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## **Freedom and Liberation**

### **Reflections on the Church's Vocation and Mission**

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The quest for freedom and liberation is quite widespread in our country today. This is noticeable especially among the poor, the Dalits, the tribal people and women. They long to be liberated from oppressions of various kinds so that they can live in freedom and dignity. Besides this, there is the quest for inner freedom, for liberation from the emotional blocks which prevent people from reaching wholeness and peace. It is this quest that makes them go in for therapies of different kinds. Moreover, a large number of our people are engaged in the quest for spiritual liberation. That is why they flock to the so called god-men or frequent the meditation centres which are proliferating in India today.

The Church in India needs to re-define its mission and reshape its life so that it can effectively respond to the contemporary quest for freedom and liberation. In this paper, I shall contend that the Church's vocation is to be a community of radical freedom and that its mission is to work for the total liberation of humankind. Such an understanding of its vocation and mission will give the Church a new vitality and a new relevance in our country today.

The paper begins by clarifying the idea of freedom and liberation. It goes

on to develop some theological perspectives on the Church's vocation and mission. Then it examines the dimensions of freedom in the life of the Church and investigates the areas of liberation the Church should engage in.

#### **1. Freedom and Liberation**

1.1. Though freedom is a matter of daily experience, it is difficult to define it. One can perhaps understand it negatively as the absence of external force as well as internal necessity. Positively, it denotes the capacity for self-determination. Hence, a person is said to be free when he/she is not determined by internal compulsions or external pressures. He/she determines him/herself.

Freedom is basic to human existence. Only through the exercise of freedom can humans realize themselves and achieve their destiny. As Vatican II declares:

For its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man. For God has willed that man be left "in the hand of his own counsel" so that he can seek his Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to him. Hence, man's dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice. Such a

choice is personally motivated and prompted from within. It does not result from blind internal impulse nor from mere external pressure (GS 17).<sup>1</sup>

As a created reality, human freedom is finite and fallible.<sup>2</sup> It can be used to make wrong choices – choices that do not help persons to realize themselves or to establish right relationships to God and other humans. Humans are essentially social. Only by relating to other humans can they really become what they are meant to be. This truth applies also to human freedom. It is only in the community of other humans that we experience and exercise true freedom. Besides, human freedom has been damaged by sin and stands in need of the healing grace of God. By giving his grace God does not cancel out or destroy what he did in creation. God's grace makes us an enhanced version of ourselves.<sup>3</sup> It enables us to become more truly free. When the New Testament asserts that Christ has set us free it does not deny that God created all humans free. What it says is that Christ has healed and restored our freedom which was damaged by sin.

1.2. Such an understanding of freedom sheds light on liberation. Liberation is the removal of the obstacles to the full exercise of freedom.<sup>4</sup> It involves all the processes which have as their goal the creation of the conditions necessary for the exercise of authentic freedom. It is not true to say that liberation produces human freedom. Liberation merely removes the obstacles to its exercise. "Indeed a liberation which does not take into account the personal freedom of those who fight for it is condemned in advance to defeat."<sup>5</sup>

There is often a tendency to view liberation rather negatively as the mere removal of the obstacles to the full exercise of freedom.<sup>6</sup> But liberation can also be understood positively as an experience or a process which enhances, enriches our life. Thus, when someone says that the theological education he/she has received has been a liberating experience, he/she does not only mean that it has removed the obstacles to the full exercise of freedom. He/she also asserts that it has brought enrichment to his/her life. In fact, one can even think of liberation as a process that can lead to the fullness of life which is salvation. Liberation is thus a term which is quite rich in its meaning. Hence, it is wrong to reduce the work of liberation to a merely this-worldly project of socio-economic and political liberation.

Besides, the religious heritage of Asia helps us to understand liberation in a new way. As George Soares-Prabhu says:

But the word 'liberation' in Asia evokes specifically Asian resonances. With its profound religiosity which has found expression in its great "metacosmic soteriologies" (Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism), Asia, the "cradle of all the scriptural religions of the world", cannot possibly understand 'liberation' in merely socio-economic terms. The religious traditions of Asia (Buddhism and Hinduism in particular) claim to mediate 'liberation' (*moksha*, *vimmokha*) as an experience of unconditioned freedom resulting from an experiential realization of the radical relativity of the empirical world. Such a "perceiving of the emptiness of the transitory" (Dhammapada vii, 92) leads to the cessation of consum-

erism and greed (*alobha*), to a quenching of hatred and prejudice (*adosha*), and to the dispelling of utopian illusions engendered by the absolutization of finite values (*amoha*). It leads, that is, to a state of absolute freedom from psychological and sociological bondage, which finds its concrete, institutionalized expression in the Buddhist monk (*bhikku*) or Hindu wandering ascetic (*sannyasin*). Here we have the 'classless individual' who is totally free because he has 'renounced' (that is, come to realize the radical relativity of ) everything that once held him in its grip. 'Liberation' for the Asian psyche is not only liberation from poverty, but equally the liberation which leads to that 'poverty' which is freedom from illusion, attachment and greed.<sup>7</sup>

It is this rich understanding of liberation that we need to appropriate for ourselves.

## 2. Theological Perspectives

2.1. Some years back a Vatican Instruction declared: "The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a message of freedom and a force of liberation."<sup>8</sup> What was said about the Gospel in fact applies to the whole Bible.

As the Old Testament bears witness, "Israel experiences God primarily as the liberator God".<sup>9</sup> This is why Israelites often speak of God as the one who brought them out of the land of Egypt, "out of the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2). In fact, this may be the only way to name the God of the Bible since he refuses to reveal his name (see Ex. 3:13-14). As Mark Coleridge points out:

The God of the biblical story proves constantly to be a God who names

himself *in action*. Therefore, if you wish to know who this God is, then do not ask his name: look at what he does. This is a God who names himself in action. In that sense, the biblical story which recounts God's action in time is nothing other than a naming of God; and in the liberation of slaves we see the seminal action of the God whose first name is Exodus.<sup>10</sup>

The Bible makes it clear that Israel is liberated from bondage in order to become Yahweh's people (Ex 6:6-7). And as Yahweh's liberated people Israel is expected to adopt a new way of life. George Soares-Prabhu observes:

Its shape as Yhwh's people is spelled out in the great codes of the Bible, notably the Covenant Code in Ex. 21-23, the Holiness Code in Lev. 17-26 and the Code of Deuteronomy in Deut. 12-26. These make it clear that unlike neighbouring societies (the Canaanite city states or the great empires of Egypt, Babylon, or Assyria), the societal structures of Israel are not to be oppressive and exploitative, but just – indeed, marked by a special concern for the care of the needy and the protection of the powerless (the widow, the orphan and the refugee).<sup>11</sup>

This clarifies the place and role of Law in Israel's life. Its purpose is to preserve freedom, thus making Exodus an enduring experience. Coleridge explains: "This means that at the heart of the Bible there lies the mystery of a liberating obedience, with the biblical voice insisting: Obey this Law and you will come forth from your Egypt, whatever it may be."<sup>12</sup>

2.2. According to the Gospels, the Kingdom of God was central to the life and ministry of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> In a significant

study, Soares-Prabhu has shown that the Kingdom of God is Jesus' vision of a new society.<sup>14</sup> He believes that the proclamation of the Kingdom of God is the revelation of God's offer of unconditional love to sinful humans. And if humans positively respond to God's offer of love, then a process of liberation begins. As Soares-Prabhu asserts:

When the revelation of God's love (the Kingdom) meets its appropriate response in man's trusting acceptance of this love (repentance), there begins a mighty movement of personal and societal liberation which sweeps through human history. The movement brings *freedom* inasmuch it liberates each individual from the inadequacies and obsessions that shackle him. It fosters fellowship, because it empowers free individuals to exercise their concern for each other in genuine community. And it leads on to *justice*, because it impels every true community to adopt the just societal structures which alone make freedom and fellowship possible. Freedom, fellowship and justice are thus the parameters of the Kingdom's thrust towards the total liberation of man. Together they spell out the significance of the Kingdom, and tell us what the Kingdom, in practice, means today.<sup>15</sup>

The mission of Jesus was thus directed to the liberation of humankind.

This is confirmed by the Gospel of Luke. Luke begins his narrative of the public ministry of Jesus with an account of the inaugural sermon which Jesus delivered in the synagogue of Nazareth (Lk 4:16-30). This sermon not only launches his ministry but also interprets its meaning. By deliberately changing

part of Isaiah 61: 1-2 and adding a phrase from Isaiah 58:6, Luke has produced a programmatic statement which explains the meaning of Jesus' mission and ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Lk. 4: 18-19).

This text spells out Jesus' understanding of his mission. His mission is to evangelize, to proclaim the good news of liberation to the poor, to herald freedom to the captives, sight to the blind and liberty to the oppressed. In this way he is to inaugurate the time of salvation prefigured by the Jubilee year of Old Testament (Lev. 25: 8-17, 25-28).<sup>16</sup>

It is generally held by scholars that the inaugural sermon at Nazareth is a Lukan composition. But there is reason to believe that Luke's formulation reflects Jesus' own understanding of his mission.<sup>17</sup>

2.3. The first Christians were quite aware of the freedom to which they were called: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another" (Gal 5:13). They also knew that it was Christ who had liberated them: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Gal 5:1: see also Jn 8: 31-36). However, as Rudolf Pesch has asserted:

The New Testament concept of freedom, which proclaims that the Christian is not at the disposal of all the powers of this world, should be thought of not in a purely individual sense, but in a social and ecclesiological context. The Christian community, the Church, is above all the fellowship within which eschatological freedom is realized here and now in anticipation, the free fellowship of those who are no longer enslaved and subjected to the elements, the gods, of this world, to the powers of fate or to the law and the letter of the law, but who have been set free by Christ and are bound only to the "law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2), to love.<sup>18</sup>

Hence, the Church is meant to be a community of radical freedom.<sup>19</sup>

2.4. During the last fifty years there has developed in the Church a deeper understanding of its mission. For centuries the salvation of souls had been regarded as the purpose of mission. And this was to be achieved by the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, especially baptism. In the course time it became increasingly clear that God can and does save people even if they have not accepted the gospel and received baptism. So the purpose of mission was reformulated as the establishment of the Church in different places and among diverse peoples. Vatican II describes the Church's mission as the "task of preaching the Gospel and planting the Church among peoples or groups who do not yet believe in Christ" (AG 6; see also LG 17). But the Council is not fully satisfied with this description. Hence, it goes on to affirm that the Church has

received from Christ the mission to proclaim and inaugurate God's Kingdom among all peoples (LG 5). Vatican II also maintains: "Missionary activity is nothing else and nothing less than a manifestation or epiphany of God's will, and the fulfilment of that will in the world and in world history" (AG 9). The Council has thus taken the first steps towards a redefinition of the Church's mission.

[The Third Synod of Bishops held in 1971 clearly saw that the total liberation of humankind is a constitutive dimension of the Church's mission. Hence it declared:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.<sup>20</sup>

Two things are worth noting here: 1. The bishops stress the fact that work for justice and liberation is so essential to evangelization that there can be no evangelization without it; 2. The bishops are quite sure of what they are asserting. Hence the phrase, "fully appear to us."

Paul VI deals with the question of liberation at length.<sup>21</sup> He begins by pointing out that it was primarily the Kingdom of God that Christ proclaimed and that the Church should do the same. He goes on to affirm that there are profound links between evangelization and human liberation.<sup>22</sup> Hence, evangelization necessarily includes liberation. And yet, it would be wrong to reduce the Church's evangelizing mission to a merely this-

worldly project of socio-economic and political liberation. The Church cannot forget the spiritual as well as the eternal dimension of evangelization. As the Pope expresses it:

Hence, when preaching liberation and associating herself with those who are working and suffering for it, the Church is certainly not willing to restrict her mission only to the religious field and dissociate herself from man's temporal problems. Nevertheless, she reaffirms the primacy of her spiritual vocation and refuses to replace the proclamation of the Kingdom by the proclamation of forms of human liberation; she even states that her contribution to liberation is incomplete if she neglects to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup>

John Paul II basically agrees with Paul VI, though he expresses himself quite differently.<sup>24</sup> He is convinced that "The proclamation and the establishment of God's Kingdom is the purpose of his (Jesus') mission".<sup>25</sup> And the Church has received the mission to work for the Kingdom. He is quite original in his explanation of what it means to work for the Kingdom: "Working for the Kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God's activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the Kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms."<sup>26</sup> He believes that the Kingdom of God was realized and made present in Jesus Christ. Hence, his declaration "All forms of missionary activity are marked by an awareness that one is furthering human freedom by proclaiming Jesus Christ."<sup>27</sup>

From what has been said so far, it is clear that the Church's mission is to

collaborate with God in his work for the establishment of his Kingdom. God is present and active in the world for the integral liberation of humankind. In order to collaborate with God, the Church needs to discern the presence and purposes of God in the events, needs and desires of people today (see *GS* 11). The contemporary quest for freedom and liberation "is one of the principal signs of the times which the Church has to examine and interpret in the light of the Gospel."<sup>28</sup> The Church also needs to respond this quest through effective action. As the Third Synod of Bishops, 1971, has pointed out:

The present situation of the world, seen in the light of faith, calls us back to the very essence of the Christian message, creating in us a deep awareness of its true meaning and of its urgent demands. The mission of preaching the Gospel dictates at the present time that we should dedicate ourselves to the liberation of man even in his present existence in this world.<sup>29</sup>

While working for the integral liberation of humankind, the Church has to become a community of real freedom, since it is called to be an initial realization of the Kingdom of God (see *LG* 5). Speaking of the People of God, Vatican II says: "The heritage of this people are the dignity and freedom of the sons of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in his temple" (*LG* 9). It also teaches that the ministers of the Church are servants of their brothers and sisters and that their duty is to coordinate the activities of all while respecting their God-given dignity and freedom (see *LG* 18).

### 3. Dimensions of Freedom in the Church

In this section I wish to highlight the main dimensions of freedom in the life of Christians both as individuals and as a community.

*3.1. Freedom from 'God':* As we have seen, the Israelites experienced God primarily as the liberator God, as the one who sets people free. Jesus experienced God as *abba*. And he revealed to us the God of unconditional love, who makes his sun shine both on the good and the bad alike. Faith in the God of the Bible should naturally lead to an experience of great freedom.

Unfortunately, this is not what usually happens. The vast majority of the Christians I have come to know deeply are frightened of God. Their relationship to God is far from being a liberating one. Most of them picture God as a glorified police inspector or a cruel judge who is out to punish them. This image of the punishing God is often the result of their projecting on to God their experience of an overly strict parent.

Besides personal experience, socio-cultural factors exert an influence on the way people picture God. In a society where master-slave relationship obtains people tend to think of God as the Supreme Master. In a society where the monarchical form of government exists God is looked upon as a great King, In a male-dominated society God is regarded as the highest ruling male, the most powerful Patriarch. Religion, too, has a negative impact on the way people imagine God. Speaking of the liturgy of the Church, Samuel Rayan observes:

Is it not remarkable that so many official prayers are addressed to 'Almighty and everlasting God'? One could wish that the New Testament figure of God as the gentle Father, as Compassion, as Love came to the fore oftener.<sup>30</sup>

According to Catholic tradition God is incomprehensible and ineffable. Human minds cannot grasp him, nor can human language adequately express him. Hinduism, too, thinks of the Ultimate as being without name and form – *Nirguna Brahman*. If God is thus beyond our thoughts and words, we have to learn to think of him, to imagine him in ways that are liberative and life-giving. The Old Testament idea of the liberating God and the New Testament image of the unconditionally loving Parent can be of great help to people in their efforts to form ideas/images of God that are not oppressive or terrifying. The catechesis, the preaching and the pastoral care of the Church should enable people to free themselves of negative ideas/images of God and to form positive, liberative ideas/pictures of him.

*3.2. Freedom from Lords:* In the New Testament we find an egalitarian understanding of the ecclesial community. The Church is looked upon as "a new community in Jesus Christ, a community in which the oppositions which prevail in the rest of the society are removed".<sup>31</sup> This is particularly true of the opposition between master and slave. Jesus is quite radical in the rejection of domination. As Mark records it:

So Jesus called them and said to them, "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 a ransom for many.” (Mk. 10:42-45)

This is a gospel tradition which the other evangelists too have preserved (see Mt. 20: 25-28; Lk 22: 24-27). As E. 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>32</sup>

In the course of time, the ministerial understanding of leadership gave way to a hierarchical understanding. The leaders of the Church were said to have “sacred power” because of which they were thought to be superior to the ordinary believers. This led to the rejection of the egalitarian ecclesiology of the New Testament. In a draft prepared for Vatican I we read:

But the Church of Christ is not a community of equals in which all the faithful have the same rights. It is a society of unequals, not only because among the faithful some are clerics and some

are laymen, but particularly because there is in the Church the power from God whereby to some it is given to sanctify, teach, and govern, and to others not.<sup>33</sup>

Besides, authority in the Church began to be conceived closely on the pattern of jurisdiction in the secular state. In fact, according to the definition of Vatican I, the pope has “the full and supreme power of jurisdiction over the whole Church.”<sup>34</sup> While discussing colonial and colonized theology Samuel Rayan remarks:

The Church, assimilated to imperial systems, has come to love a little show of pomp and power. A great deal of traditional clerical theology is about hierarchical power and about minutiae of rituals, titles, procedure and precedence, and not about You-are-my-friends, or You-are-the-branches, You-are-all brothers/sisters type of relationship within the community!<sup>35</sup>

As a result, the leaders of the Church thought of themselves as lords and masters of the ordinary faithful and oppressed them in manifold ways. A radical rethinking of the nature of leadership and profound changes in the exercise of authority in the Church are necessary if the bulk of the people of God are to experience genuine freedom.<sup>36</sup> Leadership in the Church is Spirit-filled ministry, and not an exercise of power and domination over the faithful. And leaders have to show respect for the God-given dignity and freedom of their brothers and sisters (see *LG* 18). Only those Christians who have shown themselves to be mature and committed disciples of the Lord should be chosen to be ministers, as they are likely to



perform their ministry in the spirit of Jesus who came not to be served but to serve. If this is done, the people of God will be liberated from the many lords of today and experience genuine freedom in the Church.

*3.3. Freedom from Sin:* It is part of our faith that Christian believers obtain freedom from sin (see Rm. 6:18-23; Jn. 8:31-36). As John L. McKenzie explains:

Freedom from sin is not only freedom from guilt and punishment for past sins, but also freedom from the bondage to concupiscence which impels men to sin; through Christ man is delivered from slavery to his own desires (Rm. 7:3-25).<sup>37</sup>

All this may be true. Still, most Christians do not experience freedom from sin. There are probably many reasons for this. One of them surely is the undue importance given to sin in Christian life and Christian thought. The preaching and the catechesis of the Church lay too much stress on sin and the avoidance of sin. It would seem that the primary task of the Christian is to avoid sin. But this is not the perspective of the Bible. The Bible is not directly concerned with sin. It is true that the word, sin, occurs on almost every page of the Bible. Still, the approach is different. The OT is centred on the Exodus and the Covenant, that is, on God's liberating activity through which he makes Israel his people. Sin is dealt with indirectly, as Israel's failure to live according to the demands of the Covenant. In the NT Jesus' life and ministry is centred on the Kingdom of God. He announces that the Kingdom of God is at hand, that is, that God is savingly

present and active among us. The Apostles, however, proclaimed salvation in and through Jesus Christ. Once again, sin is referred to indirectly as that condition from which Jesus saves. Hence, a Christian should think and speak of sin only in the context of God's forgiving love. Otherwise, sin would become an oppressive reality.

Besides, the vocation of a Christian is not primarily to avoid sin but to follow Christ, to work for the establishment of God's Kingdom and live by the values of the gospel. As a popular hymn has it:

To follow the Lord and find freedom,  
To love as He loved and bring peace,  
To spend our lifetime for his Kingdom,  
To want it to grow and increase.

*3.4. Freedom from Law:* It is necessary for the Church to have laws which define its values and objectives and the means to achieve them. In fact, a large body of people like the Church cannot function smoothly without laws. And yet, laws may go against the freedom of believers. As J. Hawkins has pointed out: "For the majority of the members of the Church, however, canon law represents the experience or threat of penalty or oppression."<sup>38</sup>

One of the main reasons for this is the fact that the ordinary faithful has little say in the law-making process of the Church. As citizens of democratic countries they exert considerable influence on the governance of their states. Besides, Vatican II has powerfully affirmed the equality of all the members of the Church (see *LG* 32). The Council also spoke of the supernatural sense of faith

which characterises the people of God as a whole:

For, by this sense of faith which is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, God's People accepts not the word of men but the very Word of God (cf. 1 Th. 2:13). It clings without fail to the faith once delivered to the saints (cf. Jude 3), penetrates it more deeply by accurate insights, and applies it more thoroughly to life. All this it does under the lead of a sacred teaching authority to which it loyally defers (LG 12).

Commenting on this text L. Örsy states:

That is, the community has the capacity to come to correct insights into the word of God; to insights which then lead them to a thorough application of the same Word to life. In theological terms, the Council affirms that the assistance of the Spirit is given to the people of God, all of them, bishops and laity together, to discover Christian values and find the ways and means to reach out for them. This means obviously that there is a power (*dynamis* in biblical speech) in the Christian community to create good laws which can help to usher in the Kingdom.<sup>39</sup>

The leaders of the Church need to show greater respect for the dignity of all the faithful and ensure their active participation in the law-making process of the Church.

Equally important is to have greater appreciation for the immense diversity that exists in different parts of the world and not to impose a uniform code of law on the different local churches of the world. In a speech at the Synod of Bishops, 1974, Cardinal Picachy asserted:

Now it is clear that human cultures, religious traditions, circumstances of life, along with men's needs and expectations, differ from one place to another. Through this diversity the Spirit is manifested in different ways. Hence, pluriformity in the life of local churches is by all means to be encouraged and fostered. Pluriformity is likewise desirable in styles of evangelisation, forms of ministry, ecclesiastical law and administration, religious life and its organisation as well as in the promotion of a truly creative liturgy.<sup>40</sup>

It is worth recalling that Paul VI, faced with widely varying situations in the world, did not feel competent to put forward a solution which has a universal validity. He asked the different Christian communities to find solutions to the problems of their people.<sup>41</sup> Something similar should be done in enacting laws which are relevant to the concrete situations of various local churches.

It is also necessary to develop a healthy Christian attitude to law. All laws are meant to promote the welfare of human beings. "The Sabbath was made for humankind" (Mk. 2:28). Or as Paul declares: "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Gal. 5:14). If love for one another is the characteristic mark of a disciple of Jesus (Jn 13:35), everything in the Church including its laws should foster such love.

*3.5. Freedom from Dogma:* According to contemporary Catholic theology, a dogma is a divinely revealed truth which has been proclaimed as such by the infallible teaching authority of the Church and hence is binding now and forever on all the faithful.<sup>42</sup> It is only in

the last hundred years or so that the term dogma has acquired this meaning.

It is the binding nature of dogma that causes problem. When appropriate authorities define a dogma what are the faithful obliged to do? Are they merely required to accept a formulation, a set of words? That would be sheer formalism. Or are they obliged to internalize the dogma – to believe interiorly what the dogma means. That would be doing violence to the conscience of the faithful. As G. O'Collins succinctly puts it:

In the technical definition of dogma the phrase 'binding on all the faithful' either says too little or it says too much. It says too little, if it concerns no more than external regulations of language. It says too much, if it implies that dogmas can and should exercise a normative control over the inner beliefs of both Christians in general and Church leaders and teachers in particular. But in both cases liberty is threatened.<sup>43</sup>

Before I discuss the problem of the binding nature of dogma, it may be useful to situate dogma in the larger context of Christian faith. Christian faith is primarily a personal relationship to God. It is more like love than knowledge. It is an act by which a person entrusts his/her whole self to God in response to God's self-revelation (*DV5*). Obviously there is an intellectual dimension to faith as it involves the acceptance of the Christian message. Hence, one can speak of the content of faith, a content "to which faith is linked and by which its finds its bearings".<sup>44</sup> But that is secondary.

The ultimate norm of faith is not dogma, but the living God. And to make

dogmatic formulation the ultimate norm of faith is nothing short of idolatry. Moreover, no dogma can be as important as inspired Scripture. In fact, "All dogmas need to be checked against the record of foundational revelation which the Bible provides."<sup>45</sup>

In this connection, it is instructive to recall the ministry of Jesus. Jesus announced the advent of the Kingdom of God and called people to repentance. He did not ask them to believe in a set of propositions. Jesus invited people to follow him freely. It was quite clear to him that some of them would choose not to follow him. Hence the question: "Will you also go away?" Jesus of the gospels invited, challenged and even threatened people, but never forced them to follow him. Moreover, for Jesus faith was not intellectual conviction but commitment and action. As Samuel Rayan writes:

Traditionally, in the patristic and Scholastic West, faith has been understood as an intellectual conviction. Hence the concern with dogmas and their elaboration, and the killing of people whose terminology differed from that of the people in power. Faith was reduced to correct words and creeds, to neat orthodoxy. But the truth is that saving faith consists in orthopraxis, in right living, in doing God's will. Jesus said, "It is not everyone who calls me, 'Lord, Lord,' who will enter in the Kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father".<sup>46</sup>

Rayan adduces a number of texts to show that Jesus understands faith as orthopraxis.<sup>47</sup>

Unfortunately, the Church has adopted an approach which is quite different from that of Jesus. Speaking of the Church's teaching function, Avery Dulles says:

The Church is therefore a unique type of school – one in which the teachers have the power to impose their doctrine with juridical and spiritual sanctions. Thus teaching is juridicized and institutionalized.<sup>48</sup>

One wonders if the biblical idea of bearing witness to Christ and his message would not be more effective. In any case, unless the transforming power of the gospel at work in the lives of the faithful is clearly visible, the Church's preaching will not be credible.

In the light of what has been said so far, how can we understand the 'binding' nature of dogma? In and through dogmas our predecessors in faith are speaking to us. We ought to listen to them. In the Judaeo-Christian, divine revelation is often mediated through social and ecclesiastical channels. The formulation of dogma may be regarded as one such channel. Besides, in and through dogmas God may be speaking to me here and now. To quote O'Collins once again:

Where a specific dogma renews an insight, communicates a message or evokes a religious feeling, it 'binds' me to follow that insight, accept that message or act on that religious feeling. In brief, dogmas oblige where they actually prove to be revealing.<sup>49</sup>

But there is no way of making sure that this will always happen. Hence, many dogmas have no influence whatever on the life of the faithful.

*3.6. Freedom from Mammon:*  
The word 'mammon' is probably not of Greek but of Chaldaic origin.<sup>50</sup> Etymologically, it comes from *aman*, meaning that in which one trusts. In Aramaic 'mamona' denotes anything of cash value, property or fortune. Originally, it had no negative connotation. And yet, Jesus emphatically declares:

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth (mammon) (Mt. 6:24).

Commenting on this passage C. H. Grundmann says:

Jesus does not fight mammon, he fights against the hold mammon has on humans. There he makes his point. And that mammon can get hold over people at all is not by force of itself but by man's not putting all trust in God alone but consciously or unconsciously in possessions, in kind, kin, cash and knowledge. Things meant to be at the disposal and service of people have attained a power over them which has made them become slaves of their own artefacts.<sup>51</sup>

Unfortunately, individual Christians as well as the institutional Church as a whole have often been enslaved by mammon. It is true that the Church needs material resources to fulfil her mission in the world. But are there no limits to what she may legitimately possess? Canon Law affirms the Church's right to own temporal goods:

The Catholic Church has the inherent right,  
independently of any secular power,

to acquire, retain, administer and alienate temporal goods, in pursuit of its proper objectives. (Canon 1254)

Commenting on this canon, L. Örsy states:

The meaning of this "inherent right" could not be determined without taking into account the "inherent duty" not to accumulate wealth to the detriment of the common good. Moral theology alone is capable of giving some norms as to how the right balance should be achieved, a balance fitting for a community which professes that the poor are blessed. Had this right been interpreted always theologically, the excessive accumulation of wealth by the Church might not have taken place, and in consequence the rightful resentment of the poor against the Church and the eventual expropriations might not have followed, as they did at the time of the Reformation, or the French revolution, or the reunification of Italy.<sup>52</sup>

Even today, the Church seems to rely too much on material resources. That is probably why there is an accumulation of wealth by different organs of the institutional Church. In this connection it is good to recall the wise words of Vatican II, "Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and under oppression, so the Church is called to follow the same path in communicating to men the fruits of salvation." (LG 8).

It is important for Christian believers to become aware of the enslaving hold that wealth has on them. Today global capitalism has made money or the growth of money into a god which is

devoutly worshipped by millions the world over. Hence, Christians need to realize that like the rest of humanity they too are placed before a radical choice: God or mammon.<sup>53</sup> To choose God is to opt for life in freedom.

In this section I have dealt with some of the important dimensions of freedom in the Church. I have mainly spoken of "freedom from". It is also necessary to treat of "freedom for". Christian freedom is for love, community, creativity etc. However, what is extremely important is to enable all believers to discover "the nature of freedom in its most profound sense . . . as love, as the capacity for self-communication, as the spontaneous impulse to minister and not be ministered to, as the outgoing will to communion with the others."<sup>54</sup>

#### 4. Areas of Liberation

There are many areas where our people are in need of liberation. From among these, I wish to single out some to which the Church should give special attention.

*4.1. The Church and the Poor:* Even after 50 years of Independence, we have not been able to remove poverty from the face of India. Millions of our people are still utterly poor. In fact, there is sufficient evidence available today to show that the policy of economic liberalisation which India adopted in 1991 has led to an increase in poverty.<sup>55</sup> Equally evident is the alarming eclipse of social consciousness among the rich and the powerful. As Felix Wilfred has noted:

The decades between 70's and 90's will be remembered for the vibrant sense of social justice. Since the 90's with the advent of globalisation and new economic policies in the country, for the upper castes and classes – who are also mostly the policy makers – social justice has become the bad dream of yester-years. This anaesthetising of social consciousness and responsibility is the worst thing that has happened. For it strikes at the very root of our capacity to envision a different order of things, a different kind of society.<sup>36</sup>

Hence, it is important for the Church to take sides with the poor and work for their liberation. Ever since Vatican II there has been a lot of talk about preferential option for the poor. But only a small minority of Catholics – priests, religious and lay people – are actually involved in working with the poor. The vast majority of the faithful, both clerical and lay, do not really bother about the poor. What Paul VI wrote some 28 years back is valid even today:

Let each one examine himself, to see what he has done up to now, and what he ought to do. It is not enough to recall principles, state intentions, point to crying injustices and utter prophetic denunciations; these words will lack real weight unless they are accompanied for each individual by a livelier awareness of personal responsibility and by effective action.<sup>37</sup>

**4.2. The Church and the Oppressed:** One of the significant signs of the times is the upsurge of the Dalits, the tribal people and women. They are fighting for their dignity and freedom. They are refusing to be treated like door-mats. Obviously, there is a backlash.

The atrocities against them are on the increase. Hundreds, if not thousands, of Dalits are slaughtered every year. The tribal people are also being increasingly discriminated against. Crimes against women like rape, murder etc. are also growing rapidly.

It is therefore imperative that the Church gets actively involved in the movement for the liberation of the Dalits, the tribal people and women in our country. As we Christians are a small minority in India, we cannot contribute much to the liberation of the oppressed unless we co-operate with all those who are working for the same cause. The Church should take the initiative to start a mass movement of all people of good will for the strict enforcement of the Fundamental Rights and the effective implementation of the Directive Principles of State Policy spelt out in the *Constitution of India*. The Founding Fathers of the Republic dreamed of a just and egalitarian society in which all the citizens would be able to live in freedom. They wanted the State to establish and protect “a social order in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of the national life.”<sup>38</sup> They were for the equality of all before law and against discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth.<sup>39</sup> They were particularly concerned about the welfare of the weaker sections of society. Hence, they enacted the following:

The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes,

and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.<sup>60</sup>

With its vast network of institutions spread all over the country and a large number of committed and well – trained personnel at its disposal, the Church in India should be able to persuade people of all faiths and secular ideologies to join together in a mass movement for the creation of a just society based on the Constitution and the liberation of all the oppressed, especially the Dalits, the tribal people and women.

*4.3. The Church and Individualism:* With the rapid spread of capitalism in our country more and more people are imbibing such bourgeois values as blind competition, ruthless efficiency, self-interest, personal gain, craze for success and narrow individualism. Keen observers of the contemporary scene seem to think that global capitalism is deliberately spreading the ‘gospel’ of modern culture. According to Michael Amaladoss, the characteristics of this culture are:

A materialistic outlook on life and reality, a spirit of individualism and competition, an attitude of consumerism, an approach of autonomy in the name of science from ethical and religious control, profit-oriented commercial activity.<sup>61</sup>

James Patras believes that U. S. cultural imperialism is involved in the promotion of individualism. As he forcefully expresses it:

Cultural imperialism and the values it promotes played a major role in preventing exploited individuals from responding collectively to their deteriorating conditions. The symbols, images and ideologies that have spread

to the third world are major obstacles to the conversion of class exploitation and growing immiseration into class conscious bases for collective action. The great victory of imperialism is not only the material profits, but its conquest of the inner space of consciousness of the oppressed directly through the mass media and indirectly through the capture (or surrender) of its intellectual and political class. Insofar as a revival of mass revolutionary politics is possible, it must begin with open warfare not only with the conditions of exploitation but with the culture that subjects its victims.<sup>62</sup>

What we need to realise is that capitalism and the culture it fosters are downright individualistic. Today global capitalism is systematically using the media to desensitise the public and thereby to prevent the rise of revolutionary consciousness based on the sense of solidarity of the oppressed.

It is here that the Church has to intervene in order to counteract the culture of individualism by promoting a ‘civilisation of love’ and a ‘culture of solidarity’. The Church should make use of her educational institutions, social centres and the mass media to bring home to people the harmful consequences of a culture of individualism and to make them aware that we humans belong together and that our destinies are intertwined. Unfortunately, many Catholic schools, colleges and other Church-related institutions are under the influence of the Multinationals and are spreading the individualistic culture of global capitalism. If effective steps are not immediately taken to liberate these institutions from this pernicious influence we shall one day wake up to realise that

we have done a disservice to the people of India. For just as in the heyday of colonialism our educational institutions consciously or unconsciously collaborated with the colonisers, so too in this era of globalisation we will be making a similar mistake by promoting the cause of global capital.<sup>63</sup>

By way of conclusion I would like to make two observations:

1. While speaking about the Church's mission of liberation we need to keep in mind that the Church cannot in fact liberate people. It can only attempt to create conditions for people to liberate themselves. Hence, the mission of the Church is to facilitate the process by which people free themselves.

2. Work for liberation is an area where interreligious collaboration is possible. It would seem that all the religions of India\Asia share a common concern for liberation (*vimukti*, *moksha*, *nirvana*) Hence, the suggestion which Samuel Rayan makes is eminently practical:

The best way, then, for religions to grow and purify themselves, the fin-

est way for them to break out of their narrow prisons and encounter one another is (a) to collaborate in the transformation of society, in the work of building a new earth, a classless society, the family of God on this earth, a community of friends in which faith, prayer, (the Eucharistic) bread and all productive resources are shared blessing and common responsibility; (b) to struggle together against all that degrades the human, hurts human dignity, alienates us from ourselves, from one another and from the earth, and obstructs the coming of a fresh future; and (c) to celebrate together the strivings, the struggles and the victories and liberations however small, however fragmentary.<sup>64</sup>

Such collaboration will certainly promote communal harmony and national integration.

At a time in human history when the quest for freedom and liberation is so powerful and so widespread it is necessary for the Church positively to respond to this quest. Otherwise, there is a danger that the Church will become largely irrelevant to the life and concerns of humans today.

## Notes

1. Unfortunately, the English versions of the Documents of Vatican II and Papal Encyclicals do not use bias-free language. So, too, some of the authors quoted in this paper. Please do not hold me responsible for it.
2. See Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF), *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, 1986, n. 30.
3. See J. Coventry, *The Theology of Faith*, Cork: Mercier Press, 1973, pp. 63-64.
4. See *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, 31.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. G. Soares-Prabhu, *Inculturation, Liberation, Dialogue*, Pune: Jnanadeepa Vidyapeeth, 1984, p. 7.



8. CDF, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"*, Mumbai: The Daughters of St. Paul, 1984, p. 5.
9. 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, p. 595.
10. Mark Coleridge, "The Truth Will Set You Free: The Path from Egypt to Eden," in *The Way* 35 (1995) 3, p. 183-184.
11. G. Soares-Prabhu, "Expanding the Horizon of Christian Mission," in Augustine Kanjamala (ed.), *Paths of Mission in India Today*, Mumbai: St. Paul's, 1997, p. 41.
12. Mark Coleridge, "The Truth Will Set You Free: The Path from Egypt to Eden," p. 187.
13. G. Soares-Prabhu, "The Kingdom of God: Jesus' Vision of a New Society", p. 587.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 583-584.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 601.
16. See G. Soares-Prabhu, "Good News to the Poor: the Social Implications of the Message of Jesus," in *Bibelbhaāshyam* 4 (1978) 2, pp. 202-203.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
18. Rudolf Pesch, "The New Testament Foundations of a Democratic Form of Life in the Church," in *Concilium* 3 (1971) 7, pp. 50-51.
19. G. Soares-Prabhu, "Radical Beginnings: The Jesus Community as the Archetype of the Church," *Jeevadhara* 88 (1985), pp. 307-325.
20. *Justice in the World* n. 6.
21. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN), 29-39.
22. *Ibid.*, 31.
23. *Ibid.*, 34.
24. See his *Redemptoris Missio*.
25. *Ibid.*, 13.
26. *Ibid.*, 15.
27. *Ibid.*, 39.
28. CDF, *On Theology of Liberation*, p.7.
29. *Justice in the World*, 35.
30. S. Rayan, "Decolonization of Theology," in *Jnanadeepa* 1 (1998) 2, p. 147.
31. G. Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, pp. 92-93.
32. E. Schillenbeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face*, London: SCM Press, 1985, p. 39.
33. NR, 369, as quoted by Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1974, p. 35.
34. See Neuner-Dupuis, 830.
35. S. Rayan, "Decolonization of Theology," p. 147.
36. Speaking of the ministry of the pope, John Paul II wrote in *UT UNUM SINT*, 1995, n. 94: "This service of unity, rooted in the action of divine mercy, is entrusted within the college of bishops to one among those who have received from the Spirit the task, not of exercising power over the people – as the rulers of the gentiles and their great men do (cf. Mt. 20:25; Mk. 10:42) – but of leading them toward peaceful pastures." I hope that all those who are entrusted with the ministry of leadership in the Church will take to heart these words of the pope.
37. John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968, p. 288.

38. J. Hawkins, "Freedom in the Church: Conflicting Horizons," in *The Way* 35 (1995) 3, p. 194.
39. L. Orsy, *Theology and Canon Law*, pp. 115-116.
40. As reported in *Word and Worship* 8 (Jan-Feb 1975), p. 127.
41. See *Octogesima Adveniens*, n. 4.
42. Gerald O'Collins, *The Case Against Dogma*, New York: Paulist Press, 1974, p. 2.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
44. H. Fries and K. Rahner, *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985, p. 13.
45. O'Collins, *The Case against Dogma*, p. 40.
46. S. Rayan, "Decolonization of Theology," p. 148.
47. See Mt. 7:21-27; Lk. 6:46-49; 10:29-37; Jas 2:14-17; Mt. 25:31-46.
48. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, p. 35.
49. O'Collins, *The Case Against Dogma*, p. 53.
50. See C.H. Grundmann, "Mammon – Its Biblical Perspectives" in *Mission Studies* 25 (1995) 2, p. 157.
51. *Ibid.* p. 162.
52. L. Orsy, *Theology and Canon Law*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992, p. 114.
53. See U. Duchrow, "God or Mammon: Economies in Conflict," in *Mission Studies* 25/26 (1996) 1 and 2, pp. 32-67.
54. J. C. Murray, "Freedom, Authority, Community," in J. H. Provost (ed.), *Code, Community, Ministry*, Washington: Canon Law Society of America, 1982, p. 10.
55. See J. Chathanatt, "Bharat Vs India: The New Economic Policy and the Marginalized," in *VJTR* 61 (1997) 11, pp. 818-819.
56. Felix Wilfred, "Church's Commitment to the Poor in the Age of Globalization," in *VJTR* 62 (1998) 2, p. 80.
57. *Octogesima Adveniens*, n. 48.
58. *Constitution of India*, art. 38.
59. *Ibid.*, art. 15.
60. *Ibid.*, art. 46.
61. Michael Amaladoss, "Globalisation from the Perspective of the Victims of History," in *Integral Liberation* 1 (1997) 3, p. 131.
62. J. Petras, "Cultural Imperialism in Late 20th Century" in *EPW*, 1994, p. 2073.
63. See F. Wilfred, "Church's Commitment to the Poor in the Age of Globalization," p.89.
64. S. Rayan, "The Other and the Theologian" in S. Arokiasamy (ed.), *Responding to Communalism: The Task of Religions and Theology*, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1991, pp. 439-440.