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## The Indian Church of the Future

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**Keywords:** Indian church, People of God, Future Church, Church in India, Inculturation

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## The Indian Church of the Future

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### 1. Preliminary Remarks

1. In this paper I shall attempt to answer the question: if the Church in India were to inculturate itself radically, what kind of a church would emerge? My intention is to describe the main features of the Indian Church to come. Limitations of space do not permit me to paint a complete picture of the future Church. What I have to say about the Indian Church of the future can be summed up in two statements: 1. It will be a church of God; 2. It will be a church of the people.

Experience of God is central to Indian religions.<sup>1</sup> The followers of these religions do not appreciate any religion which presents itself as a well-organized and rigidly structured institution.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the Church when it becomes truly Indian will be a church of God which lays stress on God experience as basic to Christian existence. It will also be a church of the people, a church which respects the equality and dignity of all its members. This is highly significant in a country where the caste system has tended to marginalize large sections of the population and look upon them as non-people. The Church needs to be responsive to the quest of the Dalits, women, the tribal people and other sections of society for human dignity.

2. The situation of the Church in India is anomalous. The proclamation of the gospel normally gives rise to truly inculturated churches. As Vatican II declares:

The seed which is the Word of God sprouts from the good ground watered by divine dew. From this ground the seed draws nourishing elements which it transforms and assimilates into itself. Finally it bears much fruit. Thus, in imitation of the plan of the Incarnation, the young churches, rooted in Christ and built up on the foundation of the Apostles, take to themselves in a wonderful exchange all the riches of the nations which were given to Christ as an inheritance (cf. Ps. 2:8). From the customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and sciences, these churches borrow all those things which can contribute to the glory of their Creator, the revelation of the Saviour's grace, or the proper arrangement of Christian life (AG 22).

Though the Christian message was brought to India most probably in the Apostolic times, no truly Indian Church emerged. In fact, what we have here at present are three churches - the Syro Malabar Church, the Syro-Malankara Church and the Latin Church. I have serious doubts about the legitimacy of the churches which, after they had grown into adulthood in far-off lands,

were transplanted into our country. Are they not remnants of our colonial past? The only way open for them is to undergo a process of decolonization which demands that they be ready to die in their present form so that a genuinely Indian Church can be born. According to Vatican II, all things human stand in need of this paschal experience:

For it is only by putting to death what is old that we are able to come to a newness of life. This fact applies first of all to persons, but it holds also for the various goods of this world, which bear the mark both of man's sin and of God's blessing (*AG* 8).

3. The Council is quite clear that because of its universal mission the Church should be ready to incarnate itself in the cultures of the peoples among whom it exists. This demands that it does not behave like an "export firm" which exports to different parts of the world a church which was deeply rooted in the culture of a particular people.<sup>3</sup> This is how I would interpret the following statement of Vatican II:

But at the same time, the Church, sent to all peoples of every time and place, is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, nor to any particular way of life or any customary pattern of living, ancient or recent. Faithful to her own tradition and at the same time conscious of her universal mission, she can enter into communion with various cultural modes, to her own enrichment and theirs too (*GS* 58).

## 2. The Church of God

1. For us believing Christians, the Church is not a purely human enterprise. It is more than just an association

of humans. God is at work in the origin and development of the Church. That is why Paul speaks of "the Church of God, that is at Corinth" (1 Cor 1:2). He is quite aware that the Church is the fruit of God's saving design in Christ Jesus. This is implied in his view that the Church is a mystery (see Eph 5:32). For Paul, "The mystery is the divine plan and decision to save men (and women) through the death of Jesus."<sup>4</sup> And the Church is the effect of God's saving action in Jesus Christ.

God's saving work accomplished in Jesus Christ is effectively communicated to humans through the Holy Spirit. He is the author of the Church. That is why Pentecost is regarded as the birthday of the Church. One can say that the Church is "the sacrament of the Holy Spirit."<sup>5</sup> It is meant to be a Spirit-filled and Spirit-led community. As Vatican II has stated:

The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful as in a temple (cf. 1Cor 3:16; 6:19). In them He prays and bears witness to the fact that they are adopted sons (cf. Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15-16 and 26). The Spirit guides the Church into the fullness of truth (cf. Jn 16:13) and gives her a unity of fellowship and service. He furnishes and adorns her with the fruits of His grace (cf. Eph 4:11-12; 1Cor 12:4; Gal 5:22). By the power of the gospel He makes the Church grow, perpetually renews her, and leads her to perfect union with her Spouse (*LG* 4).

This has serious implications for our Christian life. The transforming power of the Spirit at work in us is to be manifested through the quality of our

life. The fruits of the Spirit have to be visible in us (see *Gal* 5:22).

2. The expression, the Church of God, also signifies a church that is rooted in the experience of God. Just as Israel originated from the experience of the liberating God in the Exodus event, so too the Christian Church sprang up from the experience of the saving God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. One becomes a member of the Church by sharing this experience.

The early Christians were quite aware of this. It was the Damascus experience - the experience of God in the risen Christ - that transformed Saul of Tarsus into Paul the Apostle.<sup>6</sup> This is what enabled Paul to assert that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2Cor 5:18). And his only desire in life was to deepen this experience. As he has stated:

All I care for is to know Christ, to experience the power of his resurrection, and to share his sufferings, in growing conformity with his death, if only I may finally arrive at the resurrection from the dead (Phil 4:10f).

John, too, was quite clear that Christian life and Christian proclamation were rooted in an experience of God in Jesus Christ. So he says:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us (1Jn 1:2-3).

The Indian Church of the future needs to recapture this spirit and strive to become a church rooted in an experience of God in Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, because of a one-sided development of European theology, the importance of God experience for Christian existence has been lost sight of.<sup>7</sup> This rationalistic theology - which gradually spread to all parts of the Church - reduced revelation to a communication of divine truths which can be articulated in propositions. As a result, faith was understood as the acceptance of these propositional truths. It appeared as though one could be a believer without any experience of God or relationship to him. To be fair, we must point out that the mystical tradition in the West did not follow the predominant theology and stressed the importance of personal experience of God. So, too, St. Thomas pointed out that our faith is not directed at the expressions of faith but at the reality they refer to. So we do not confess: I believe that God is all powerful, but, I believe in the all powerful God.<sup>8</sup>

Vatican II has a rich understanding of revelation and faith. It has laid stress on the experiential dimension of revelation. It speaks of how "Israel came to know by experience the ways of God" (*DV* 14). And the Apostles encountered God by listening to Christ's words, by observing his actions, by living with him as well as by the experience of the Holy Spirit (see *DV* 7). For the Council, revelation is God's saving intervention in human history and it takes place through words and deeds (see *DV* 2). Only by listening to the words and observing the deeds of God

can we receive this revelation. To put it differently, divine revelation is available to us only in experience and as experience.

3. As Gabriel Moran has pointed out, "Experience should not be equated to what is empirically evident and scientifically measurable."<sup>9</sup> Nor should it be reduced to the subjectivism of a human being living in individual isolation. Human persons are essentially community beings. And the community exerts a deep influence on the way we experience life and reality. Humans are also historical beings. This, too, shapes our experience. Hence, human experience includes the dimensions of society and history. If one understands experience in a comprehensive way, then one can agree with Moran when he asserts:

People who demand that there be a higher norm of truth than human experience are asking for an idol. Man has no recourse in his life except to turn to what is finite. He can submit, as he is always tempted to submit, to a text or a ruler or an institution built by his own hands. There is no lack of things available and waiting for divinization. His only other alternative is to follow his own human experience and to pursue it wherever it takes him. If there be a God, must not his voice be heard within the experience of a man who listens with all other men for the voice of the divine?<sup>10</sup>

As Vatican II has said, "all believers of whatever religion have always heard His revealing voice in the discourse of creatures" (*GS* 36).

4. We need to reflect a little more on human experience. Experience is not

something which we do, it happens to us. Herein lies the possibility of encountering the Absolute who makes unconditional claims on us. As Langdon Gilkey points out:

The ultimate or unconditioned element in experience is not so much the seen but the basis of seeing; not what is known as an object so much as the basis of knowing; not an object of value, but the ground of valuing; not the thing before us, but the source of things; not the particular meanings that generate our life in the world, but the ultimate context within which these meanings necessarily subsist.<sup>11</sup>

Hence, the divine is the horizon of our experience and understanding.

True, there is a danger that people who insist on personal experience may fall into pure subjectivism. The only way to avoid this is to be in open dialogue with the members of the Christian, human community. The community can correct and complete my defective and partial understanding of what I experience. Inter-subjectivity is the only safeguard against individual misinterpretation of experience. As Paulo Freire has said, people in communion discover truth.

5. We have now to examine the specific nature of the Judaeo-Christian experience of God. In the religious traditions of humankind, there are at least four ways in which people have encountered the divine.<sup>12</sup> First of all there is the experience of God in nature, as the power behind natural phenomena. Such an experience usually leads to belief in nature gods. This is true of the Hindus from the Vedic times. This type of God

experience is to be found also in Judaism and Christianity. Secondly, there is the experience of God in the depths of one's being. God-ward movement often takes an inward direction. This leads to the cultivation of interiority. The Upanishads bear witness to this kind of an experience of God. It is also found among the Christian mystics. Thirdly, there is the experience of God mediated through the rites and doctrines of religions. This is probably the most valued form of God experience in popular Catholicism, in which the frequent reception of sacraments is highly esteemed. Such an approach to the experience of God is found also among the followers of other religions. Finally, there is the experience of God in inter-human relationship and socio-political involvement. This form of God experience is, I believe, typical of the Biblical tradition. The foundational God experience of Israel was the Exodus – the experience of God in the liberation of slaves. Israel also experienced God as the one who was active on its behalf in the decisive moments of its history. And the early Christians experienced God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus who was done to death as a political criminal. For us Christians, the human person is the privileged locus of God experience – first of all in Jesus of Nazareth, and then in every man, woman and child. Besides, as Charles Davis has pointed out:

The Christian religion has always been thoroughly political, with social and political action the major vehicle of the distinctively Christian religious experience. Briefly, Christians find God in their neighbor rather than in

their inner consciousness or in the cosmos.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, Israel's prophets bear witness to this kind of God experience. Thus for Jeremiah, to know God, to experience God, is to practise justice as well as to promote justice (see Jer 22:15-16). Similar ideas are found also in the other prophets. And this way of experiencing God has affected the shape of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. According to Charles Davis:

Yahweh from the beginning was a political God. Most of the images and symbols we use of God are social and political in their basic meaning. The mighty acts of God are a series of political events. The prophetic message is a demand for social justice. Jesus died, not because of his inner life of prayer, but because of his impact upon the social order. The Gospel message is centred upon the political symbol of the Kingdom. The earliest Christian creed was 'Jesus is the Lord' – a declaration that takes its meaning from the political order. The early Christians were a movement of the marginalized and under-privileged. They eventually came to power in the Roman Empire because their movement offered, culturally and politically, what was needed by society.<sup>14</sup>

If the Indian Church of the future is rooted in such an experience of God, it will necessarily be a prophetic church. Like the prophets of old and Jesus of Nazareth, the Church will speak on behalf of God and interpret his will for his people today.<sup>15</sup> Basing itself on its real experience of God, it will endeavour to decipher the designs of God in the events of today. It will also engage in "a continuous and endless

critique of all earthly institutions, beliefs, customs and practices.”<sup>16</sup> It will do this not in the name of any earthly absolutes – which would be idolatry – but under an appeal to the incomprehensible mystery of God. In the last analysis, “the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”<sup>17</sup> At a time when global capitalism has made money the central tenet of faith of the present-day universal religion and when it brings with it poverty and misery for millions of people in India (and elsewhere in the world), we are faced with a crucial choice: God or Mammon?<sup>18</sup> It is here that the Church has to take a stand for God and raise her voice in protest against this iniquitous system. It has to hold fast to Jesus’ vision of a new society<sup>19</sup> and work for the establishment of a new human community which is rooted in God, which is characterized by freedom, equality, love, justice and peace, and which lives in harmony and communion with nature.

6. The Indian Church of the future will be a church of real spirituality. There is a frightening dearth of true spirituality in the Church today. What Karl Rahner has said of the Church in Germany is by and large true of the Church in India. “The Church’s public life even today (for all the good will which is not to be questioned) is dominated to a terrifying extent by ritualism, legalism, administration, and a boring and resigned spiritual mediocrity continuing along familiar lines.”<sup>20</sup> Besides, there is a lot of piety, but not enough

spirituality in the Church today. This is not to condemn the popular devotions which play a significant role in the life of many Christians. It must, however, be pointed out that these devotions are truly beneficial only if they mediate an experience of God and help people to live the gospel way of life. The quality of one’s life, not fidelity to exercises of piety, is the sign of real spirituality.

The Indian Church of the future needs to learn and practise “the incomprehensibly noble art of a true initiation into the mystery of experience of God.”<sup>21</sup> This has to become a top priority for the Church. All Christians, but especially the leaders of the Church, have to be men and women who have had a deep experience of God and who can mediate such an experience to others. There is reason to believe that at present the Church is not very successful in mediating an experience of God to people.<sup>22</sup> One wonders if this is a high priority at all on the Church’s agenda today.

Because of its peculiar nature the Christian experience of God leads to a spirituality not of monastic withdrawal from the world, but of evangelical involvement in it. In this the Church has to follow the example of Jesus who because of his experience of God adopted a spirituality of identification and confrontation. As George Soares-Prabhu says:

In his sharply polarized society, clearly divided into economic and social classes with conflicting interests, Jesus takes sides. He identifies with the poor and the outcast, and he confronts the establishment, which impoverishes and rejects them.<sup>23</sup>

Incarnation and the cross are the symbols of Jesus' spirituality.

7. The realization that the experience of God is basic to Christian existence will lead to a new understanding of many ecclesial realities. Thus, in the Indian Church of the future, Scripture will be not looked upon primarily as a book of doctrine, but as a record of the Judaeo-Christian experience of God. It is the story of this experience. As George Soares-Prabhu writes:

It is because the specific God-experience of biblical religion is the experience of a God active in history that the literary expression of this God experience takes the form of a story. It is important, then, that we grasp firmly this overarching unity of the Bible as a story. The Bible contains many laws but it is not (unlike the *Manusmriti*) a book of laws. The Bible contains much doctrine, but it is not (unlike the *Upanishads*) a book of doctrine. The Bible contains many hymns but it is not (unlike the *Rgveda*) a book of hymns. Laws, doctrines and hymns are all parts of the one story the Bible tells.<sup>24</sup>

As a story, the Bible is meant to mediate this God experience. That is probably why Vatican II says that Tradition and Scripture are "like a mirror in which the pilgrim Church on earth looks at God" (*DV* 7).

So, too, the primary function of the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, is to mediate an experience of God. I do not deny that it may fulfil other functions as well. But if it does not put people in touch with God, then it is of no great value. Something similar is to be said of the doctrines of the Church. The doctrinal for-

mulations are articulations of the experience God. Originating in experience, they are meant to lead us back to experience. Unrelated to experience they are empty and meaningless. Speaking of the dogmatic formulations of the early Church, J. A. T. Robinson remarked:

Originally the doctrine was created to describe, define and safeguard an experience. But in the process experience seems to have drained right out of it, the dogma has become airborne, and we are asked if we believe in the dogma as though this were what being a Christian means. We are left with a shell on our hands from which the life which shaped it has long since departed.<sup>25</sup>

Besides, dogmatic language goes the way of all language and changes with the passage of time. This calls for creative reinterpretations of doctrines in the socio-cultural context of the emerging India. As Avery Dulles has pointed out:

Christianity has been a vital religion for so many centuries because Christians of successive generations have had the courage to rethink their faith in the light of the most pressing problems of their day. This was done by the biblical authors, by the Greek and Latin Fathers, and by the great Scholastics.<sup>26</sup>

The Indian Church of the future will encourage the faithful, especially the theologians, creatively to reinterpret the doctrines of the Church so that they become living and life-giving.

### 3. The Church of the People

1. The Church of God is not primarily an institution but a people - a



people who have positively responded to their experience of God in Jesus Christ. That is why from ancient times the Church has understood itself as the congregation of the faithful. The Kingdom of God, which is central to the life and ministry of Jesus, “evidently presupposes a people, a people of God, in whom it can become established and from whom it can shine forth.”<sup>27</sup> St. Paul, who is the first New Testament writer to develop an ecclesiology, looks upon the Church as the new Israel, the people of God of the messianic times.<sup>28</sup> And in our own day, Vatican II has retrieved this understanding of the Church as the people of God.

2. The Church is a community of radical equality. Basing himself on his experience of God as abba, Jesus taught that all men and women are brothers and sisters, and this rules out all discrimination on any ground whatever. And his life exemplified this teaching. As George Soares-Prabhu asserts:

Jesus himself violates the caste distinctions of his people by ‘communing’ with tax collectors and sinners (Lk 15:1-2) and by numbering an out-cast customs official (Levi the tax collector of Mk 2:13) and an outlaw rebel against Roman rule (Simon the Zealot of Lk 6:15) among his closest followers. He makes women his disciples (Lk 8:1-2; 10:38-42), commends the faith of gentiles (Mt 8:10; Mk 5:34), and proposes a Samaritan as the model for the interhuman concern which for him is the essence of the Law (Lk 10:29-37).<sup>29</sup>

And the early Church followed the example of Jesus. It was a community in which all racial, social and gender

differences were eliminated. As St. Paul declares:

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:26-28).

Such an egalitarian ecclesiology is of great significance to the Indian Church of the future. Caste is an all pervasive reality in India today. It exerts an influence on almost all aspects of life. Practically all political parties exploit it as a means to mobilize the people. What is very sad is that it has also affected the Church. It is to the credit of the Church that it has received into her ranks large numbers of the Dalits. But, unfortunately, it has not treated them as equal members of the community. Various kinds of discrimination against the Dalits are still prevalent in the Church. The Church will have to take effective steps to remove them and ensure that the equality of the Dalits is accepted by all. They have to be treated with respect and love.

Obviously, the Dalits are not the only people who suffer discrimination in Church and society. The tribal people and women, too, are often treated as second class citizens of the country and inferior members of the Church. The Church of the future will have to make sure that the equality and dignity of these people are affirmed in practice, and not merely in theory.

3. The Indian Church of the future will be a community of radical free-

dom. Freedom is one of the parameters of the Kingdom of God which Jesus proclaimed.<sup>30</sup> And Jesus thought it to be his life's mission to liberate people (see Lk 4:16-21). The early Christians regarded freedom as one of Christ's gifts to them (see Jn 8:31-36; Gal 5:1, 13-15). Freedom is also the sign of the presence of Christ's Spirit: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2Cor 3:17). The Church as a Spirit-filled and Spirit-led community has to be a place of freedom - not only freedom from sin and selfishness, but also from all forms of oppression and manipulation. This is necessary if it wishes to fulfil its mission effectively. The Church is the bearer of the gospel, which is a message of freedom and a source of liberation. As the sacrament of liberated humanity, the Church is called to champion the cause of freedom in our country. Even though India has just celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her Independence, the vast majority of our people suffer from unfreedoms of various kinds. How can the Church credibly fight for their liberation if it is not itself a community of real freedom?

One important aspect of freedom is the freedom to express one's views fearlessly and frankly. For a variety of reasons, many Catholics including theologians do not experience this freedom. And yet, Vatican II powerfully affirmed the freedom of the believers to express their views without fear. Speaking of the theological education of lay people and their collaboration in the formation of priests, the Council declared:

In order that such persons may fulfil their proper function, let it be recognized that all the faithful, clerical and

lay, possess a lawful freedom of inquiry and of thought, and the freedom to express their minds humbly and courageously about those matters in which they enjoy competence (*GS* 62).

I hope that the Indian Church of the future will take this statement of the Council seriously. The leaders of the Church will have to realize that hasty condemnation of what they consider to be an erroneous teaching often creates an atmosphere where freedom of expression is threatened. In this day and age when there is an explosion of knowledge and when the legitimacy of pluralism in theology is acknowledged, it is not at all easy to say whether a particular opinion is erroneous or not. Besides, the experience of the past, when the magisterium had condemned some theological views as false, but later on had to retract its verdict, should make the Church cautious in the future. Moreover, there is no need of any condemnation, if a teaching considered erroneous can be refuted. And if it cannot be refuted, then the condemnation is manifestly unjust. In his opening speech to the first session of Vatican II, John XXIII declared:

Nowadays, however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations.<sup>31</sup>

Today the most effective way of arriving at truth while respecting the freedom and dignity of the faithful is through honest dialogue. And the pastors of the Church have a duty to foster

it. While speaking about the mission of the Church to unify all humankind, Vatican II affirms the importance of dialogue within the Church. It declares:

Such a mission requires in the first place that we foster within the Church herself mutual esteem, reverence and harmony, through the full recognition of lawful diversity. Thus all those who compose the one People of God, both pastors and the general faithful, can engage in dialogue with ever abounding fruitfulness. For the bonds which unite the faithful are mightier than anything which divides them. Hence, let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is unsettled, and charity in any case (*GS 92*).

4. The Church of the people will be a participative community. All the faithful will have a say in the making of decisions in the Church. This is quite in keeping with the tradition of the Church. In the Apostolic times, when the nascent Church faced a serious problem it called an assembly of the faithful. The twelve apostles served as a kind of "ruling council" which presided over the assembly and facilitated the process of decision-making (see Acts 6 and 15)<sup>2</sup>. When there was some confusion caused by the charismatics in the Church of Corinth, Paul asks not the leaders of the Church (in fact we do not know if there were any leaders at the time in Corinth) but the community to regulate the use of the gifts of the Spirit (See 1Cor 14:26-32). These practices of participative decision-making continued after the New Testament times. In the third century, St. Cyprian declared: "I have made it a rule, ever since the beginning of my episcopate, to make

no decision merely on the strength of my own personal opinion without consulting you (the presbyters and the deacons), and without the approbation of the people."<sup>3</sup> In the course of the thirteenth century, Innocent III and Boniface VIII, two of the most authoritarian Popes in the Church's history, appealed to the principle: "Whatever affects everybody ought to be corporately approved by everybody."<sup>4</sup>

Gradually the Church ceased to be a participative community. The decision-making power was concentrated in the hands of the clergy, especially the higher clergy. Lay people had no say whatever in the affairs of the Church. In our own day, Vatican II has recommended the establishment of a pastoral council in each diocese and a parish council in each parish (*CD 27*). This is only a first step towards becoming a participative community. In 1996, the meeting of the general body of the CBCI stated:

We reiterate our sincere desire to improve and to perfect the movement towards a truly participatory Church where all sections of the People of God revitalizing their baptismal grace fulfil their vocation and mission. The CBCI will then be a Body that gives witness to unity in mission, achieved with a diversity of roles. In this context we resolve to emphasize the importance of involving all sections of the Church, especially the laity, and reposing greater confidence in them."

The Indian Church of the future will have to set up structures and organs of participation, for without them the desire for a participative Church will remain just a pious wish. In democratic

India today sections of people once neglected are clamouring for participation in the making of decisions that affect them. And lay people in the Church are asking for a more active role in the thinking, planning and decision-making process in the Church. If we believe that the Spirit of the Lord is present and active in every member of the Church, it is important that we attentively listen to every one. Through him/her the Spirit may be speaking to the Church.

5. In the Church of the people there will be a radically new understanding and exercise of leadership. It will recapture the spirit of gospel leadership and incarnate it in the situation of our country. Selfless service, and not power or domination, is the ideal Jesus sets before the leaders of the Church. As Mark sums it up:

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as ransom for many (Mk 10:42-46).

Thus, Jesus the servant, who lays down his life for the welfare, the salvation, of the people is the model for all Christian leaders. This is witnessed to in all the books of the New Testament. As Edward Schillebeeckx observes:

According to Paul and the whole of the New Testament, at least within the Christian communities of believers,

relationships involving subjection are no longer to prevail. We find this principle throughout the New Testament, and it was also to determine strongly the New Testament view of ministry. This early Christian egalitarian ecclesiology in no way excludes leadership and authority; but in that case, authority must be filled with the Spirit, from which no Christian, man or woman, is excluded, in principle, on the basis of the baptism of the Spirit.<sup>36</sup>

As is well known, the leaders of the Church down the centuries have not always exercised their authority according to the gospel ideal. It is, however, an encouraging sign that Vatican II has reaffirmed that the ministers of the Church are servants of their brothers and sisters and that their service consists in coordinating and directing the efforts of all towards a common goal, while respecting the Christian freedom and dignity of each one (See *LG* 18).

Such an understanding of leadership is very relevant to the Indian Church of the future. Ours is a country in which the priestly caste has for centuries oppressed and dominated over the Dalits. It is also a country where the rich and the powerful have been exploiting the poor and making them totally powerless. As a prophetic community, the Indian Church needs to raise her voice in protest against the abuse of power and authority in the secular society. One way to make its protest credible is precisely to ensure that in the Church there is no place for power and domination over people. This calls for a return to the gospel ideal of leadership. The Church should make serious efforts to empower the laity. In this connection

one needs to raise the question of the place and role of women in the Church. Is it not strange that they have absolutely no leadership role in the Church?

6. The Indian Church of the future will be a church of the poor. According to the Bible, the poor are the objects of God's preferential love.<sup>37</sup> God is on their side. Though the poor are an oppressed group of the economically and socially deprived, they are not depicted as a pitiable group of unfortunates who have no historical significance. As George Soares-Prabhu points out: "The poor in the Bible are a dynamic group who are not passive victims of history but those through whom God shapes his history."<sup>38</sup> They are the mediators of salvation for all. The Church of the future will have to follow the example of God and take sides with the poor. The primary thrust of all its activities will be the liberation of the poor. It should make an "irrevocable covenant" with the poor as God has done.<sup>39</sup>

It is not enough for the Church of the future to be a *church of the poor*, it must also be a *poor church*. Even though the vast majority of the Catholics of India are poor, the Church in our country gives the impression of being a rich church. This needs to be changed. Vatican II believes that the Church in its saving mission should follow the example of Jesus who became poor for our sake (see *LG* 8). It will have to give up reliance on material wealth for the

furtherance of its mission. This is highly significant in India where 'opted poverty' is a sign of true religiosity. As Aloysius Pieris has observed: "The open repudiation (not necessarily the overthrow) of any order of society based on the cult of Mammon is an essential ingredient of Asian religiosity as symbolized in the Monastic ideal of *voluntary poverty*."<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested that the Indian Church of the future – a church that is radically inculturated in our country and among our people – will be first of all a church of God. It will be a church that is rooted in the experience of God in Jesus Christ and constantly draws nourishment from it. It will be a church of faith – a church that entrusts its life and destiny into the hands of God. It will be a church of hope which places its trust not in what it can foresee, plan, control and manipulate, but in the incomprehensible mystery of God. It will also be a church of charity, which in its life and activity strives to manifest and exercise God's unconditional love for humankind (See *GS* 45).

I have also suggested that the Indian Church of the future will be a church of the people – a community which is characterized by equality, freedom, justice and participative decision-making. The liberation, empowerment and wholeness of the people, especially the poor, will be her primary concern.

#### Notes

1. See I. Puthiadam, "Experience of God in Hinduism", in *Jeevadhara* 21 (1974), pp. 247-259.
2. See T. Urumpackal, *Organized Religion According To Dr. S. Radhakrishnan*, Rome: Gregorian University, 1972, pp. 45-155.

3. See K. Rahner, *Concern For The Church*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1981, p. 78.
4. J. L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968, p. 598.
5. See L. Boff, *Church: Charism And Power*, London: SCM Press, 1985, p. 144.
6. See F. Pereira, *Gripped By God in Christ: The Mind and Heart of St. Paul*, Mumbai: St. Paul Publications, 1991, pp. 29-39.
7. See M. Schoof, "The Theological Roots of Christian Dogmatism", in *Downside Review*, 316 (1976), pp. 178-196.
8. *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 1, art. 2.
9. G. Moran, *Design for Religion*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1970, p. 45.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46; see also S. Kappen, "The Future Of Christian Education And Christian Education Of The Future", in *Jeevadhara* 13 (1973), p. 64, where he says: "Authority as the principle of truth therefore must be subordinated to the principle of obedience to reality, i. e., to the global experience of man."
11. L. Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind*, Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1969, p. 296.
12. See C. Davis, "From Inwardness to Social Action: A Shift in the Locus of Religious Experience", in *New Blackfriars*, 67 (1986) 789, pp. 114 - 125.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 122-123.
15. See G. Soares-Prabhu, "The Dharma of the Biblical Prophet", in *CRI National Assembly Report*, Delhi, 1988, pp. 85-109.
16. C. Davis, "From Inwardness . . .", p. 124.
17. See W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981, p. 13.
18. U. Duchrow, "God or Mammon", in *Mission Studies*, 13 (1996) 1 & 2, pp. 32-67.
19. See G. Soares-Prabhu, "The Kingdom of God: Jesus' Vision of a New Society", in D. S. Amalorpavadass (ed.), *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981, pp. 579-626.
20. K. Rahner, *The Shape Of The Church To Come*, London: SPCK, 1974, p. 82.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
22. See P. Parathazham, "The Challenge of Neo-Pentecostalism", in *Vidyajyoti* 61 (1997) 5, pp. 312-313.
23. G. Soares-Prabhu, "The Spirituality of Jesus as a Spirituality of Solidarity and Struggle", in J. Vattamattom, et al. (eds.), *Liberative Struggles in a Violent Society*, Hyderabad: Montfort Bhavan, 1990, p. 145.
24. G. Soares-Prabhu, "Expanding the Horizon of Christian Mission - A Biblical Perspective" in A. Kanjamala (ed.), *Paths of Mission in India Today*, Mumbai: St. Paul Publications, 1997, p. 35.
25. J. A. T. Robinson, *But That I Can't Believe*, London: Collins, 1969, p. 463.
26. A. Dulles, *The Survival of Dogma*, New York: Doubleday, 1973, p. 210.
27. G. Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, p. 27.
28. See L. Cerfaux, *The Church In The Theology of St. Paul*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1959, pp. 49-79.
29. G. Soares-Prabhu, "Radical Beginnings: The Jesus Community as the Archetype of the Church", in *Jeevadhara*, 15 (1985) 88, p. 321.
30. See G. Sores-Prabhu, "The Kingdom of God . . .", pp. 601-602.

31. John XXIII, "Opening Speech to the Council" in W. M. Abbot (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*, New York: America Press, 1966, p. 716.
32. See R. E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop*, London: SCM Press, 1971, pp. 58-59.
33. As quoted by Y. Congar, *Lay People In The Church*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965, p. 43.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
35. "CBCI Evaluation Report: Response of the General Body," Trivandrum, 1996, Nrs. 4-5.
36. E. Schillebeeckx, *The Church With A Human Face*, London: SCM Press, 1985, p. 39.
37. G. Soares-Prabhu, "Class in the Bible: The Biblical Poor A Social Class?", in S. Arokiasamy and G. Gispert-Sauch (eds.), *Liberation in Asia*, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1987, pp. 81-85.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
39. Aloysius Pieris, "A Theology of Liberation in Asian Churches?", in S. Arokiasamy and G. Gispert-Sauch (eds.), *Liberation in Asia*, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1987, p. 31.
40. *Ibid.*