

OUR MISSION IN INDIA TODAY

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We are aware that we are a people on mission, called and "sent" to be witnesses to the Good News of Jesus. We need however to discern what are the concrete implications of this for us today. But before we can discern the challenges of our mission in India today, we have to be clear about the nature and goal of this mission. Two different views of mission are still current in the Church today and we have to choose our point of view.

The first view holds that the goal of mission is the "planting of the Church". Its focus is on making more people become members of the Church. Other activities like working for the poor, education and inter-religious dialogue are subordinated to mission as proclamation of the Gospel. Even if the 'seeds of the Word' are found in other religious traditions, they need to be fulfilled in the Church. The Church is perceived as the only "arc of salvation".

The second view considers that the goal of mission is the building up of the Kingdom of God and of the Church as its symbol and servant. Working for the liberation of the poor and the oppressed, the transformation of culture and dialogue and collaboration with other religions are seen as the many dimensions of mission. They mutually involve each other so that you cannot do any one of them without doing the others. While we promote the Kingdom of God in the world, we are open to people who wish to join us because they are attracted by Jesus and want to be his

disciples and co-workers. The Church in the world is the "light, salt and leaven".

The time after the Second Vatican Council has been a progressive shift from the first to the second point of view, even though people may actually hold on to different positions between them. To look at this history is to become aware of its significance.

A New Vision of Mission

This development can be seen as *a deepening, a widening and a sharpening* of the vision of mission. The Second Vatican Council did not see mission as limited merely to the activity of some missionaries in mission lands. It saw the Church itself as essentially missionary and saw its roots in the creative action of the Trinity.¹ With a desire to share God's life with people, God sends (missions) the Word and the Spirit into the world. They manifest God in various ways, through various peoples and human groups in history. The Word becomes flesh in Jesus to carry on and lead this plan to a fulfillment so that finally God will be "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28). God's own mission therefore is active everywhere and at all times. Every other mission on whom God sends God's chosen ones is at the service of this overall mission of God. Mission has its depths in God's own being and action in the world.

In their first plenary assembly at Taipei, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences described evangelization in Asia as a three-fold dialogue with the poor, the rich cultures and the great religions of Asia.² This vision sees work for the liberation of the poor and dialogue with cultures and religions not merely as pre- or indirect evangelization, but as its integral dimensions. John Paul II, in *The Mission of the Redeemer*, calls them 'ways of mission'.³ Such a *widening* of the scope of mission may lead some to think that every activity becomes mission in some way.

¹ Cf. *Ad Gentes*, 2.

² Cf. Gaudencio Rosales and C.G. Arevalo (eds.), *For All the Peoples of Asia*. Manila: Claretian, 1997, pp.14-16.

³ Cf. Chapter 5.

Theological reflection has helped us to avoid such an undue widening by a *sharpening* of the vision of mission. This sharpening takes place in two stages. First of all, the three-fold dialogue of the Gospel with the poor, the cultures and the religions mutually involve each other in such a way that we cannot do any one of them without also doing the other. We cannot liberate the poor and change social structures without changing peoples' worldviews and systems of values (that is cultures) and without collaborating with the believers of other religions with whom we share our social and cultural contest.⁴ Secondly, the focus of mission is the building up of the Kingdom of God as a community of freedom, fellowship and justice. Our struggles with and for the poor are both the touchstone and the field in which this transformation is actually taking place. Cultural change and inter-religious collaboration are geared to this transformation.

Interacting with this movement of deepening, widening and sharpening of the vision of mission has been another development that regards other religions in an increasingly positive manner. From regarding them as the works of the devil, the Second Vatican Council sees them as mainly human efforts to reach out to God, though some "seeds of the Word"⁵ may be found there. Asian Bishops and theologians, in the context of their living contact with the believers of other religions were increasingly asserting that God was reaching out to them in and through their religions. The invitation of John Paul II to the leaders of other religions to come together at Assisi in October 1986 to pray for peace indicated the possibility of divine-human encounter in other religions. Finally, in his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer*, no. 28, John Paul II affirms the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in other religions. But this affirmation is still made within a 'preparation-fulfillment' paradigm, Christianity being the fulfillment of other religions. But, once we accept the freedom of the humans and the freedom of the

⁴ Cf. M. Amaladoss, "Integral Evangelization: Pre-Synodal Reflections", *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 61 (1997) 223-232.

⁵ Cf. *Ad Gentes*, 11.

Spirit in them, any attempt to set limits to them as divine-human encounter *apriori* seems questionable.

A positive view of other religions as the field of divine-human encounter makes them collaborators in our mission. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God and called people to be converted to God from their situation of slavery to Satan and Mammon. The Church progressively identified the Kingdom with Jesus and then with the Church itself. The other religions came to be identified as works of Satan. It is from this perspective that we are moving today to recognize in other religions not enemies, nor even competitors, but collaborators in the task of building the Kingdom of God in the world. We collaborate, not only between ourselves, but also with God. In this context, the Church becomes aware of itself as the symbol and servant (sacrament) of the Kingdom. As a symbol it has to be a model of the new community of the Kingdom. It proclaims the Gospel more by example than by words. It is also a fellowship of the disciples of Jesus and follows his way in mission. As part of its mission it welcomes people who feel called to become disciples of Jesus and follow his way. Baptism, then, is not a passport to salvation but a call to mission. The Decrees of the 34th General Congregation of the society of Jesus have summarized this contemporary vision of mission.

The Way of Jesus

The way of Jesus in mission can be spelt out by looking at the life of Jesus as narrated in the New Testament. Jesus opts for the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized of his day and struggles with them for freedom, fellowship and justice against those who were the oppressors, namely Herod, the High Priests and the Pharisees. He does not hesitate to lay down his life in the cause of justice. He manifests to the people through his words and deeds the boundless and forgiving love of the Father, sharing with them his own *Abba* experience. His chosen way is not one of power and domination as the Jews were looking forward to, but of self-emptying and humility becoming active in struggle through non-violent love. His approach to others is not to impose himself, but to inspire and empower them. He gives his disciples a new commandment, asking them to love and serve each other even unto death, following his own example. The memorial of a

common meal that he leaves behind is a real-symbolic celebration of the new community that he wants to build. This new community will eventually reach out to bring together every human being and even the cosmos (Cf. Eph 1:3-10; 1 Cor 15:27-28; Rom 8). Over the centuries we have turned this way of mission into an aggressive way of saving individuals through the sacraments.⁶

This vision of the goal and of the way of mission must guide us in discerning the challenges of our mission in India today. These challenges will depend, on the one hand, on what we see to be the contemporary manifestations of Satan, namely the personal principle of evil based on egoism and pride and Mammon, namely the social forces of evil based on the abuse of money and power. On the other hand, we also have to look at the multi-cultural and multi-religious situation, which has been made a conflictive and divisive one by forces of fundamentalism and communalism, instead of being an opportunity for collaboration and mutual enrichment.

The Challenge for Justice

God has created the earth for all peoples. God wants them to become a community, loving each other and sharing what they have. But some people, egged on by selfishness and desire, seek to appropriate more than their share, depriving others of their just share. Sometimes even the basic needs of the poor may not be met. The continuing and widening gap between the rich and the poor is not natural, but human-made. Such an unjust structure has taken various forms in history.

Feudalism, in which the means of production, especially in the form of land, is owned by a few reduces the majority to slavery or serfdom. Their labour is exploited. They live on subsistence wages, weighed down further by debt burdens. The rich landowners may become factory owners in an industrializing society. But the economic system of exploitation is the same.

⁶ Cf. Amaladoss, "The Asian Face of the Good News", *Mission Today* 2 (2000) 166-172

Feudalism, in a more industrial society, gives rise to capitalism, where a few own the capital and exploit the labour of others for their won profit. In order to increase their production and profit the capitalists promote an atmosphere of consumerism through advertisement creating artificial needs that their production of goods can satisfy. Commerce then becomes an important support to capitalism. Progressively, commerce becomes a better means of making profits than production. Money is the medium of exchange in commerce. With increasing productive and commercial activity money itself becomes a commodity that is bought and sold in the market. Money makes more money. Capitalism is called liberal when it can engage in its pursuit of profit without control of any kind except the mechanism of the market. But the market itself can be manipulated by powerful commercial and banking interests. State socialism plays by the same rules, except that the means of production are owned by the State. Capitalism encourages production and accumulation of wealth, leaving equitable distribution to private charity. While socialism insists on distribution, it lacks any special techniques for production of wealth. Here it follows the methods of capitalism. But lacking the incentives of individual enterprise and competition it may end up eating into the capital.

Thanks to the development of communications, both with regard to its speed and its outreach, and thanks also to the collapse of state socialism, liberal capitalism is today becoming global. Markets and the movement of goods and capital are becoming global. Economic borders are collapsing. Political borders are becoming irrelevant, with the economy being managed by multinational companies. Economic competition is becoming global too. But there can be no free and fair competition between unequal partners. The gap between the rich and the poor is growing both between nations and within nations.⁷

⁷ Cf. C.T. Kurien, *Global Capitalism and the Indian Economy*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1996.

The results of such a global economic system can be seen in increasing poverty and misery of vast masses of people even in the rich countries, not to speak of the poorer ones. Exploitation of women and child labour and migrant workers is becoming rampant. Consumer values are destroying families and communities. The poor are migrating to the cities giving rise to urban slums. Poverty and frustration on the one hand and meaningless consumerism on the other give rise to drugs and violence. Quest for scarce resources leads to group rivalries and violence leading to displacement of populations and refugees. The pursuit of profit also leads to the wanton destruction of natural resources resulting in their unjust appropriation, increasing pollution and decreasing the quality of life.

One of the results of globalization and the dominance of multinational companies is the fact that authority and decision making is diffused and the managers are professionals and not owners, so that it is difficult to pinpoint people responsible for particular problems. Globalization is supported on the one hand, by a widespread consumer culture sustained by the mass media and, on the other by the political power of the rich, both within countries and among nations, supported by military power when necessary to defend their interests. The international institutions created to manage the global economy like the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank are controlled by the rich.

What can the bearers of the Good News do in such a situation? The Gospel does not offer alternate economic or political systems. But it questions the freedom without control given to such unjust economic and political structures in the name of the pursuit of profit. This is the real domination of the world by mammon. This can be countered in various ways: limits to profit making and accumulation of wealth, fair prices, right to employment, just wages, distribution of profits, protection of the poor from exploitation, attention to the basic needs of every one, stopping unjust and unlimited exploitation of natural resources, prevention of production and trade monopolies, opposing unfair trade practices, etc. No economic system can be giving the freedom to dominate society. It will have to be under human and social control to benefit the wider interests of the community. Such control is

possible only by the political will of the people through their governments and this in turn is possible only in democratic systems of government. The poor certainly will have to get organized to defend themselves. But they cannot defend themselves without the support of all people of good will, especially of the middle classes and of the intellectuals.⁸

Political mobilization will have to be inspired by a sense of values and of community. Unbridled consumerism is detrimental to individual and social health and well-being. Alternate technologies can limit the destruction of the earth. An unlimited quest for profit is immoral. Every type of exploitation of people, which looks on them as object or commodities, is unjust. Underlying all these are uncontrolled desires, individual and collective selfishness and a quest for power. The sense of values is being eroded by secularization. A spirit individualism and competition is replacing the sense of community. It is at this level that religions and the Gospel can provide human and spiritual values and motivations encouraging the pursuit of justice, equality and sharing. Given the prevalence of unjust structures, justice and equality cannot be achieved without struggle. This struggle will be led by the poor who are victims. Jesus challenges us to struggle with the poor as he himself did. Helping the poor is not enough. This involves that we are sensitive to various peoples' movements in the country and collaborate with them. In a globalizing world we may also have to network with various international movements.

An Unequal Society

The society in India is characterized, not by a sense of community, but by division and inequality. India is a young nation that is still in quest of unity. Ethnic and linguistic groups are still pulling it in various directions. There are more than four thousand caste groups in the country. All these groups are competing with

⁸ Cf. Ulrich Duchrow, *Alternatives to Global Capitalism*, Utrecht: International Books, 1996. See also M. Amaladoss (ed.), *Globalization and its Victims, as Seen by the Victims*, Delhi: Views, 1999.

each other for scarce resources in an overpopulated, poor country. Such division is even more odious when it is made worse by the hierarchical caste system. This hierarchy, which is basically socio-cultural, is supported both by economic and religious factors. There is a division of labour that is graded in terms of purity and pollution. Nearly 170 million people are discriminated against, oppressed and exploited in a cumulative manner economically, socially, politically and religiously. Their status within the Church is no better. While the Dalits are rising up demanding their rights as human beings, the other caste groups too are being politicized. The rich and the powerful can easily use a policy of 'divide and rule' and play one group against another in such a situation to protect their own interests. While Hinduism legitimates the caste system, the other religions, including Christianity, have meekly accepted it, concentrating on an otherworldly salvation.⁹

In such a situation the Gospel challenges us to create a community of equals. Different groups in society may not disappear. But the hierarchical system in which they are ordered must disappear. Particularly the Dalits must be freed from their oppression and marginalization. There must be a respect for the dignity of the humans as created in the image of God, irrespective of their social affiliation and status. There must also be an awareness of being called to become a community of God's children, conscious not only of one's rights but also of one's duties to others. Side by side with the growing individualism of modern society, we also have a sense of group identity that makes us look at other groups as competitors and enemies. Jesus' own table-fellowship with the poor and the marginalized of his day, with the Eucharistic table-fellowship that he left us as a memorial, inspires us to work for social equality and community.¹⁰ Such solidarity with subaltern groups that are struggling for recognition and

⁹ Cf. V. Devasahayam, *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, Chennai: Gurukul, 1996.

¹⁰ Cf. Francis Gonsalves (ed.), *Body, Bread, Blood: Eucharistic Perspectives from the Indian Church*, Delhi: Views, 2000.

respect is essential in building up a community of sharing and participation.

A different type of social discrimination treats women as inferior human beings. Women are oppressed from birth to death.¹¹ A familiar saying goes: "Women are dependent on their fathers in childhood, on their husbands when married and on their sons when widowed". Female infanticide is still practiced in many parts of the country. Girl children do not have the same access to education. They are objects of financial transactions in the marriage market. Abuse of women belonging to the oppressed castes is not uncommon. Dowry deaths are all too common. Widows are marginalized in various ways. Such treatment of women seems strange in a country full of goddesses of various kinds. Women seem to evoke some respect and attachment only as mothers. The status of women in the Church is no better though they form the majority of its clientele. True liberation of women requires a socio-cultural transformation. I wonder whether the Church is ready for such a transformation. Is the great number of vocations among women for religious life in India a search for basic human dignity and respect?

A Foreign Church

The Christians in India are considered a foreign group, not only by the RSS, but also by otherwise sympathetic Indians. Our governance is controlled by foreign centres of power. We are financially dependent on foreign aid. Our thinking (theology), ways of worship (liturgy) and ways of *sadhana* (spirituality) are guided by foreign ideologies. Our works, particularly in the field of education, are seen as purveyors of western culture mingled with modernity. How Indian are we? What are our roots in Indian history? What is our contribution to Indian culture(s)? Who are our reference groups? The enthusiasm for inculturation, evident after

¹¹ Cf. Morny Joy and Eva K. Neumaier-Dargyay (eds.), *Gender, Genre and Religion*, Waterloo Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1995; Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita (eds.), *In Search of Answers – Indian Women's Voices*, New Delhi: Horizon, 1991.

the Second Vatican Council, has considerably cooled down, partly under the control of foreign centres of power. To be able to respond to God's Word in our context, through our culture, is a fundamental right that is denied us. When we spoke about the economic and socio-political challenges of our country we raised many issues that are cultural in nature, like the way we look at others and the world and the value systems that guide our orientations and decisions. But our prophecy towards transformation in this field will not be credible if it comes from a group that is identified as 'foreign'. Even when we are Indian in our social life, we seem to become 'foreign' as we cross the threshold of the Church. We are hesitant to insist on the rightful autonomy of the local Churches within the universal communion of the Church.¹²

In the process of becoming Indian, we will also have to meet the challenge that India is really a multi-cultural subcontinent. Perhaps cultural diversity is more visible than unity. We have to respect this pluralism in unity, resisting every attempt to impose the culture of a particular group as normatively Indian. Linked to this is the problem that the different cultures are related in a hierarchical manner. Today the subaltern cultures of the dalits and the tribals, not to speak of other groups, are asserting their identity and autonomy. This will have to be respected both within and outside the Church. Every cultural group must be recognized, respected and accepted as equal in the community.

In addition to this fundamental inability to be authentic and credible prophets in the field of culture there are at least three problem areas that we need to attend to as part of our mission. Secularization as an anti-God and anti-religious phenomenon does not seem to be prevalent in India. But as a dichotomy between the secular sphere (socio-economic and political) and the sacred (the rituals of religion) it is becoming a problem in India. Profits in economics, power in politics and domination in society seem to

¹² Evelyn Monteiro, "Refounding' the Church? A Search in Pluralistic India", *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 64 (2000) 438-445.

hold sway independently of religious values. Religion itself is used as a political instrument of power and domination. This practical atheism cannot be effectively countered if our own religious practice is centred around the sacraments and other practices procuring personal and spiritual salvation.

Such secularization is further supported by the impact of modernity and westernization that are invading the country through the global media and consumerism. One of the reasons for religious and cultural fundamentalism is precisely this threat to traditional values. While many traditional values need transformation, there are others that need to be protected. Modernity promotes a blind belief in science and reason, a material attitude to nature and an objectification of the human. In the West one is already speaking of the failure of modernity and the emergence of a post-modern world. But post-modernism seems to lead to increased individualism and relativism. In this area, we Christians, though we are not the prime agents of such globalization, will be playing an ambiguous role till we become authentically Indian.

One concrete example of globalizing modernity is its attitude to nature. On the one hand, 20% of humanity is abusing 80% of the resources of nature, thus depriving people now and future generations of what rightfully belongs to them. On the other, the earth is 'raped', exploited and destroyed with such speed that it is affecting adversely the quality of life of present and future generations. The denuding of the forests is interfering with the ecological balance. Huge dams are displacing and effectively destroying groups of people. Large-scale pollution of the atmosphere is affecting the health and well being of millions all over the globe. People have forgotten to live in harmony with nature, sensitive to changing seasons and respectful of its productive generosity. Lack of harmony with nature is also shown in the absence of integration with the body. Seeming idolization of it leads subtly to its objectification as an instrument and as a commodity.

The encounter between Gospel and culture should seek to respond to these challenges. Unfortunately our talk about 'inculturation' often stops with the problems of indigenization and

even this is seen mostly as the translation of a pre-existent Word in Indian categories, not as a creative response to the Gospel in our situation through our culture.

Religions in Conflict

India is a multi-religious country and, as we saw above, we are called to collaborate with peoples of other religions and ideologies in building up a common human community. But as a matter of experience religions in India are in conflict with each other. Before we can dialogue and collaborate, we need to engage in conflict resolution. For this we need to understand the reasons for such conflict. We may ourselves be unconscious victims of these.¹³

Religions are the deepest sources of identity of a group as they respond to ultimate questions. It is interiorized in a semi-conscious manner through life-cycle rituals, festivals and religious practice. It is a primary identity determining how we look at ourselves, at others and at the world. Factors like belief/unbelief and purity/pollution may also play a role. The other is seen not merely as different, but as inferior. Psychologists say that this sense of identity is fixed at pre-school going age. It can be modified only by experience, not by teaching.

Threatened by the secularizing impact of modern science and technology, religious groups tend to hold on to what they consider as the fundamentals of their religion. These fundamentals are often identified in terms of a literal interpretation of the scriptures or of religious traditions. Such identification naturally leads to a negative identification of other religions which do not agree with these fundamentals.

A third reason for religious conflict is communalism. Communalism is based on the pretension that people who share the same religious faith also share the same economic and political interests. In societies where there is a competition for scarce

¹³ Cf. M. Amaladoss, "Difficult Dialogue", *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 62 (1998) 567-579.

resources religious identity is used to unify and mobilize a group by an elite who use it for their own political advancement. True religion itself may be sacrificed in the process.

Finally there is historical memory. Religious groups in conflict have a memory of hurts and losses that cry out for revenge, when there is an occasion. The memory of the victims tends to be long and strong.

All these factors are triggered on in a situation of actual or perceived injustice. These factors are not absent from the Christian community. Conflict resolution would involve discovery of the true causes of conflict, rendering justice including restitution, rituals of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation and healing of memories. Such a process could be facilitated by multi-religious groups. Conflict resolution can lead to other forms of inter-religious dialogue spoken of in our documents: of life, of conversation, of common action and experience. I think that collaborative action for liberation should be the context in which sharing of ongoing life, conversion leading to mutual removal of prejudice, understanding and enrichment and experience lived in common prayer and celebration of festivals will become significant and helpful. We could foresee the building of Basic Human Communities, side by side with Basic Christian Communities, as the fruit of dialogue. This would help us to become peace-makers in situations of conflict, on the one hand, and, on the other, promote the universal reconciliation and communion of all peoples in God's Kingdom.

Conclusion

In keeping with the two-fold goal of mission we look first of all at the many challenges that India poses to the task of building the Kingdom of God. We have a reputation of serving the poor and of running educational institutions. But we have not made any mark in contributing to the social transformation of the country. We have not been part of any major social movements. Even in our educational institutions we have been successful in handling well an existing system. We have not pioneered in the transformation of the educational system in keeping with the needs of the country nor in transforming culture and society through education. There are many social and subaltern movements in the country. Are we

ready to participate in them and struggle with the poor? We are also accustomed to run our own little projects rather than collaborate with others. Can we really discern the signs of the times and see the Spirit of God active in various social movements and be ready to be at their service? Can we focus more on empowering the people rather than being the leaders? A growing awareness of God's mission in and through other people may help us to shed a certain arrogance and self-sufficiency that often characterize our statements. A respect for the freedom of the Spirit present and active in others may encourage us to collaborate with them without comparing ourselves with them and feeling superior.

The Indian Church is self-centred. Owing to its minority consciousness it is closed in on itself in an attitude of self-defense. It rarely protests against injustice unless it is itself attacked. It is not really an open community. Dialogue is limited to a few experts here and there. It is more interested in life after death than in life before death. It spends more time in administering the sacraments than in animating mission.

In talking about mission we hardly ever look at the Church itself in view of making it a symbol of the Kingdom of God. The social divisions like the caste system and ethnic rivalries that characterize Indian society are found in the Church too, particularly among the Clergy and the Religious, since it is they who are competing for power within the Church. The values of the Kingdom like freedom, fellowship and justice are as absent within the Church as they are outside. The Church-community in India can hardly call itself a model of the Kingdom.

The way of Jesus was a way of self-emptying and humble service. We have to rediscover our identity as servants. The Church gives the impression of certain arrogance as the sole repository of truth and of the salvific power of the sacraments. In the context of God's mission such pretensions are baseless. Openness to the others is not only a virtue, but a necessity. It is a response to God's call.

The Church in the past had not focused much on cultural or religious transformation. It had at least some pioneers in the field of dialogue with cultures and religions, though it has always been the work of some enterprising individuals without much

community support. Even in this area there has been some cooling down.

Jesus' option for the poor led him to challenge and call to conversion the rich and the powerful of his day: the Pharisees, the High Priests and the political leaders like Herod. Today too our option for the poor must not limit us to attend to their needs. Our option will have to be shown also in our prophetic confrontation with the rich and the powerful. We claim to communicate values through our educational institutions. But without an experiential and conflictive (prophetic) dimension our efforts may be fruitless and ineffective. Similarly, we need to work with the subaltern groups as they struggle for their liberation. But it is no excuse to keep ourselves away from the mainstream of Indian culture. In spite of our educational institutions we have hardly made any creative contribution to Indian culture. Our efforts are often limited to the instrumentalization of culture for "evangelical" purposes.

We have been experiencing some persecutions in some areas in recent years. It is perhaps an opportunity, not for a self-defensive and self-justificatory closing in, but for reform and renewal both within and without. It is time for a renewed commitment to mission at the beginning of a new century.