr-Ceyrac-2.jpg

https://files.catholicmission.org.au/images/uploads/1966-67-Fr-Ceyrac-3.jpg

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https://files.catholicmission.org.au/images/uploads/1966-67-Fr-Ceyrac-front-page.jpg