

THE VOCATION OF THE LAITY IN A RELIGIOUSLY PLURAL WORLD

Dr. A. Pushparajan
Professor and Head
Department of Interreligious Relation
Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai

It is an acknowledged fact that the secular character marks the vocation of the laity in the Church. If however the 'world' in which the laity live happens to be a religiously plural world, then what does it mean for them 'to be in the world'? An analysis of this question would shed some light on not only certain crucial issues regarding interreligious dialogue but also on the mission of the laity living in a multi-religious context.

In the first part of this article, attempt is made to elucidate the specificity of the laity's vocation in terms of the secular character. The second part describes the religiously pluralist context of Indian society so as to pinpoint the problematic concerning the vocation of the laity. This is done with the help of a personal case-study. Continuing the same case study, the following two parts, indicate the solution found out and the lessons learnt, respectively. These findings are put on a sound footing in Part 5 with the help of Church documents. The concluding remarks hopefully shed light on the relevant type of mission by the laity, living in a religiously pluralist society, as against some of the prevalent and possibly irrelevant types of understanding the laity's vocation.

PART 1

THE SECULAR CHARACTER OF THE LAITY'S VOCATION

For a long time in the history of the Church the word 'laity' was understood in predominantly negative term. It meant "all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in religious state sanctioned by the Church." However, the Second Vatican Council went beyond such a negative categorization and gave a decidedly positive definition of the laity with two-fold features, one is the common feature that belongs to all the disciples of Jesus Christ, and the other is a specific feature attributed to the laity alone. Firstly, the laity are now considered to be "fully belonging to the mystery of the Church" and "the full members of the People of God and the Mystical Body. By virtue of Baptism, they are also sharers, in their own way, of the triple functions of Christ: the priestly, prophetic and kingly (LG 31). As against the pre-Vatican opinion according to which the clergy and the religious really constituted the Church and the laity were just at the fringe of this great institution, now it was proposed that all the baptized are said to be People of God, irrespective of the fact one is a priest or a lay faithful. This is the common feature, shared by both the priests and laity.

Secondly with regard to the specific feature, the laity is said to have "a secular quality" which is properly and particularly that of the lay faithful. It is true that those in holy orders or the religious may at times engage in secular activities and even may have a secular profession. But by reason of their particular vocation they are chiefly and professedly ordained to the sacred ministry. *But the laity by their vocation seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God.* They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. There they are called by God so that by exercising their proper function and being led by the spirit of the gospel they can work for the sanctification of the world from within in the manner of the leaven. The lay person is closely involved in temporal affairs of every sort. It is therefore their special task to illumine and organize the affairs in such a way that they may always start out, develop, and persist according to Christ's mind, to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer (LG 31).

After twenty two years since Vatican II, the Synod of Bishops-1987 projected the secular character of the laity's vocation against a deeper ecclesiological and theological background. The Post-Synodal document *Chirifideles Laici*, quoting Pope Paul VI, said the Church "has an authentic secular dimension, inherent to her inner nature and mission, which is deeply rooted in the mystery of the Word Incarnate, and which is realized in different forms through her members" [AAS 64 (1972) 208]. Further it cited from the Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay People and reiterated that the Church "is sent to continue the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, which by its very nature concerns the salvation of humanity, and also involves the renewal of the whole temporal order" (AA 5). Certainly *all the members* of the Church participate in this secular dimension of the Church, the document agrees. But it specifies that it is in *different ways*. "In particular", it says, "the sharing of the *lay faithful* has its own manner of realization and function, which is "properly and particularly" theirs. "They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life. They study, they work, they form relationship as friends, professionals, members of society, cultures etc.

These conditions, according to the document, are not simply external and environmental framework but a reality destined by the Father to find in Jesus Christ the fullness of its meaning. Indeed it leads to the affirmation that the Word made flesh willed to share in human fellowship... He sanctioned those human ties, especially family ones, from which social relationships arise, willingly submitting himself to the laws of his country. He chose to lead the life of an ordinary craftsman of his own time and place. Thus the "*world*" becomes the place and the means for the *lay faithful* to fulfil their *Christian vocation*. Because the world itself is destined to glorify God the Father in Christ, the laity are not called to abandon the position that they have in the world. Baptism does not take them from the world at all. On the contrary, it entrusts them with a vocation that properly concerns their situation in the world. They "are called by God so that they, led by the spirit of the Gospel, might contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties" (CL 15).

Thus for the lay faithful, to be present and active in the world is not only an anthropological and sociological reality, but in a specific way, a theological and ecclesiological reality as well. That

is why the Fathers of Synod (1987) said: "The secular character of the lay faithful is not therefore to be defined only in a sociological sense, but most especially in a theological sense. The term *secular* must be understood in light of the act of God the creator and redeemer, who has handed over the world to women and men, so that they may participate in the work of creation, free creation from the influence of sin and sanctify themselves in marriage or the celibate life, in a family, in a profession and in the various activities of society" (*Propositio* 4).

Further, taking from the gospel the images of salt, light and leaven, the Apostolic Exhortation says that "although indiscriminately applicable to all disciples of Jesus, yet they are *specifically applied to the lay faithful*. They are particularly meaningful images to the laity, because they speak not only of the deep involvement and the full participation of the lay faithful in the affairs of the earth, the world and the human community, but also and above all, they tell of the radical newness and unique character of an involvement and participation which has as its purpose the spreading of the Gospel that brings salvation" (CL 15).

The secular character of the laity's vocation is also viewed from a different angle by the *Christifideles Laici*. The Second Vatican Council had significantly spoken of the universal call to holiness. Everyone in the Church, precisely because they are members, receive and thereby share in the common vocation to holiness. In the fullness of this title and on equal par with all other members of the Church, the lay faithful are called to holiness: "All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of Charity"; "All of Christ's followers are invited and bound to pursue holiness and the perfect fulfilment of their own state of life" (CL 16). Having thus spelt out the universal call to holiness, the Exhortation proceeds to specify the vocation of the laity thus: "The vocation of the lay faithful to holiness implies that life according to the Spirit expresses itself in a particular way in their *involvement in temporal affairs* and in their *participation in earthly activities*" (CL 17).

The Council, applying St. Paul's admonition: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him" (Col 3:17) to the lay faithful, had categorically affirmed: "Neither family concerns nor other secular affairs should be excluded from their religious

programme of life"(AA 4). The Synodal Fathers reverberated the same idea: "The unity of life of the lay faithful is of the greatest importance: indeed they must be sanctified in everyday professional and social life" (*Propositio* 5).

Citing this Proposition of the Synod, the Post-Synodal Document gives a glowing tribute to the numerous "lay women and men, busy at work in their daily life and activity, oftentimes far from view and quite un-acclaimed by the world, unknown to the world's great personages but nonetheless looked upon in love by the Father, untiring labourers who work in the Lord's vineyard. ...the humble yet great builders of the Kingdom of God in history"¹ (CL 17).

PART 2

THE RELIGIOUSLY PLURAL 'WORLD'— THE PROBLEMATIC OF THE LAITY

From the foregoing it is clear that the 'secular character' forms the specific feature of the laity's vocation, and sanctification of the 'world' constitutes the mission-field of the laity. However, in the context of Asia in general and India in particular, one must bear in mind that the world is not that secular, devoid of religious colour or devotional content. It is not a *tabula rasa*, a plain slate in which the laity need to scribble afresh the teachings of Jesus Christ and sanctify the world thereby. On the contrary it is already filled with ever so many religions with their long history and a tangible impact and lasting imprints upon the living culture. In such a context then what does it mean for the lay people to be involved in the world? This is the question that draws our attention in this section.

We, the Christians in India, Catholics and all the Protestant churches put together, are just 2.3 %. We are born in a country where over 82 % are Hindus. Muslims, constituting 12 %, form the second largest population of Muslim world. 2 % are Sikhs. The rest belong to the variety of indigenous religions. The Buddhists, Jains and Parsis are numerically insignificant but are significant in many

¹ Emphasis added

ways. In this backdrop then our laity are obviously growing up with neighbours, classmates, friends, colleagues who are of different religious affiliation.

I for one was born in a village surrounded by many Hindu villages. Sociologically we were very well connected with our Hindu neighbours. We used to get labourers on daily wages from other villages. Some of our poor people also would go as labourers to the Hindu neighbours, and vice versa. Most of the people from the Hindu neighbourhood would gather around tea-shops in our village and spend time in chatting. Those whom my grandfather used to address as '*thambi*' or '*anna*' (younger or elder brother) were called by my father as '*chithapa*' or '*periyappa*' (the younger paternal uncle or the elder paternal uncle) and we in turn used to address them as '*chinna thatha*' or '*periya thatha*' (the younger grandpa or the elder grandpa). The speciality of these different terms is that they indicate a precise blood-relation. Unlike the English word 'uncle', used both with reference to strangers as well as blood-relatives, the Tamil language makes use of different terms to indicate separate blood relation as against the polite ways of calling strangers as uncles. Here the terms '*chithapa*' '*periyappa*' are used only to indicate the blood brothers of one's father. Likewise there are specific terms used to indicate the blood relatives of one's mother's side. It is precisely these terms that have been used to indicate our relationship with our Hindu neighbours. It means that the bond of friendship that existed between my parents with their Hindu neighbours was so close that it almost bordered on blood relationships. They shared their joys and sorrows with us just as we did ours with them. No special function would be held in our family circles without their active participation. Similarly we used to join in their family celebrations, like weddings or funerals, as actively as their own family members.

Despite this type of close relationship at the socio-cultural level, our village enjoyed a 'splendid isolation' insofar as religious matters were concerned. Daily mass was celebrated early in the morning at 5 o'clock and people would attend it in large numbers. Common prayers were recited in the evening and which we, the children, were expected to attend without fail. Our parents were very strict in inculcating in us the value of participating in these practices of the Church. The Church bells would go three times a day as a reminder for people to pray. At the very first stroke of the

bell, people would stand still, refraining from any work and recite the Angelus prayer. Thus the whole village was vibrant with a specifically Christian atmosphere.

It was not a simple state of isolation, I believe. It implied an attitude of condemnation as well. We were taught from our childhood that ours was the only true religion that led all people to salvation. Our faith was supreme and sacred while the Hindus' faith was pagan. We worshipped the true God but they were idolaters. Our form of worship was sublime while theirs was crude. Our morality was noble but theirs was ignoble. The very fact that we were baptised was an assurance for us to go to heaven. However, it was not at all certain that even the best of Hindus would go to heaven. If they were acceptable it was because of God's special act of grace and mercy, not because of their religious faith.

Can this be true? This was the question with which I wrestled in my mind. For already in my childhood I had come across certain Hindus who were known for their uprightness of character, equanimity of soul, great sense of justice and utter detachment to material comforts. Is not my experience contrary to the belief upheld by Christianity then, viz. that nobody would be saved except through Christ and the Church. What do we make of their attainments which consisted not only in their highly ethical life that would often put us Christians to shame but also in the genuineness of their faith of having been touched by the grace of God, expressed profoundly in enormously rich and devotional literature.

PART 3

THE SOLUTION IN SIGHT

The problem became acute when I pursued my research on Interreligious Dialogue in a secular State University, under the guidance of Prof. K.J. Shaw, a Jain. He was a well known person not merely for his vast knowledge and profound thought but also for uprightness of character and integrity of soul. He was legendarily simple in his lifestyle although he was a rich person through inheritance. He appeared to me a living exemplar of *aparigraha* (non-possession), genuinely being poor in spirit. Perhaps it was his 'lay asceticism' that touched me the most. I call it lay

because it was not a formal type of asceticism he took up through a *sanyasa* life. But he adopted voluntarily certain vows as part of his everyday life, without interfering with the routine duties of his teaching profession, and adhered to them so strictly that he really led an ascetic life, without any of its paraphernalia. Suddenly he would take just a few *chappathis* for his lunch, totally abstaining from rice, the staple food of the people over there. This he would continue for nearly a month. Later, he would abstain himself from *ghee* which is an essential item for a vegetarian meal. This also he would continue for a month or so. On certain occasions in a year, he would refrain from taking tea for a month, although he is fond of it otherwise. When we asked him why he did these things, his answer was always the same: "just for fun." Only later did I come to know that it was his manner of disciplining himself. "Otherwise there is a danger of ourselves becoming an addict to any one of our pet-items of our food-habits or ordinary things like tea and coffee " he said.

The more I came to know Professor K.J. Shah, the deeper I realized the meaning of spirituality. Until my close contacts with my professor I had believed that a spiritual person is one who took to various spiritual exercises. In fact, if I had sincerely followed many spiritual exercises of my upbringing in my traditional family as well of my seminary formation that I was fortunate to have for nearly eight years, it was only because I wanted to become genuinely a spiritual person. But I don't think I had ever integrated those pious exercises with other dimensions of my life. For example, one day I might have made the morning meditation on detachment fervently enough. However, within an hour after it, as I was approaching the refectory for breakfast, if I smelt the *poories* at the table, I would be the first person to rush in to the refectory! Worse still, I would grab as many *poories* as possible, take them to a lonely corner of a table and consume them all, insensitive to the needs of other members of the community. Many of my fellow-seminarians also would indulge in such a practice that it became an accepted pattern of behaviour. All this did not seem wrong to me or anybody else at that time. Yet as I was coming to know Professor K. J. Shah more and more, I began to wonder what impact a meditation on detachment had made on me or on my fellow-seminarians. Likewise, I used to reflect upon the difference regular attendance to Sunday mass and novenas made on my

traditionally Christian village-community. I could not perceive any tangible changes in their day-to-day life on account of their daily or weekly practices of piety. My parishioners including me kith and kin, including me and my family, were all as quarrelsome as my Hindu neighbours! They were equally possessive, deceitful, loathsome, lethargic etc. None of this was to be explained in terms of either the personal weakness of people or the gap that always exists between the ideal and the actual.

It occurred to me that it was all to be traced to the dichotomous world-view between the sacred and the secular underlying the Church's approach. We, the Christians were proud of our belief in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the historicity of his death and resurrection or the atonement theory. Further we assumed that spirituality consisted in the performance of certain practices prescribed by the Church - getting baptism in the Church, and going to Parish Church on Sundays and taking part in the Holy Mass, and if possible frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament, taking part in the novenas to our Lady or Sts. Sebastin, Antony etc. Once we had fulfilled such Church obligations, we felt we were free to do what we wanted in every other aspect of our lives.

In contrast to it, I learned from my Professor that spirituality is no spirituality unless it penetrates and changes all other dimensions of life. This I learned not through formal lessons or discourses but through *the dialogue of life*. In fact he would never show interest to explain about his personal approach to spirituality or his viewpoints on religious matters. However, the fact that I spent four years of intimate discipleship with him enabled me to absorb the values he cherished and the worldview that he espoused. My interaction with Professor K. J. Shah enabled me to grasp where I had failed in my spiritual journey. I had laid much emphasis on holding to certain outward doctrines of my religion and following certain ritual or moral practices of my religion, rather than integrating them with my life and thereby growing in true holiness.

PART 4

LEARNING ABOUT MY FAITH THROUGH THE NEIGHBOUR'S FAITHS

My close interaction with Professor K. J. Shah was crucial not only to my own spiritual growth but even to a new way of

understanding of my faith. With the insights I gained from my Professor about spirituality, I could learn also what it means to be really religious. My encounter with a genuine faith of my neighbour challenged my faith as presented within my religious tradition. In the course of my research I realized that my failure of integration was not due to any particular personal weakness but to the distortion of the Christian message by the religious community itself. The people of my religion at that time were not able or were unwilling to take the religious life of my neighbours seriously. They were even ready to denigrate it, often misinterpreted it, made its tenets as 'adversary' to its theses, but never tried to face its challenges. I felt that my faith was too narrow and that our life with our neighbours distorted and diminished by the outright condemnation of their genuine spiritual heights of attainments, and even unjust refusal to take their religious life seriously. In short, my taking my neighbour's faith seriously, even while I was busy with my secular study and research, challenged me to re-look at some of the preconceived notions on which my faith was built. I used to discuss with him for hours together on the traditional faith-convictions with which I had grown. He was ever ready to enter into dialogue with me with outstanding patience and generosity. Many a time our dialogues would change into hot discussions, even wrestling and quarrels. Without any attempt to bully me or to impose his views upon me, he succeeded to exert his influence on me in re-interpreting my faith

As part of my research studies, Prof. K. J. Shah invited me to take Mahatma Gandhi seriously as a religious thinker. Gandhiji was not a professional theologian. But he was a person who had imbibed the Sermon on the Mount so thoroughly that he allowed it to affect his life in all its dimensions, social, economic and political. Perhaps this gave him an authority to challenge the missionaries of his times. Specifically when I began to take Mahatma Gandhi's rejoinders with the missionaries of those days seriously, I came to realize that my Church as a whole was suffering from a dichotomy between its beliefs and its life-style. It preached about Jesus the crucified whose life was marked by non-violence and voluntary suffering. Yet, it had openly advocated violence for the sake of truth, the Crusades and the Inquisition being two well-known historic examples. The so-called Christian countries did not believe in the applicability of the Sermon on the Mount, much less did they

dare put them into practice politically. Rather, they conveniently shelved them as "good counsels for individual perfection but not practical enough in politics." This explains why the so called Christendom was involved in so many wars, inflicting violent punishments even on people who did not err but just differed in their opinion.

Particularly the overall approach of Christianity towards other religions was imperialistic and triumphalistic, always trying to condemn others, at times to confront and conquer and convert them. It is perhaps this dichotomous approach that was one of the factors that led the Church to emphasise the uniqueness of its beliefs, and the more rational/philosophic ways in which the beliefs were presented. Moreover, the so-called the cultural superiority of the Western Europe boosted Western Christianity in its assumptions of religious superiority as compared with other religions practiced popularly by the masses. Thus Western Christianity was keen on confronting other religions and converting their followers into its fold. The Church in the past was anxious to conquer other religions rather than collaborate with them.

Thus I found two levels of dichotomy: first, at the *intra-religious level*, the dichotomy was between the belief-system it held and the life-pattern it advocated; or, between ritual practices like the Eucharist and the life-style of its people. Secondly, at the *interreligious level*, the dichotomy arose as a sequel to the affirmation of uniqueness in its beliefs and practices. The Church affirmed that it alone was the true religion while all other religions were either false or partially true.

With reference to both Gandhi gave a sound retort. First, he said salvation is not merely a matter of belief or a observance of a particular practice, however unique it may be. It is primarily a way of life, resulting in a state of Perfection, Attainment, Transcendence, or Realization. As he emphasized:

The message of Jesus, as I understand it, is contained in his Sermon on the Mount as a whole, unadulterated and taken as a whole . . . The message, to my mind, has suffered distortion in the West... Much of what passes as Christianity is negation of the Sermon on the Mount. And, please, mark my words! I am not, at present,

speaking of Christian conduct. I am speaking of the Christian belief, of Christianity, as it is understood in the West.²

Gandhiji was well aware that although one is at every moment of one's life trying to live up to one's profession, one's conduct falls short of those professions. Hence, far from criticising the missionaries' conduct he placed before them his fundamental difficulties about Christianity itself. He disputed the claim that Christianity was the only true religion, though he agreed that it was also a true religion:

Why do you think that the truth lies only in believing in Jesus as you do? . . . God is not encased in a safe to be approached only through a little hole in it, but that He is open to be approached through billions of opening by those who are humble and pure of heart. I invite you to step down from your pinnacle where you have left room for none but yourself³

Challenged by the faith of my neighbours like K.J. Shah (a Jain) Mahatma Gandhi (a Hindu), I came to learn that the core of my faith could not really be a particular belief or practice alone. I was convinced more and more that salvation could not be the prerogative of my religion alone. It cannot be a matter of just 'belonging to' a religion or 'holding on' to a particular belief or practice that guarantees one with salvation. Rather, it is the life of transformation brought about by a religion, or a religious belief or practice that constitutes the essence of salvation. However, a committed Christian as I was, I could not accept the findings of my own research unless I dug out my sources and searched out the scriptural evidence in order to validate my findings. Thanks be to God, I did find them. Just to give a sample of such confirmation from my sources of faith:

² *Young India*, Nov.8, 1927, as reproduced in a compilation Ed. Anand T. Hingorani, *All Religions are True*, Bharatiya Vidyabhavan: Bombay, 1962 pp.53-54

³ excerpts from a letter written by M.K.Gandhi to Mrs. Satyavati Chidambar, an Indian Christian, reproduced in Ed. Anand T. Hingirani, *op.cit.* p.71

Not everyone who call me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants them to do. When judgement day comes many will say to me 'Lord, Lord! in your name we spoke God's message, by your name we drove out many demons and performed many miracles! Then I will say to them, 'I never knew you; get away from me, you wicked people' (Mt 7: 21-23).⁴

Along with the statement cited above, if one takes the final judgement narrative (Mt. 25:31-46) one will find that the Master himself gives importance to deeds rather than the profession of any belief or practice.

Similarly, I found a lot of support for recognizing the *fact of saints* beyond the boundaries of my own faith-tradition, from the Gospels. When the Apostles reported to the master that they asked a man to stop driving out demons in his name, because he *did not belong to their group*, Jesus tells them: "Do not try to stop him, because whoever is not against you is for you" (Lk 9: 49-50). Indirectly, Jesus condemns those of the priestly class who were too keen on converting people from other religions thus "How terrible for you teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You sail the seas and cross whole countries to win one convert, and when you succeed, you make him twice as deserving of going to hell as yourselves are" (Mt 23: 15).

Based upon such evidences from the biblical sources, I could clearly affirm that a life of transformation is indeed the pivot of genuine spirituality or the core of religious faith, rather than the claim of uniqueness to any belief or doctrine or ritual. Thus I was also able to reconcile the dichotomy that existed at two levels. Firstly, in personal life, I am making a genuine effort to bridge the gap between my belief and my life. Secondly, I would like to convince my fellow believers, the lay faithful, that the core of our faith is not so much a claim of certain uniqueness to a belief as the translation of the claim into a concrete life-style.

⁴ All the citations from the Bible in this article are taken from Good News Bible

PART 5
THE SOUND BASIS FOR
INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION

The lesson I learnt about the core of one's faith in turn enabled me to find a sound platform for integrating my relationship with neighbours of other religions, not merely on socio - cultural level, but also on religio-spiritual level. Stressing the uniqueness of a belief or a practice only divides religions. But emphasizing the life of uniqueness gives room for religions to dialogue with one another and even to collaborate among themselves.

Additionally, I believe, the interreligious dialogue is an obligation laid on the laity today. For the contemporary crisis-ridden social milieu, has created a number of common concerns which no lay woman/man can ignore the ecological crisis, the energy crisis, the moral crisis, the faith crisis, the value crisis etc., to mention a few. Besides, the common concerns, there are today quite a few common enemies which any religion can ignore only at its own peril: Consumerism, Fundamentalism, Communalism, the Market God with his mighty wings of globalisation. Obviously no one religion can solve any of these problems today, much less the political or legal systems. Thus contemporary imperative is that the followers of different religions have to come together, dialogue with one another and pool their sources together and tackle the common concerns of humanity and pose a common attack on the common enemy. The need of the hour is a United-front of Religions⁵

Furthermore, I was very happy to find that the documents of Vatican Council II as well as the Post-Conciliar documents gave enormous support to interreligious dialogue. Here it may be sufficient just to mention a few texts from documents of the Second Vatican Council.⁶ First of all the Pastoral Constitution of the

⁵ Cf. A. Puhparajan Ed. *The Value Crisis on the Way Out*, Dept. of Interreligious Relations, Madurai 2002, pp. 25-32

⁶ For more details please see my booklet in Tamil: *Sangam Vahutha Samya Uravu*, Private Circulation) 2002,

Church in Modern World established a clear breaking of the dichotomous world-view, and a sign of integrative approach to the world and a close link with humankind and its history. It identified the griefs and anxieties of people of this age, especially those of the poor and the afflicted as those of the followers of Christ (GS1). It also enjoined the Catholics to promote the true common good of all people: "They should try to cooperate with all men and women of good will to promote whatever is true and just, what ever is holy and worth-loving"(AA 14).

As regards the positive relationship with other faiths too, I could find many profound insights in the Council documents. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church declared that her attitude to other religions would no more be destructive but rather be constructive: "Through her work, whatever is in the hands and hearts of men, whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of peoples is not only saved from destruction but also is healed, ennobled and perfected (LG 16). The Declaration on Church's relationship with other religions acknowledged the "task of fostering unity and love among people, and even among nations" and accepted the need of giving "primary consideration to what human beings have in common and to what promotes fellowship among them"(NA 1). It enumerated several points of commonality that needed to be considered in fostering unity among humans (NA 1 & 2).

1. All peoples comprise a single community.
2. The whole human race is housed in a single habitat: the earth.
3. They all have a single origin.
4. One is also their final destiny, namely God.
5. Providence of God is for all human beings.
6. His saving designs extend to all human beings.
7. The fundamental predicament of human beings and the profound mysteries of human condition is all there deeply stirring the hearts of all the humans.
8. All the religions are attempts at solving the fundamental predicament.
9. Awareness of a hidden mysterious power is universal among all peoples.

Moreover the Council's recognition of religious freedom was indeed a philosophical foundation for the dialogue relationship. It declared that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs (DH 2). "In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience faithfully, in order that he may come to God" and therefore "he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience"(DH 3). With a specific reference to evangelization the Council said "every one ought at all times to refrain from any manner of action which might seem to carry a hint of coercion or of a kind of persuasion that would be dishonourable or unworthy, especially when dealing with poor or uneducated people"(DH 4).

Not that the Council ignored the missionary obligation of the Christians. But it projected it in the proper perspective of inculturation: "That they may be able to give this witness to Christ fruitfully, let them be joined to those men by esteem and love and acknowledge themselves to be members of the group of men among whom they live. Let them share in cultural and social life by the various exchanges and enterprises of human living. Let them be familiar with their national and religious traditions" (AG 11). The document cites Christ as the model of dialogue relationship and expects his disciples to follow Him: "Christ himself searched the hearts of men, and led them to divine light through human conversation. So also His disciples, profoundly penetrated by the Spirit of Christ should know the people among whom they live, and should establish contact with them. Thus they themselves can learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth" (Ibid).

Therefore the Church exhorts her children to follow dialogue as the proper way of evangelisation: "They should, prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture" (NA 2). With all these supports I could clearly be convinced that the Church has officially taken a stand in favour of dialogue with people of other religions.

This changed approach of the Church towards other faiths is by no means a step taken out of expediency or diplomacy. Rather, it is deeply based upon her theological foundations. Firstly,

dialogue is rooted in the Church's faith in the mystery of the Trinity. Thus, God the Father is not only the Creator of heaven and earth but is the loving Provider. As such, his love is "pervasive and unlimited by space and time." If the Church believes in God the Father, then, from it follows the "duty of discovering and bringing to light and fullness all the riches which the Father has hidden in creation and history." In other words dialogue relationship is a way to recognise and enjoy the common patrimony of humankind. A genuine recognition of the spiritual patrimony merits the attention and action of the same Spirit today, even outside the visible Church (*Dominum et Vivificantem* 53). Thus the Spirit is not only one who "acts in the depths of people's conscience and accompanies them on the secret path of hearts towards the truth" but also the Spirit of Truth operative outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body (*Redemptoris Missio* 6). If our faith in the Third Person of the Holy Trinity implies all this, then it follows that the Church has an obligation "to discern the signs of the Spirit and follow Her wherever she leads."⁷

The dialogue relationship is theologically derivable also from the nature of the Church. The Church is really meant "to be the seed and beginning of the Kingdom" (*LG* 5&9). To start out on this path towards the Kingdom and along with the rest of humanity implies a common pilgrimage of all peoples towards the goal and their interdependence. In other words, the Church has to realise herself to be pilgrim Church along with other pilgrims. Therefore there is a need to talk together with other pilgrims and work together to realise the Kingdom on earth. Thus, the Church is here "not to reject anything that is true and holy in other religions", but on the contrary, "to look with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of the Truth which enlightens all men" (*NA* 2).

⁷ Cf. The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission, Document issued from the Secretariate for Non-Christians, 1984 No 24

CONCLUDING REMARKS

From the official stance of the Church and the solid theological grounds that support it, it is clear that it is characteristic of all the local Churches situated in a multi-religious context to be genuinely interested in interreligious dialogue, which itself leads one to cooperation and common action for encountering the common concerns (the various crises) and eradication of the enemies (the societal evils). It implies that interreligious dialogue needs to be promoted in every parish in the Indian Church, since the parish is the prime unit of the local Church.

Further it implies that the laity, who *are* the Church at the grassroots, realize their specific responsibility to be sufficiently open to people of other faiths, to take their faith seriously so as to be challenged by their faith and make their faith more meaningful so that they become not only self-integrative but also ready to collaborate with other believers, engaging themselves in humanitarian development, with a liberative thrust and thereby contributing to establishing of the Kingdom of God on earth.

It is still graver responsibility of the clergy of the Indian Church to train the laity, give them sufficient theological clarity, and equip them with pastoral techniques so that the laity living in a religiously plural world will view their 'secular character' as providing them with space for personal responsibility to take their neighbour's faith so seriously as to reinterpret their own faith meaningfully and re-live their faith-commitment genuinely.

If not, the laity's vocation and mission will be affected in less positive ways. To mention a few,

1. The majority of the laity will continue to be in the pre-Vatican dichotomous worldview, conveniently separating the sacred from the secular and confining the former with the Church attendance and getting satisfied with being good 'Sunday-Catholics', performing their secular activities in an a-religious manner neither caring to challenge the secular with the faith-perspective of theirs nor taking seriously the faith of the neighbour, least interested in such questions as whether faiths or belief systems are compatible with one another (**Religious Indifferentism**).
2. Or, quite a few of the laity are still intoxicated with the religious fervour of the pre-Vatican times, going on with an exclusive mind-set and condemnatory approach to other

religions, even nourishing a feeling of hatred against anything that is culturally or religiously alien to one's own, and even willing to use psychological or physical violence, incurring thereby the wrath of others, giving room for a potential communal riot (**Religious Fundamentalism**).

3. Or, some others, compelled by the fellow-workers or fellow-residents belonging to other religions may participate in their liturgy and worship and may even take to some of their worship patterns as demanded by a situation, when it is convenient or beneficial to their job prospects, making thereby uncritical compromises with one's own tradition (**Religious Syncretism**).
4. Or, still other may find that the Church is outdated in its approach, irrelevant in its message and therefore develop an anti-Church feeling, and turn out anti-religious and carry on with their secular profession just according to the whims and fancies, or even become unscrupulously involved in callous negligence of duties and even in corruption and crime (**Irreligionism**).
5. Lest the laity should get entangled in any of the irrelevant approaches to religion, let the clergy concentrate on the formation of the laity in such a way that the laity are able to take the faith of their neighbours seriously and realize their vocation in a religiously plural world.

It means for me, a lay faithful, a pilgrimage. It presupposes deep rootedness in my faith as well as sufficient openness to others' faith, readiness to be religiously challenged as well as to challenge. The expectation is a mutual learning and mutual enrichment, contributing thereby to the realization of my Master's dream of the Kingdom of God on earth.

It is an urgent need of the Indian Church to project a new image, such that our laity are religiously related to the religiously plural communities of the nation. If they are to realize their specific call of serving the Indian society as salt, light and leaven, then they can never be a threat to the long cherished genuinely human and spiritual values of our cultural heritage. They should be able to allow their faith commitment challenged by other faith-committed persons so that they re-live their own faith with a stronger foundation, and are enabled to work together for a world of justice, peace and liberation, as true and vibrant disciples of Christ Jesus.