



VAIHARAI

(The Dawn)

A Theological Half-Yearly

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Editorial

New Way of Being Church

Jesus gathered some companions and tried to live a new type of community life where family frontiers were crossed. When his mother and brothers came to see him Jesus asked: "Who are my mother and brothers?" He also stated that, 'whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother' (Mk 3:31-35; cf. Mt 12:46-50; Lk 8:19-21). In a society where family relationships were extraordinarily important, Jesus brought out an idea of spiritual family of many biological families living together with a special bond of love. This idea of spiritual family became materialized into the Church, though officially it was instituted on the day of Pentecost as Luke pictures it in Acts 2.

There was a new impetus after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the first followers of Jesus could live a life with renewed interest, of course, based on the strong faith that Jesus rose from the dead. The early Christians could form themselves into a local Church and live a life of one heart and one soul which was wonderfully new, wherein no one would be left to remain needy (Acts 4:32-35). The leadership in the new community was not juridical, nor authoritative but charismatic. It was really a family which Jesus envisioned, a family which would cross the boundaries of biological entities. The church at that time was not large but it was local, loving, its members knowing one another and catering to the needs of one another, in the footsteps of Jesus who came to serve and not to be served (Mark 10:43-45).

History had different turn and the new way of the life of the early Church was lost at the wake of institutionalized structures, though such structures have helped the church to grow and withstand oppressions and attacks. The Church, founded by Jesus Christ, became organized and it grew under the leadership of his followers and faced the typical problems of any organization- requirements for membership, consolidation of its structures, and consensus in its beliefs. In AD 96 Clement of Rome wrote to the Corinthian Church, urging the recipients to maintain unity and cooperation, and reminding that the Church's hierarchical ministries were divinely instituted. But there were always efforts to renew the Church, involving a spiritual dedication to simplicity of life as seen in the efforts of St. Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) and that of St. Dominic (d. 1221). After the Renaissance the catholic reform was led by great theologians like Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), and by religious orders such as the Jesuits and Capuchins. In the 17th century there was an emphasis on the priestly renewal. Nineteenth century renewal was principally centred on authority and devotion to the papacy. In the First Vatican Council (1870) there were efforts to rethink ecclesiology. But the efforts were based on patristic and medieval writers. Yet the church as the Mystical Body was first discussed in Vatican I.

In 1959 Pope John the XXIII announced the Second Vatican Council, with the hope that it would lead to a major renewal of the Church. He spoke of a "New Pentecost." The Pentecost of the early believers should be renewed as the Church today needs badly a new life of witnessing to the values of Christ. Since then the slogan 'new way of being church' was on the forefront in many a discussion in the Church at large. The tendency to go to the roots of the church has always been appreciated.

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) took up this slogan, 'new way of being church' and it began to explore the possibilities of the Church being a communion of communities. The Church is at its deepest level a communion (koinonia) rooted in the life of the Trinity, and thus in its essential reality a sacrament (mys-terium et sacramentum) of the loving

self-communication of God and the graced response of redeemed mankind in faith, hope and love. The FABC also stressed the need for being a new Church in Asia. This "new way of doing church" is rooted in six predominant propositions: (1) the Asian Church is called to be a "communion of communities;" (2) it is shaped by the immense diversity and pluralism of Asia, and it responds to that diversity and pluralism; (3) It is under-girded by a commitment and service to life; (4) it is inspired by an overarching vision of harmony; (5) it is oriented toward a threefold dialogue with Asian cultures, religions and the poor; (6) it seeks to build the Kingdom of God in Asia.

With this perspective this issue of *Vaiharai* is dedicated to the theme, "New Way of Being Church." While the universal character of the Church cannot be forgotten and its importance cannot be diminished, we need to take a different view point as the established structures are cracking in the church. The institutional church is losing its status and power in this fast-changing environment. Many have left the Western Church as they do not seem to find spiritual solace in the same. Hence, while keeping up with the universal character of the church, under the leadership of the Pope, the Church needs to examine and try to renew itself so as to go to the roots of the early church which was more charismatic and not juridical nor canonical but more local. In this perspective the Church on the one hand being global, should also be really local in character, wherein the faithful are really able to come out of the frontiers of biological families to live a life of a family unit which is larger, but not too large to be impersonal and ideological.

In this new type of community, which is smaller and local, there will be more of participatory structure, the members knowing each other, caring for one another, witnessing to the values of Christ and his kingdom in the local environment. There will be a role for each one in the community. In this type of community there will be a renewal of the role of the Holy Spirit; there will be prophetic voice within the institution; there will be an awareness to meet the needs of those who were formerly marginalized both within the church and society at large.

In this issue S. P. Johnson encourages us to think locally in a situation where, the local claims have become a nuisance to the people who are obsessed with the allure of power. According to him “marginal claims and spaces should become the platform of new thinking and new hope.” He also vouches that the local church is an effective sphere to comprehend the divine mysteries. The church is a radically inclusive religion where all the local potential of the faith community helps us to conceive the mystery of God.

While the importance of being a local church is felt and is ventured, different names are given for such a community life: Base Communities, Small Christian Communities, Basic Church Communities, and Cell Churches etc. But John Thomasque thoroughly analyses the various names given and explains that the title ‘Basic Ecclesial communities’ is the apt one as it signals the relationship with the universal church besides being the local church, as today many small communities go astray from the unity of faith and oneness in faith and they become just worldly. He also explains why it should be called a ‘community’ as it is not just a group or team. It is also basic as it is from the heart of the community and it caters to the base people of the society.

Devaraj points out how the church after Vatican II has rediscovered that far from being centralistic and monolithic the church is communion (koinonia). It is a communion of communities. The Church is a community of believers, proclaiming the message of the kingdom of God, celebrating the Eucharist and other sacraments, practicing love and fellowship, continuing the liberative mission of Christ in a socio-economic context. He delves on its implications for the local church in Asia, explaining the necessity of being participatory in character, advocating responsibility and co-responsibility.

D. Alphonse elucidates that the church is to be a prophetic community and goes to the roots stating that Israel, called to be a community of the people of God, was to be a prophetic community to the nations. He emphasizes the fact the prophetic mission could be well carried out only if the Church

realizes that it is local too. He explains what it means to be prophetic today. The Church should come out of being merely cultic. It should be a contrast community having caring relationships in an uncaring world, being just in an unjust world, serving the marginalized and weak in a society dominated by the wealthy and the powerful. It should be a dialogic community.

The early Christian community, even though it was a new way of being church, had problems of disunity and competition. Hence S.J. Antonysamy explores the possibilities of applying Paul's methods of solving the problems of disunity etc. in the local church and in the universal Church, from the Corinthian experience. Today the Indian Church is divided on the basis of caste which is a big scandal in the society at large. Paul focuses on the crucified Lord as the point of unity in the church, and he shows how the Eucharist is the vital constituent of unity. Paul beautifully brings out the Body analogy for the unity of the church. Hence the Church in India today can apply such methods so as to give real witness to Christ by being united.

This issue of Vaiharai comes very late due to unforeseen circumstances. We do apologize for the same. We hope to bring out the pending issues soon.

I thank sincerely the previous editor, Rev. Dr. S.P. Johnson, the dean of Studies of St. Paul's Seminary, for his valuable service.

Fr. V. Raphael
Editor