

The Church at the Service of the People of India

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In the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World the Second Vatican Council has made a significant statement:

Mindful of the Lord's saying: "By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35), Christians cannot yearn for anything more ardently than to serve the men of the modern world ever more generously and effectively (GS 93).¹

This is a challenge and invitation to the members of the Church to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to the service of their brothers and sisters. In this paper I intend to investigate the theological basis of this service and examine the actual shape it should take in the concrete situation of our people today.

The paper begins with a brief survey of the Indian situation. It goes on to discuss the theological foundation of the Church's service. It then explores the concrete ways of rendering this service today. By way of conclusion it briefly describes the manner in which the Church should serve the people of India.

1. The Quest

Today India is a country in transition. Rapid and radical changes are tak-

ing place in every area of life. The new economic policy with its stress on liberalisation and globalisation is causing unprecedented changes not only in politics and economics but also in culture and mores. Conflicts and tensions are noticeable in all dimensions of personal and societal life. Underlying these tensions and conflicts is, I suggest, a three-fold quest of our people – the quest for human dignity, the quest for security and the quest for meaning in life.

1. The quest for human dignity is manifested in the cry of the poor of our land. The new economic policy has aggravated the situation of the poor. Now a large percent of the population of India live on or below the poverty line.² Poverty which is inflicted on people against their will is deeply dehumanising. The poor do not have the means of leading a truly human life. They are often politically powerless, socially discriminated against and culturally deprived. With its concomitant evils of hunger, malnutrition, disease and illiteracy, poverty makes people helpless and dependent. Deep down the poor long to be freed from their misery so that they can live in dignity and freedom.

All over the country one observes an upsurge of the Dalits. For centuries

they have been oppressed and demeaned by the upper caste people. Today they are refusing to be treated like doormats. They are raising their voices in protest against the indignities heaped on them and the atrocities perpetrated against them. They are organising themselves in order to regain their dignity and vindicate their rights.

Again, there is a growing awareness among women today that in many ways they are second class citizens in this country. From the cradle to the grave women suffer varieties of injustice and oppression. Female foeticide, the killing of the baby girl, neglect of the girl child, female illiteracy, male domination, discrimination against women in family and society, sex slavery, assault, rape, murder – these are some of the ways in which women are oppressed in our country today. Increasing numbers of women are now demanding that they be recognised as equal members of the human family and their dignity and rights as human persons be fully respected.

Further, there has been growing unrest in different parts of the country, especially in Kashmir, Chotanagpur and the Northeast. Various groups of people are clamouring for autonomy. Some seem to want total independence from India. There is reason to believe that most of these groups are really protesting against the injustices committed against them in the economic, political and cultural spheres of life. They demand that their ethno-cultural identity be recognised and respected, and that they be allowed to shape their life

and destiny in accordance with their traditions and aspirations. In a meeting of the leaders of the Northeast held in Guwahati in the last week of September, 1997, “it was clearly stated that self-determination implied internal self-government, not secession.”³

It is increasingly felt today that over the last decades there has been a tendency to strengthen the centre at the expense of the states. As B.G. Varghese has pointed out, “The field left to the states has been eroded over time, undermining the spirit of cooperative federalism.”⁴ This may explain why regional parties have been growing in influence and popularity in several states. These parties give expression to the hopes and aspirations of the people in different parts of the country and demand that the central government be responsive to them. In the last analysis this, too, manifests the quest of the different sections of the people for the recognition of their dignity and rights.

2. Human life is under serious threat because of the growing violence in several parts of the country. The land of the Mahatma is fast becoming a slaughter-house where innocent people are mercilessly butchered. It is undeniable that political and economic interests play a role in the growth of violence. For years now there has been a tendency among many political leaders to use religion and caste for the purpose of political mobilisation. These power-hungry men and women are often responsible for fanning the flames of communal and caste violence. There is also the growing phenomenon of the criminalisation of politics and the po-

litical involvement of criminals which lead to violent conflicts. The insurgency-related violence is also caused by political and economic interests.

Another factor contributing to the growth of violence is the increasing immorality of some sections of the people. Keen observers of the contemporary scene often wonder if our society is not in a state of moral disintegration. How else would one account for the naked power struggle in the political arena, the rampant corruption even in high places, the amoral business practices, the scandalous life of some of our religious leaders and the utter callousness with which human life is snuffed out for political or economic gain?

In this situation of serious threat to life, human beings feel a sense of insecurity. This sense of insecurity is aggravated by the acute ecological crisis we are facing today. Selfishness and greed, both individual and collective, as well as the unscrupulous exploitation of nature for economic profit have made the earth almost uninhabitable. Not only human life, but all life is threatened with extinction.

There is also an international dimension to this growing threat to life. Transnational terrorism and the possibility of a nuclear holocaust which can reduce everything to dust have made human life precarious. In the face of all these threats, human beings are engaged in an earnest quest for security.

3. We Indians have always been a deeply religious people. That is why our country is a land of many religions. It is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and many tribal

religions. And it has welcomed to its shores Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The fact that all these religions have millions of devoted followers in our country bears witness to the relentless quest for meaning our people are engaged in.

This quest for meaning has become very acute today. Modernity has created in our people a deep sense of homelessness. They find it difficult to cope with the rapid and radical changes brought about by science and technology. Economic liberalisation and globalisation have radically altered the context of their life. Satellite television and other mass media of communication are exposing them to a variety of world-views and moral standards. All this is deeply disturbing to our people. In their bewilderment some people turn to godmen like Satya Sai Baba or Osho for help in their search for meaning in life. Others flock to the different meditation centres which are proliferating today. Yet others go in for therapies of various kinds.

Among the Christians the phenomenal growth of the charismatic movement bears witness to this quest for meaning. The retreat movement centred in Potta is attracting tens of thousands every week. The rapid proliferation of neo-pentecostal churches all over the country also points to the intense search for meaning that is to be found among sections of our people. According to a recent study:

God experience is the most important factor that attracts believers to neo-pentecostalism. Eight out of ten respondents indicated God experience

as the reason for joining the sects. Correspondingly, the lack of God experience is the most frequently cited reason for their disaffection with the former church.⁵

There are also negative indicators of this quest for meaning. Thus the growth of alcoholism and drug addiction especially among the youth reveals the experience of meaninglessness. The increase in sexual promiscuity and other sex-related aberrations might be the result of a wrong kind of quest for meaning. One of the main reasons for the frequent suicides, especially in Kerala, is the growing sense of the meaninglessness of life. Thus in a variety of ways the human quest for meaning in life expresses itself in India today.

2. Perspectives

There has been some doubt as to whether the Church's servant role in the world has a biblical basis. According to Avery Dulles, "While service is often extolled, the Bible does not envision the task of the Church as service."⁶ In his opinion, Jesus is the servant of God, not of humans. So, too, the Church is at the service of God, not of the world. Dulles is right in pointing out that the perspective of the Bible is different from that of contemporary theology. The Bible focusses on God's saving intervention in human history. It does not directly deal with the implications of this intervention for the Church's mission in the world. However, there are biblical themes which provide a strong, if indirect, foundation for the Church's servant role in the world. I shall now discuss some of these.

1. The Kingdom of God was cen-

tral to the life and ministry of Jesus.⁷ It was the main theme of his preaching (Mk 1:14-15), the referent of most of his parables (Mt 13:1-52), and the content of his symbolic actions like table-fellowship with publicans and prostitutes (Mk 2:15-17). And his miracles too were signs of the advent of the Kingdom (Lk 11:20). As has been pointed out, the Kingdom of God is not a concept with a precise meaning.⁸ It is rather a polyvalent symbol which stands for Israel's long sustained hope of liberation, no matter in what form this hope was nourished. When Jesus announces the Kingdom of God, his hearers understand that their hope is being definitively fulfilled.

George Soares-Prabhu has shown that the Kingdom of God points to Jesus' vision of society, which is characterized by freedom, fellowship and justice.⁹ And Vatican II teaches that the Church has received the mission to proclaim and establish among all peoples the Kingdom of God (see *LG* 5). The Council believes that our efforts to bring about a better ordering of human society is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God (see *GS* 39). It states:

For after we have obeyed the Lord, and in His Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured (*GS* 39).

2. Closely connected with the Kingdom of God is the love-commandment of the New Testament. The Synoptics, John and Paul bear witness to the centrality of love in the life of a

Christian.¹⁰ Rooted in his abba-experience, Jesus reveals to us God's unconditional love for sinful humans. Humans are invited to experience this love and be transformed by it, so that they become lovers of other humans. It is surprising that Jesus rarely spoke of our love for God.¹¹ Instead he insisted on our love for our neighbour. John gives us a neat summary:

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love... This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you (Jn 15:9, 12).

John makes it abundantly clear that love for one another is the characteristic mark of a Christian (Jn 13:35).

Now love for humans demands reverence for their person and respect for their rights. The Third Synod of Bishops unambiguously declares: "Love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one's neighbour".¹² If our response to God's offer of love in Jesus is to love other humans and if effective love implies that we respond to their genuine quest today, then the Church is meant to be at the service of people. In the words of Samuel Rayan:

To God's radical love and Jesus' own radical obedience correspond the radical demands they make on us: that we renounce all selfishness, that we be ready to offer everything, that we wash one another's feet, that we risk our life for the liberation, dignity, freedom and well-being of every brother, of the broken neighbour, and of the oppressed and dishonoured masses. The movement Jesus started is a movement of radical love and radi-

cal action in favour of men and of basic human values which make life worthwhile, and for which God gave himself and went to extremes in Jesus Christ.¹³

3. Then there is the inaugural sermon at Nazareth which is "the occasion of a stirring manifesto through which Jesus announces his own understanding of his mission and proclaims the significance of all that he is to do."¹⁴ By deliberately changing part of Isaiah 61:1-2 and adding a phrase from Isaiah 58:6, Luke has produced a programmatic statement which he places at the beginning of Jesus' 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 favor (Lk 4:18-19).

Commenting on this passage George Soares-Prabhu says:

For the manifesto which he makes his own (Lk 4: 18-19) is formulated in language of astonishing earthiness and actuality. Jesus announces his task of 'evangelizing' (proclaiming the good news of liberation to) the poor, of heralding freedom to captives, sight to the blind, liberty to the oppressed; and so of inaugurating a time of salvation prefigured by the Jubilee Year of Old Testament legislation, when debts were to be remitted, ancestral property returned, and slaves set free (Lev 25, 8-17, 25-28). His is thus a *social manifesto* with little that is 'spiritual' about it. Indeed its social thrust is intensified by the deliberate changes the Lukan Jesus makes in the Old Testament text he quotes.¹⁵

The Church's understanding of its mission needs to be patterned on Jesus' understanding of his mission. Like Jesus, the Church, too, is sent to be at the service of the people, especially the poor and the oppressed.

4. There was a time when the Church thought that it had no proper mission in the secular life of humans. Thus Pius XI wrote that "the objective of the Church is to evangelize not to civilize. If it civilizes, it is for the sake of evangelization."¹⁶ And Pius XII spoke of the Church's "strictly religious, supernatural goal."¹⁷ Vatican II seems to agree with this view when it states:

Christ, to be sure, gave His Church no proper mission in the political, economic, or social order. The purpose which He set before her is a religious one (GS 42).

The Council, however, is not very comfortable with this position. Hence it adds:

Pursuing the saving purpose which is proper to her, the Church not only communicates divine life to men, but in some way casts the reflected light of that life over the entire earth. This she does most of all by her healing and elevating impact on the dignity of the person, by the way in which she strengthens the seams of human society and imbues the everyday activity of men with a deeper meaning and importance. Thus, through her individual members and her whole community, the Church believes she can contribute greatly toward making the family of man and its history more human (GS 40).

There is reason to believe that

Vatican II has a deeper understanding of what is 'religious'. It does not look upon the 'religious' as one dimension among other dimensions of human existence. The religious dimension intersects with the other dimensions.¹⁸ That is why the Council speaks of "the supremely human character" of the Church's religious mission (GS 11). In other words, the Church's mission is concerned with the totality of human existence and the entirety of human history.

This realisation made it possible for the later documents of the Church to affirm that the Church has a mission in the secular sphere of human existence. Thus the Third Synod of Bishops unhesitatingly declares:

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.¹⁹

Both Paul VI and John Paul II have stressed the secular dimension of the Church's mission. Thus Paul VI asserts:

But evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man's concrete life, both personal and social. This is why evangelization involves an explicit message, adapted to the different situations constantly being realized, about the rights and duties of every human being, about family life without which personal growth and development is hardly possible, about life in society, about international life, peace, justice and

development – a message especially energetic today about liberation.²⁰

Soon after he became Pope, John Paul II took up the same theme in an address to the General Assembly of Latin American bishops.²¹ Throughout his pontificate John Paul II has taught that the Church is concerned with the temporal life of humans and she has a servant role in the world. In *Redemptoris Missio*, he says:

The Church and her missionaries also promote development through schools, hospitals, printing presses, universities and experimental farms. But a people's development does not derive primarily from money, material assistance or technological means, but from the formation of consciences and the gradual maturing of ways of thinking and patterns of behaviour. *Man is the principal agent of development*, not money or technology. The Church forms consciences by revealing to peoples the God whom they seek and do not yet know, the grandeur of man created in God's image and loved by him, the equality of all men and women as God's sons and daughters, the mastery of man over nature created by God and placed at man's service, and the obligation to work for the development of the whole person and of all mankind.²²

3. Response

In the light of what has been said so far I wish to point out the kind of response the Church should make to the three-fold quest of the people of India.

1. The Christian message affirms the dignity of the human person. The book of Genesis describes the special

creation of humans and shows how they are placed at the apex of all creation (see Gen 1:26-28). And Psalm 8:4 exclaims that humans are made only "a little less than God". The Old Testament bears witness to the truth that God looks upon humans as his partners in the dialogue of salvation and treats them with love and respect.

Jesus too shows love and respect for people. He invites and challenges them but never forces them to respond to his message. And he asserts that sabbath is for the sake of humans (see Mk 2:27-28). Referring to this saying of Jesus, Samuel Rayan observes:

In his view sabbath is for man; sabbath and sacrifice, temple and altar, priests and hierarchies, churches, institutions, laws, liturgies, traditions, definitions, creeds and cultures are all for man, and the community of men and the wholeness of all.²³

The Second Vatican Council repeatedly affirms the dignity of the human person. It notes with satisfaction the contemporary quest for human dignity: "A sense of the dignity of the human person has been impressing itself more deeply on the consciousness of contemporary man" (*DH* 1). Approvingly the Council points out that "According to the almost unanimous opinion of believers and unbelievers alike, all things on earth should be related to man as their centre and crown" (*GS* 12).

Vatican II believes that the dignity of the human person is rooted in the truth that humans are created in the image of God and are called to communion with him. As the Council expresses it:

An outstanding cause of human dignity lies in man's call to communion with God. From the very circumstance of his origin, man is already invited to converse with God. For man would not exist were he not created by God's love and constantly preserved by it. And he cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and devotes himself to his Creator (GS 19).

It is the Council's conviction that the acknowledgement of God does not go against human dignity (see GS 21).

The Council is happy that today people are becoming increasingly conscious of the dignity and the rights of the human person. It observes:

At the same time, however, there is a growing awareness of the exalted dignity proper to the human person since he stands above all things, and his rights and duties are universal and inviolable. Therefore, there must be made available to all men everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one's own conscience, to protection of privacy and to rightful freedom in matters religious too. Hence, the social order and its development must unceasingly work to the benefit of the human person if the disposition of affairs is to be subordinate to the personal realm and not contrariwise... (GS 26).

Hence, Vatican II is strongly opposed to all that goes against the dignity and the rights of the human per-

son. In unmistakable terms it declares:

Whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practise them than those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonour to the Creator (GS 27).

All this should impel the Church in India to take a firm stand for the dignity and the rights of the human person. Whenever and wherever the dignity of the human person is violated, the Church should raise her voice in protest. Since Christians are a small minority in our country, we can be effective in our work for the promotion of human dignity and the defence of human rights only if we join hands with others. Renouncing our ghetto mentality we should willingly collaborate with all those agencies and movements that are working for the liberation of the poor, the Dalits and women. As we may not always be able to agree with their ideology, our collaboration will often be a critical one.

Christians should also collaborate with those forces that are struggling for the realisation of constructive federalism in India so that different states, regions and ethnic groups can shape their

life and destiny according to their desires, without prejudice to the unity and integrity of the nation. It is true that we need a strong centre. But it is happy, contented and prosperous states, regions and ethnic groups that will make our country strong.

2. The Church's participation in the work for the removal of poverty can, to some extent, create a feeling of security among people. After all, poverty and oppression tend to make people feel insecure. However, the deeper quest for security, as we saw, occurs in the first place in the context of growing violence in the country. In response to this the Church in India should champion the cause of non-violence.

It is true that in the past theologians of the Church approved of the use of force in self-defence and just war.²⁴ In situations "where there is manifest, long-standing tyranny which would do great damage to fundamental personal rights and dangerous harm to the common good of the country," Pope Paul VI appears to have condoned violence.²⁵ Today there is a growing consensus that violence breeds more violence and that it is no solution to human problems. More and more people are realising the futility of violence as a means to establish a just society. Besides, it is not compatible with the Christian message. According to Paul VI:

The Church cannot accept violence, especially the force of arms – which is uncontrollable once it is let loose – and indiscriminate death as the path to liberation, because she knows that violence always provokes violence

and irresistibly engenders new forms of oppression and enslavement which are often harder to bear than those from which they claimed to bring freedom. We said this clearly during our journey to Colombia: "We exhort you not to place your trust in violence and revolution: that is contrary to the Christian spirit, and it can also delay instead of advancing that social uplifting to which you lawfully aspire". "We must say and reaffirm that violence is not in accord with the Gospel, that it is not Christian; and that sudden or violent changes of structures would be deceitful, ineffective of themselves, and certainly not in conformity with the dignity of the people."²⁶

Work for peace and reconciliation belongs to the core of the Christian message. The saving work of Christ is interpreted in the New Testament as reconciliation of humans with God and among themselves. As Paul says:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Cor 5:18-20).

The Letter to the Ephesians adds:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us (Eph 2:13-15).

The Church, whose mission it is to carry on the saving work of Christ, is called to be an agent of peace and rec-

conciliation. This is of particular importance in India today, where growing violence, communal conflicts and ethnic antagonism are posing a serious threat to the life and security of our people. Christians as a minority community have, I believe, a providential role to heal the wounds of hatred and division and lead our people to unity and peace.

Equally important is the work for promoting peace and harmony among the nations of the world, since the threat of war, especially nuclear war, is one of the main causes of the people's feeling of insecurity. The Church in India should work in collaboration with national and international agencies to bring home to all the truth that nuclear war cannot solve the problems of humanity. It can only bring untold misery to people and unimaginable destruction to life and property. Humans need to learn to live in peace and settle their problems amicably. Greater understanding and trust should be fostered among the peoples of the world. Often it is injustice which is at the root of the tensions between nations. This needs to be rectified soon, if humankind is to enjoy just peace.

The Church has to make a serious effort to promote ecological balance in the world. She needs to make people aware of the enormous harm done to nature through the uncontrolled pursuit of economic development. Since selfishness and greed, both personal and collective, are at the root of the ecological crisis, people have to be helped to go beyond their petty self-interest for the good of humankind and the cosmos.

In the last analysis, we cannot be satisfied with narrow environmentalism which strives for a more efficient control and management of the resources of the earth for the welfare of humans. This is a pragmatic and human-centred approach. Instead, we have to advocate deep ecology which teaches us to live in harmony and communion with nature because of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things. Since the many religions of India often foster an eco-friendly attitude in their followers, the Church should engage in interreligious dialogue and collaboration for the promotion of ecological balance. She also needs to cooperate with those movements and associations which are committed to the preservation of the integrity of nature.

3. The Church is convinced that it is her God-given task to help humans to discover the meaning of their life. As Vatican II states:

Since it has been entrusted to the Church to reveal the mystery of God, who is the ultimate goal of man, she opens up to man at the same time the meaning of his own existence, that is, the innermost truth about himself. The Church truly knows that only God, whom she serves, meets the deepest longings of the human heart, which is never fully satisfied by what this world has to offer (*GS 41*).

The Church is meant to facilitate humans' communion with God (see *LG 1*). Through her life and activities she has to mediate to people today a genuine experience of God. In fact "it is the function of the Church, led by the Holy Spirit who renews and purifies her ceaselessly, to make God and His

Incarnate Son present and in a sense visible" (*GS 21*). It is primarily through the practice of love that the Church reveals God's presence in our day (see *GS 21*). Mother Teresa was a credible witness to God's presence in the world by her love and care for the poorest of the poor.

It is, however, true that the Church often fails to manifest God to the men and women of our time. While examining the growth of atheism in the modern world, Vatican II found that atheism is often a critical reaction against the way religious people lived. In the words of the Council:

Hence believers can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism. To the extent that they neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral, or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion (*GS 19*).

There is something puzzling in the way a lot of people in our country look at the Church. Many of them admire our missionary zeal. They appreciate the valuable contribution the Church makes in the field of education, health services and charitable works. But few people regard Christians as men and women of God who can assist them in their quest for God and meaning in life. Why is this? Most probably the Church has by and large failed to be a credible sign of God's presence in the world and mediate to our people a genuine experience of God. Unless the transforming power of God at work in us is manifest in the quality of our lives, we shall not

succeed in being true witnesses of God in our country today.

What is still more puzzling is that the Church is not very successful in mediating God-experience even to the Catholic faithful. In a recent study of Neo-Pentecostalism, it was found that lack of God-experience was the reason that former Catholics most frequently gave for their leaving the Church and joining the Neo-Pentecostal groups.²⁷ This must be a cause of serious concern for the Church. Why does she fail to mediate an experience of God to people today?

There is also the question of the kind of God and God-experience we are talking about. We live in a country where at times in the name of God temples and mosques are demolished, and life and property are destroyed. God is sometimes projected as the defender of a social order which condemns the poor to a sub-human existence and tolerates the oppression of women and the exploitation of the Dalits. God is often depicted as the Supreme Being who offers salvation only to his devotees and who is not at all concerned about the others. He is also believed to condone, if not to foster, bigotry, fanaticism and intolerance. In such a situation the Church is called to bear witness to a God who sets people free, who lets his sun shine on the good and the evil, and who gives life and promotes the community of life.

4. The Way

The Church needs to adopt a new way of proceeding if it is to serve the people of India effectively. To begin

with, it should become part of the mainstream of life in the country. Referring to the inhuman treatment meted out to Fr. Christudas of Dumka on September 2, 1997, Frank Krishner recently wrote in *The Times of India*:

Well-wishers of the community have criticised the Church leadership for turning a human rights issue into a "Christian minority" issue. A section of Christians felt that by focussing on the minority aspect, non-Christians, otherwise sympathetic, kept away.²⁸

Time has come for us to make common cause with all people of good will and together with them protest against the violation of the dignity of the human person and the repudiation of his/her rights. This will demand that we be just as concerned about the injustices committed against non-Christians as we are about those perpetrated against Christians. What Vatican II says about collaboration in the promotion of peace applies to all the areas of the Church's service:

Since God the Father is the origin and purpose of all men, we are all called to be brothers. Therefore, if we have been summoned to the same destiny, which is both human and divine, we can and we should work together without violence and deceit in order to build up the world in genuine peace (GS 92).

The Church also needs to be appreciative of the religious and cultural traditions of India. In a recent article on Mother Teresa, Abhas Chatterjee, while acknowledging that "the Mother brought succour to millions of afflicted, helpless, ailing Indians", points out that she showed little interest in and no

appreciation of the religious heritage of the country. As Chatterjee observes:

The walls of none of the numerous institutions set up by the Mother anywhere in India are known to have been adorned with portraits of figures that are sacred to Indians – Lord Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Guru Nanak or Shri Ramakrishna. None of her benedictions ever contained citations from texts that are sacred to India. There is no evidence that the Mother spent any worthwhile time trying to study or appreciate the sacred spiritual texts of our nation.²⁹

One could ask how fair this criticism is. The more important point is that our people expect Indian Christians to know and cherish the riches of the spiritual and cultural traditions of the land.

There is another thing that we have to be aware of. If the Church seriously undertakes the task of promoting the dignity of the human person and vindicating his/her rights, she must be prepared to face opposition, even violent opposition, from individuals and groups which will not want her to render this service. Recent events in Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and elsewhere in the country confirm this. Hence it is imperative for the Church to remember that to follow Jesus Christ is to make the kind of options that he made, options which can lead to the cross. But we have the assurance that the God who raised up Jesus will raise up the Church too.

I sometimes wonder if the apostolic institutions we run and the funds we administer have not become an obstacle to a radical commitment to the

service of our people. Obviously the Church needs institutions and material resources to fulfil her mission. All the same, is it not possible that the inter-

ests of the institutions militate against the values of the gospel the Church is called to live by? This calls for an honest self-examination.

Notes

1. *GS = Gaudium et Spes*. Unfortunately the Documents of Vatican II do not use bias-free language. So, too, the popes and some of the authors cited in this paper. Please do not hold me responsible for it.
2. It is difficult to get reliable information about the extent of poverty in India today. According to The World Bank, *World Development Report 1997*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 215, 52.5 percent of the population of India live below the poverty line.
3. B.G. Varghese, "A New Deal for the Northeast: Responsible Federalism," *The Indian Express*, Pune: October 8, 1997, p. 8.
4. *Ibid.*
5. P. Parathazham, "The Challenge of Neo-Pentecostalism," *Vidyajyoti* 61 (1997) 5, pp. 312-313.
6. A. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1974, p. 93.
7. See G. Soares-Prabhu, "The Kingdom of God: Jesus' Vision of a New Society," in D.S. Amalorpavadass, *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981, pp. 579-608, esp. pp. 584-607.
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10. See Mt 22:34-40; Mk 12:28-34; Lk 10:25-37; Jn 13:34; Gal 5:14; Rom 13:8-10. In *Jeevadhara* 74 (March-April 1983) there are three studies on the love-commandment: G. Soares-Prabhu, "The Synoptic Love-Commandment: The Dimensions of Love in the Teaching of Jesus", pp. 85-103; L. Nereparampil, "A New Commandment I Give You: Johannine Understanding of Love," pp. 104-114; J. Pathrapankal, "The Whole Law Is Summed up in One Commandment: 'Love Your Neighbour as You Love Yourself' (Gal 5:14)," pp. 114-121.
11. In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus speaks of our love for God only in Lk 11:42 and Mk 12:28-34 and the parallel texts in Mt and Lk.
12. Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, 1971, n. 34.
13. S. Rayan, "Jesus and the Father," in *Jeevadhara* 21 (May-June, 1974), p. 246.
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