

JPJRS 13/1 ISSN 0972-33315, January 2010, 65-90

DOI:10.5281/zenodo.4269221

Stable URL: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4269221>

# The Challenges Priests Face in India Today\*

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**Abstract:** Three models of priesthood – *sacerdos*, builder and leader of the Christian community, and prophet of God's kingdom – are elucidated. Opting for the third model, the challenges that priests face are presented: globalization, atheism, freedom, fellowship and communion, justice, peace, joy and ecology. The steps needed to be taken to meet these challenges are also proposed.

**Keywords:** Models of priesthood, *sacerdos*, presbyter, prophet, community leader, challenges.

I have been asked to present a paper on the challenges priests face in India today. On reflection it has become clear to me that the kind of challenges priests face depends on their understanding of the priesthood and priestly ministry. Hence, the paper begins with a discussion of the different ways of understanding the priesthood. It goes on to deal with the main challenges priests face in India today. By way of conclusion it points out some of the steps priests need to take if they are to meet these challenges effectively and creatively.

## I. Models of the Priesthood

In the history of theology several models of the priesthood have emerged.<sup>1</sup> But for the purposes of this paper three models of the priesthood, I believe, are sufficient<sup>2</sup>.

## 1. The Priest as Sacerdos

In this model the priest is understood as a sacred person with sacred power to fulfill certain sacred functions. This was undoubtedly the understanding of the priesthood in the Church for centuries before Vatican II. Even after the Council, this image of the priest continues to exert a lot of influence on the thinking of a large number of Catholics. And yet, this model has very little basis in the New Testament.

It is true that “the New Testament in several key passages portrays Christ as high priest and the Christian people as an essentially priestly community.”<sup>3</sup> However, it is remarkable that the same New Testament, while speaking about Christian ministers, scrupulously avoids using any of the terms which in Greek were applied to the secular and religious authorities of the time – *arche*, *time*, *telos*.<sup>4</sup> Nor does it employ a sacerdotal terminology. Instead it calls them supervisors (*episkopoi*), elders (*presbyteroi*) and servants (*diakonoi*).

However, from the third century sacerdotal terminology began to be used for the Christian ministers. There were two reasons for this change. First, the early Christians learned to look upon themselves as the new people of God, as the new Israel. As a result, they began to appropriate the sacred terms of the old Israel. J.A. Mohler explains the process thus:

Christianity must be the true Israel, because Jesus fulfilled the prophecies, and they cannot be fulfilled twice. The new Israel with its new temple, sacrifices, priesthood and ritual purity became normative for the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. As synagogue terminology was replaced by that of the temple, elders became priests, and bishops, high priests.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, the Eucharist came to be regarded, especially in the East, as the mystical renewal of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Here the mystery religions of the East may have exerted some influence. Besides, the Gentile converts to Christianity deeply felt the need for a cultic priesthood. As a result,

By the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, sacerdotalism had become the ordinary mode of speaking of the Christian clergy... Since the pagan mysteries and priesthood were dissolving in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, there was no danger of confusing Christian ceremonies and terminology with those of the pagans. No doubt the pagan converts as their Jewish forerunners still felt the need of a cultic priesthood. This may have been a factor in the increasing Christian sacerdotalism of the time. At any rate, Christian Episcopals became high priests, presbyters became priests, deacons levites, the Eucharistic banquet a sacrifice on a table that is now an altar in a sanctuary, the Holy of Holies of the New Israel.<sup>6</sup>

A slightly different development took place with regard to the power of the priest. For about a thousand years there was in the Church a 'sacramental' understanding of the ministry.<sup>7</sup> According to this understanding, the minister was the sign of Christ's presence and activity. In him and through him Christ preached the word, administered the sacraments and took care of the people. But in the 12<sup>th</sup> century this conception began to change. A possession-of-power theory came to be held. According to this view, Christ gave sacred power to the apostles who transmitted it to their successors, the bishops, in an unbroken chain of succession. And the bishops in their turn share it with the priests. Hence the bishops and the priests are endowed with a sacred power hierarchically handed down.

In course of time, the priesthood came to be defined primarily in terms of the power to offer the Eucharistic

sacrifice. Actually, the New Testament does not tell us who really presided over the Eucharist at the time of the apostles. But it is generally believed that the leader of the local community was also the president of the Eucharist. According to Ignatius of Antioch it was the bishop who presided over the Eucharist. And it is known that priests were allowed to preside over the Eucharist in the absence of the bishop. In 1215 Lateran IV decreed that the Eucharist can be celebrated only by a validly ordained priest.<sup>8</sup> And the Council of Trent went a step further and defined the Catholic priest purely in terms of his cultic activity. In the words of Trent:

Sacrifice and priesthood are by the ordinance of God so united that both have existed under every law. Since, therefore, in the New Testament the Catholic Church has received from the institution of Christ the holy, visible sacrifice of the Eucharist, it must also be acknowledged that there exists in the Church a new, visible and eternal priesthood into which the old one was changed. Moreover, Sacred Scripture makes it clear and the Tradition of the Catholic Church has always taught that this priesthood was instituted by the same Lord our Saviour, and that the power of consecrating, offering and administering His body and blood, and likewise of remitting and retaining sins was given to the apostles and to their successors in the priesthood.<sup>9</sup>

It was this narrow view which defined the priesthood entirely in terms of the power to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice and to remit sins that got accepted in the Church during the last five centuries and in many ways still continues to influence the thinking of many Catholics.

## **2. The Priest as the Builder and Leader of the Christian Community**

Presbyters played an important role in the earliest

Christian communities. They were intimately associated with the apostles in the ‘Council’ of Jerusalem (see Acts 15:2-29). They continued to be part of the leadership of the Jerusalem community at the time of Paul’s final visit (see Acts 21:18). It is not only the Church at Jerusalem that had presbyters. Acts 20 speaks of the presbyters of Ephesus. And the Pastoral Letters also refer to them (see 1 Tim 3:1-7; 5:17-19; Tit 1:59). That the presbyters were servants of the community whose service consisted in the pastoral care of the people is clear from 1 Peter 5:1-3:

Now ‘as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it – not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge but be examples to the flock.

The New Testament does not tell us how the presbyters came to be in charge of the communities. Paul and Barnabas are said to have appointed presbyters in each of the churches they founded (see Acts 14:23). But in none of the authentic letters of Paul is there a direct reference to presbyters. It is however true that in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 Paul speaks of “those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord”. Could this be a reference to presbyters? In any case, as E. Schillebeeckx unhesitatingly affirms:

It can no longer be denied that towards the end of the first century there was a Church order according to which a group of presbyters was responsible for the leadership and pastoral care of the local communities (see Acts 14:23; 20: 17-30; 1 Pt 5:1; Tim 3:1-17; 5:17-22; Titus 1:5, 11; James 5:14; 2 John 1:1; also in the extra canonical literature: 1 Clement 44; Didache 15,1). The presbyters are also called *episcopoi* without any perceptible difference, among other reasons because they had the function of oversight (*episcopē*).<sup>10</sup>

That the priestly ministry is essentially related to the community was a significant part of the early Christian tradition. In 451 the Council of Chalcedon in Canon 6 declared the ‘absolute ordination’ of a minister null and void. According to Schillebeeckx:

This text displays a clearly defined view of ministry in the Church. Only someone who has been called by a particular community (the people and its leaders) to be its pastor and leader authentically receives ordination... ordination is an appointment or incorporation as minister to a community which calls a particular fellow Christian and indicates him as its leader... And ‘absolute ordination’, i.e., one in which hands are laid on someone without his being asked by a community to be its leader, is null and void.<sup>11</sup>

Chalcedon has thus a deeply ecclesial view of the ministry.

This canon of Chalcedon was faithfully observed in the Church till the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Towards the end of that century ‘absolute ordination’ began to be tolerated, at first on compassionate grounds. But then ministry began to be slowly detached from the local Church and related to the Eucharist. It was at this time that the Fourth Lateran Council, in 1215, decreed that the Eucharist can be celebrated only by a priest who has been validly ordained. From then on the priesthood was defined not in relationship to the community but in terms of the power to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice and to remit sins.

In the theology of the priesthood Vatican II marks a new beginning. The Council was convinced that ministries exist in the Church “for the nurturing and constant growth of the people of God” and that the ministers are servants of their brothers and sisters “so that all who are of the people of God, and therefore enjoy a true Christian

dignity, can work toward a common goal freely and in an orderly way, and arrive at salvation.”<sup>12</sup>

Hence it is a priest's task to gather the faithful and build a true Christian community by the proclamation of the word, the celebration of the Eucharist and pastoral care. As the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests expresses it:

They gather God's family together as a brotherhood of living unity, and lead it through Christ and in the Spirit to God the Father... The office of a pastor is not confined to the care of the faithful as individuals, but is also properly extended to the formation of a genuinely Christian Community.<sup>13</sup>

But Vatican II has yet another view of the priesthood.

### **3. The Priest as the Prophet of God's Kingdom**

One of the significant insights of Vatican II was that the mission of the priest must be derived from the mission of Jesus. After a careful examination of the Council's Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, Bonaventure Kloppenburg points out the theological underpinning of the Council's understanding of the priesthood:

The nature and mission of the presbyters must be derived from the nature and mission of bishops; the nature and mission of bishops must be gathered from the nature and mission of the Apostles; the nature and mission of the Apostles must be seen in the light of the nature and mission of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

Now the kingdom of God was central to the life and ministry of Jesus. 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 the table-fellowship with publicans and prostitutes (Mk 2:15-17).<sup>15</sup> And his miracles too were signs of the advent of the

Kingdom (Lk 11:20).

In the popular understanding, a ‘prophet’ is a person who foretells the future. And the Old Testament prophets are believed to have predicted future events, especially the coming of the Messiah. This view is not correct. The term prophet is the English equivalent of the Greek noun *prophetes* which is derived from the verb *pro-phemi*. And *pro-phemi* means to speak for someone, actually to speak on behalf of God and to interpret His will.<sup>16</sup> This is the original meaning of the word. And if the prophet often does in fact speak about the future, it is always in function of the present. Because of his vocation, because of his deep religious experience, he is able to decipher the designs of God in the events of the day and consequently interpret His plans for His people.

According to Abraham Heschel, prophecy is ‘the exegesis of existence from a divine perspective’.<sup>17</sup> In the name of God, in the light of his experience of God, the prophet interprets the existence of the community and challenges his people. As a result, he is often a threat to the established order, since he disturbs and disrupts the people’s accustomed ways of thinking and acting. Unlike the priest and the king, the prophet is an extra-institutional person. But because of the challenge he poses, the extra-institutional prophet will inevitably be branded as an anti-institutional transgressor by the institutional leadership of his people and will become a victim of institutional forces reluctant to change.

As prophet of God’s Kingdom, the priest is the builder of the alternative community. “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and



perception of the dominant culture around us.”<sup>19</sup> Like the prophets of old, the priest has to criticize and dismantle the feudalistic, capitalistic society in our country, and project the vision of a new society – free, just, egalitarian and non-exploitative. Here it is useful to recall the wise words of Walter Brueggemann:

Prophetic ministry does not consist of spectacular acts of social crusading or of abrasive measures of indignation. Rather, prophetic ministry consists of offering an alternative perception of reality and in letting people see their own history in the light of God’s freedom and His will for justice. The issues of God’s freedom and His will for justice are not always and need not be expressed primarily in the big issues of the day. They can be discerned wherever people try to live together and worry about their future and their identity.<sup>19</sup>

In the multi-religious context of India, the priest should devote his energies to the task of building human communities based on the values of the Kingdom – freedom, equality, love, justice, peace and joy.

If one holds the first model of the priesthood, then the challenges priests face will be related to the proper celebration of the Eucharist and the administration of the sacraments. But if one adopts the second model then the challenges will be connected with an inward-looking pastoral care of the Christian community and with convert-making. But if one prefers the third model, then the challenges priests face will be related to the totality of human existence and the entirety of human history. This paper adopts the third model.

## **II. The Challenges Priests Face**

As George Soares-Prabhu has shown, the kingdom of God is Jesus’ vision of a new society.<sup>20</sup> In his opinion,

“Freedom, fellowship and justice are thus the parameters of the kingdom’s thrust towards the total liberation of humans”.<sup>21</sup> According to Paul, “the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14: 17). Putting together all that the New Testament says about the kingdom of God one can describe it as a new human community which is consciously rooted in God, which is characterized by freedom, fellowship, justice, peace and joy and which lives in harmony and communion with the cosmos. Thus the members of this community have a three-fold relationship – a relationship to God, a relationship to the cosmos and a relationship among themselves.

The challenges which priests as prophets of the kingdom face are related to such an understanding of the kingdom of God.

## 1. The Challenge of God

These days one notices a tendency among many people to reduce the kingdom of God to a set of values like freedom, equality, love, justice and peace. This is not right. For the kingdom of God primarily denotes God and God’s activity. As Soares-Prabhu points out:

For our ‘Kingdom of God’ translates the Greek *basileia tou theou* of the Gospels, and this in turn stands for the Aramaic *malkut di ‘elaha’* or *malkut di yy* which Jesus would have used. To his listeners the Aramaic formula would have indicated not so much a place ruled over by God (which is what the English word ‘Kingdom’ suggests), as the activity through which God reveals himself as a king. For ‘Kingdom of God’ (*malkut di yy*) is used in Jewish literature, and notably in targums (Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Old Testament), as a circumlocution for Old Testament expressions like ‘God reigns’ (*malak yhwh*) or ‘God is King’ (*melek yhwh*), which are judged too ‘concrete’ to be used of God. Awed by the immense majesty of Yahweh

‘the great, the mighty, the terrible God’ (Deut 10:17), the Judaism of Jesus’ time tended to avoid verbal statements about him (God *does* this or that) replacing them with abstract noun forms.<sup>22</sup>

While one may legitimately use the term ‘kingdom of God’ for the fruits/effects of God’s kingly activity such as freedom, love and justice, the term primarily means God’s kingly activity.

There are two manifestations of the challenge of God: The challenge of globalization and the challenge of atheism.

#### a. The Challenge of Globalization

People tend to look upon globalization predominantly as an economic process. But there is a theological dimension to globalization.

Money or the making of money reveals itself as Mammon. Mammon is money or material wealth when you put your trust in it.<sup>23</sup> Globalization places before us a fundamental choice: God or Mammon.<sup>24</sup> For worship of Mammon is basic to global capitalism. As Ulrich Duchrow points out:

Anthony Sampson introduces his book on ‘money, people and power from East to West’ by describing money as the central tenet of a faith which has gathered around it the sort of accretions of reverence and ritual fitting to the present-day universal religion. He writes: ‘...everywhere the same screens display the same magic numbers, subjugating a hundred different cultures and traditions to the same universal homage to its language, proclaiming with total faith the first commandment: that money makes the work go round.’ It is this universal religion of money combined with the subconsciously stimulated consumerism that makes the majority of people follow capitalism.<sup>24</sup>

## b. The Challenge of Atheism

In the world today we are faced with a paradoxical situation. On the one hand there is the growth of atheism and on the other there is a remarkable resurgence of religion.

For long it was thought that modernization of society would lead to a secularization of the population. As a result, the influence of religion would decline. This has not happened. In fact, there is evidence to show that the influence of religion has increased. As K.N. Panikkar reports:

A national survey conducted by the centre for Developing Societies, New Delhi, testifies to the growing influence of religion in India society. According to this survey, four out of 10 people are very religious and five out of 10 are religious. That is to say that 90 percent of the respondents claimed to be religious – performing rituals, visiting places of worship and undertaking pilgrimages. Among them, 30 percent claimed to have become more religious during the last five years. An increase in the number of religious institutions is also an indication of the greater hold of religion on society. Enlightenment and modernity in India have not led to the decline of the influence of religiosity. If anything, it has only increased.<sup>26</sup>

This is true also of some other countries in the world.

However, many international studies have shown that there is a steady growth of atheism in the world. Phil Zuckerman has examined a number of studies made in this 'decade' – 2001 to 2008 – and prepared a table of fifty countries which contain the largest number of atheists. His comments on the data are quite significant.

From the fifty-plus countries above, the total worldwide number of atheists, agnostics, and nonbelievers in God is somewhere between 505 million and 749 million. These

numbers are conservative; were one to factor in a mere 0.25 percent of such highly populated countries as Egypt, Brazil, Indonesia, Nigeria, Burma, Tanzania, and Iran as nonbelievers in God, estimates would be significantly larger.

Given the above estimates, we can deduce that there are approximately 58 times as many atheists as there are Mormons, 41 times as many atheists as there are Jews, 35 times as many atheists as there are Sikhs, and twice as many atheists as there are Buddhists. Finally, nonbelievers in God as a group come in fourth place after Christianity (2 billion), Islam (1.2 billion), and Hinduism (900 million) in terms of global ranking of commonly held belief systems.<sup>27</sup>

It is in this context that priests as prophets of the kingdom of God have to champion the cause of God.

## **2. The Challenge of Freedom**

Way back in 1965 Vatican II made this perceptive comment: "Never before today have humans been so keenly aware of freedom, yet at the same time new forms of social and psychological slavery make their appearance".<sup>28</sup> Think of all the liberation movements that have sprung up in recent years in different parts of the world and different areas of human existence. Think also of the many subtle ways of controlling and manipulating human beings that have been used by dictators, opinion-makers and those who own the mass media.

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 doormats. Obviously, there is a backlash. The atrocities being committed 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 increasing rapidly.

It is therefore imperative that priests get actively involved in movements 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 cooperate with all those who are working for the same cause. Priests would do well to take the initiative to start a mass movement of all people of good will for the strict enforcement of Fundamental Rights and the effective implementation of the Directive Principles of State Policy spelt out in the *Constitution of India*.<sup>29</sup> 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.

Further, the growth of Individualism, too, is a cause for worry. 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>30</sup>

A South American Thinker, James Patras believes that U.S. cultural imperialism is involved in the promotion of individualism. Here's how he forcefully expresses it:

Cultural imperialism and the values it promotes have 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.<sup>31</sup>

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

It is here that priests have to intervene in order to counteract the culture of individualism by promoting a 'civilization of love' and a 'culture of solidarity'. They should make use of the Church's 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 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 the realization that we have done a disservice to the people of India. For, just as in the heyday of colonialism, we consciously or unconsciously collaborated with the colonialists, so too, in this era of globalization, we will be making a similar mistake by promoting the cause of global capital.<sup>32</sup>

As prophets of the kingdom, priests are called to work for the freedom and liberation of people.

### 3. The Challenge of Fellowship/Communion

More than forty years ago the Second Vatican Council called our attention to a strange anomaly in the world. In the Pastoral Constitution it stated:

Although the world of today has a very vivid sense of its unity and of how one person depends on another in needful solidarity, it is most grievously torn into opposing camps by conflicting forces. For political, social, economic, racial and ideological disputes still continue bitterly, and with them the peril of a war which would reduce everything to ashes. True, there is a growing exchange of ideas, but the very words by which key concepts are expressed take on quite different meanings in diverse ideological systems.<sup>33</sup>

This statement of the Council is even more true today than when it was first made. Because of fast travel and the communications revolution, the world has really become a global village. As a result, there is a growing awareness of the solidarity of all humankind. And yet, economic disparity between the developed and the developing countries, political differences that exist in various part of the world and 'the clash of civilizations' are a cause of deep division in the world today:

This is also true of India. Though our country recently celebrated 62 years of Independence, it has not yet achieved a cohesive unity. Fissiparous tendencies are noticeable almost everywhere. There are at least four major factors at work in our country which lead to serious conflict and division. First, there is the legitimate demand of the poor that they be provided with the wherewithal for decent human living. Even after 57 years of planned development, a large percent of our population live on or below the poverty line. The utter deprivation these millions suffer is a permanent cause of tension and



division in India. Secondly, there are the political formations which are using religion to promote their economic and political interests. Their machinations have led to the revival of religious fundamentalism and communal conflicts. These are all divisive in nature. Thirdly, there is the caste conflict which is becoming virulent day by day. The high castes who held sway over the masses for centuries feel threatened by the upsurge of the Dalits who refuse to accept passively the indignities heaped on them and the atrocities perpetrated against them. Fourthly, there are the ethno-cultural conflicts caused by groups and areas clamouring for equality and participation in the national policy. What is happening in the Northeast and Kashmir bear witness to it. The growing popularity of the regional parties, who articulate the aspirations of the people in different areas of the country, is a related phenomenon.

As prophets of the kingdom, priests have to respond to this situation by promoting unity and solidarity among people.

#### **4. The Challenge of Justice**

Recently Amrtya Sen has published a book on *The Idea of Justice*.<sup>34</sup> In it he invokes a distinction from the Sanskrit literature on ethics and jurisprudence. He points out that the two words – *niti* and *nyaya* – both of which stand for justice, have different meanings:

Among the principal uses of the term *niti* are organizational propriety and behavioural correctness. In contrast with *niti*, the term *nyaya* stands for a comprehensive concept of realized justice. In that line of vision, the roles of institutions, rules and organizations, important as they are, have to be assessed in the broader and more inclusive perspective of *nyaya*, which is inescapably linked with the world that actually emerges, not

just the institutions or rules we happen to have.<sup>35</sup>

From the point of justice as *nyaya*, there are some areas where we have not done enough. Thus there is the injustice of poverty and hunger:

It is very shocking that we have not done more on the right to food for everyone, including children. We have not done more to eliminate gender inequality, maternal undernourishment. These are essentially the real problems. We have such a widespread incidence of maternal undernourishment and underweight babies, child undernourishment and their inability to grow into healthy boys and girls. There is deprivation after you are born too, but a lot of it goes back to the womb. And that goes back to gender inequality. So gender deprivation, gender inequality and child deprivation are very closely related. And now we have the medical argument that undernourished babies tend to develop more cardiovascular diseases. Undernourishment of mothers, undernourished babies and high incidence of cardiovascular diseases in India are interconnected where the neglect of women plays a central part.<sup>36</sup>

Then there is the injustice of casteism:

I think that caste policy has been driven by *neeti*: certain reservation of this kind and reservation of that kind and so on. We need a more *nyaya*-based perspective in dealing with caste distinctions in India. The focus does relate to a deficiency in Indian political thinking on this matter, mainly over concentration on *neeti* compared to *nyaya*.<sup>37</sup>

It is true that perfect justice is very hard to come by. In fact it is not easy to agree on what it might be. And yet “if we are not eliminating removable injustices, then we are living without justice in a practical sense.”<sup>38</sup>

It is here that priests as prophets of the kingdom have to take a clear stand for justice.

## 5. The Challenge of Peace

In the conflictual situation of our country/the world today, priests face the challenge of peace and reconciliation.

For centuries India had the reputation of being a land of peace and harmony. This is no more true. Today our country is faced with conflicts of various kinds. Let me now highlight some of these conflicts:

a. First of all there is a religious conflict. India is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and many tribal religions. And from ancient times she has welcomed to her shores Judaism, Christianity and Islam. By and large, the followers of these different religions lived together in peace and harmony. But the situation has now radically changed. As a Research Seminar held recently at Ishvani Kendra, Pune, pointed out:

Today what we are up against is a situation of 'religions in conflict'. These conflicts are not arising out of merely theological factors but also socio-psychological ones, and have four important roots: (a) religion as a source of identity is closely linked to culture and may be further strengthened by ethnic identity, (b) defensive fundamentalism in every faith tradition that leads to exclusivistic tendencies, (c) communalism that uses religion as a political tool raises its ugly head in most religious groups, which in turn leads to the branding of the other as enemy, and (d) hurting memories of the unsavoury past associated with domination and even persecution, etc., that continue to burn within the hearts of religious groups. The combined might of these factors frequently lead people to set up 'institutionalized riot systems' as evidenced in Gujarat, Orissa, Utter Pradesh and other places.<sup>39</sup>

b. Further, there is the upsurge of the subaltern groups, which creates a conflictual situation. Movements of the

Dalits, the tribal people, women and the other backward castes are meant to liberate them from injustice and oppression, which has robbed them of their human dignity and condemned them to a life of poverty and powerlessness. As has been remarked:

The specific problem of Indian subaltern groups is that their rank in society is determined by birth which makes any improvement in their social, educational, cultural, religious, psychological, political and economic status well nigh impossible.<sup>40</sup>

c. Finally, there is growing violence in the country. The land of the Mahatma is fast becoming a slaughterhouse where innocent people are mercilessly butchered every day. The causes of violence are many and varied. The criminalization of politics and the political involvement of criminals have led to the growth of violence. Religious fanaticism and ethno-cultural diversity too give rise to violence. Besides, secessionist movements as well as trans-border terrorism are also factors that explain the growth of violence in India today.

It is in such a conflictual situation that priests are called upon to be agents of peace and reconciliation.

## **6. The Challenge of Joy**

When Jesus was born the angel of the Lord said to the shepherds: "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people" (Lk 2:10). According to Mark, Jesus begins his public ministry by proclaiming the good news that the kingdom of God has come (see Mk 1: 14-15). Joy is one of the fruits of the kingdom (see Rom 14:17).

In the world today there is so much suffering and sorrow. Many people despair of finding peace and joy in

their life. It is here that priests as prophets of the kingdom have to spread the sunshine of cheerfulness and joy. In this task they have to follow Jesus who declared: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (Jn 15:11). As Albert Nolan points out:

Joy was in fact the most characteristic result of all Jesus' activity amongst the poor and the oppressed. The meals he had with them were festive celebrations, parties. Jesus obviously had a way of ensuring that people enjoyed themselves at these gatherings. The Pharisees were scandalized by this. Rejoicing and celebrating with sinners was incomprehensibly scandalous (Lk 15:1). They could only assume that he had become a pleasure-seeker, 'a drunkard and a glutton' (Lk 7:34)."<sup>41</sup>

## **7. The Challenge of Ecology**

It is undeniable that we are now facing a serious ecological crisis. As Samuel Rayan remarks: "The earth system is being polluted and destroyed through wasteful, profligate and predatory practices by modern profit-oriented scientific-technological culture, be it industrial, agricultural, or communicational. The earth's standing, meaning and history as the Home of Life are under threat of death."<sup>42</sup>

It is not easy to identify the causes of the ecological crisis, as it is a very complex phenomenon. But one of the causes is certainly the unbridled growth of the economy. Capitalism which looks for an ever increasing production and ever greater profit is fast becoming the ideology of the whole world. People everywhere are striving for rapid economic development without seriously taking into account its natural and social cost. They do not seem to be concerned about the enormous harm they are doing to nature. Then there is the development and application of

mega-technology, which appears to be almost beyond all human control. Though created by human beings, it seems to have enslaved them. Besides, there is the emergence of large institutions, which are becoming increasingly unmanageable. The rapid growth of the consumerist culture and the conspicuous consumption of the rich nations as well as the rich individuals in poor countries have also contributed to the ecological break-down. Perhaps greed and selfishness, both individual and collective, as well as a utilitarian attitude to nature are at the root of this crisis.

As prophets of the kingdom priests have to creatively respond to this challenge and sincerely strive to restore the ecological balance.

### **III. By way of conclusion**

I would like to make two practical suggestions which will help priests to respond to the challenges enumerated here.

1. Priests should energize the Christian communities in such a way that they really become the sacraments, signs and agents, of the kingdom. Vatican II has asserted that the Church has received from Christ the mission to proclaim and to establish the kingdom of God.<sup>43</sup> It has also pointed out that the Church is meant to be an initial budding forth of the kingdom.<sup>44</sup> To the extent that the Church embodies the love of God and lives by the values of the Gospel, to that extent it is an initial realization of the kingdom. Richard McBrien offers a neat synthesis:

In summary, the Church has at least a threefold mission: to announce the Kingdom of God, to work here and now to bring it about, and to show by the quality and character of her own life as a community what the Kingdom is all about and what is

to be the final destiny of humankind and of all history.<sup>45</sup>

2. Priests have to devote their energies to the task of building human communities based on the values of the kingdom – freedom, fellowship, justice, peace and joy. This is what is realistically possible in large areas of our country, where Christians are a small minority. In such communities the followers of all religions can collaborate in the work of establishing the kingdom of God. As Pope John Paul II affirms:

It is true that the inchoate reality of the kingdom can also be found beyond the confines of the Church, among people everywhere, to the extent that they live ‘gospel values’ and are open to the working of the Spirit who breathes when and where he wills (cf. Jn 3:8).<sup>46</sup>

In the multi-religious context of India priests as prophets of the kingdom should foster collaboration among the followers of all faiths in the work of establishing a new human society which is consciously rooted in God, which is characterized by freedom, fellowship, love, justice, peace and joy and which lives in harmony and communion with the cosmos.

## **Notes**

- \* This is a revised version of a paper I presented at the National Seminar on *Priests in India Today: Challenges and Prospects*, held at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, on 11-12 December 2009.
- 1. A Dulles, *Models of the Church*, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1974, p. 157. In this book Dulles speaks of five models of the priesthood corresponding to the five models of the Church he has described in the book.
- 2. See K. Kunnumpuram, “Priests as Prophets of the Lord” in K. Kunnumpuram (ed.), *Shaping Tomorrow’s Church*, Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2006, pp. 347-373.

3. A. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, p. 157.
4. See H. Kung, *The Church*, London: Burns and Oates, 1967, pp. 388-389; Y. Congar, *Power and Poverty in the Church*, London: Chapman, 1964, pp. 21-39.
5. J.A. Mohler, *Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood*, Staten Island: Alba House, 1970, p. 49
6. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
7. Y. Congar, *Power and Poverty*, p. 62.
8. Neuner-Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, n. 21
9. *Ibid.*, n. 1707
10. E. Schillebeckx, *Ministry. A Case for Change*, London: SCM Press, 1971, p. 15
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39
12. *LG* 18.
13. *PO* 6.
14. B. Kloppenburg, *The Ecclesiology of Vatican II*, Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1974, p. 296.
15. See G.M. Soares-Prabhu, "The Kingdom of God: Jesus' Vision of a New Society", in F. D'Sa (ed.), *Collected Writings of George Soares-Prabhu*, Vol. 4, Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, 2000, p. 225.
16. See G.M. Soares-Prabhu, "The Drama of the Biblical Prophet", in *CRI National Assembly Report*, 1988, pp. 85-109; W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981.
17. A. Heschel, *The Prophets*, Vol. I, XIV.
18. See W. Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, p. 109..
19. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
20. G.M. Soares-Prabhu, "The Kingdom of God: Jesus' Vision of a New Society", pp. 230-231.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 239.



22. *Ibid.*, pp. 230-231.
23. See C.H. Gundmann, "Mammon – Its Biblical Perspective" in *Mission Studies* 12 (1995) 2, pp. 157-163.
24. See U. Duchrow, "God or Mammon: Economies in Conflict" in *Mission Studies* 13 (1996) 1 and 2, pp. 32-67.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.
26. K.N. Panikkar, "Religion in the Public Sphere" in *The Hindu*, Vijayawada, September 8, 2009, p. 8.
27. P. Zuckermann, "Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns" in M. Martin (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 55.
28. GS 4.
29. See *Constitution of India*, nos. 14-51.
30. M. Amaladoss, "Globalization from the Perspective of Victims of History" in *Integral Liberation* (1987), p. 131.
31. J. Patras, "Cultural Imperialism in Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century" in *EPW*, 1994, p. 2073.
32. See F. Wilfred, "Church's Commitment to the Poor in the Age of Globalization" in *Vidyajyoti* 62 (1998) 2, p. 89.
33. GS 4.
34. A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, London: Penguin Press, 2009.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
36. A. Sen, "An Unequal Country" in *India Today*, August 24, 2009, p. 19.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
39. "Conclusions of a Research Seminar on a Vision of Mission in the New Millennium" Ishvani Kendra, Pune, 9-12 March, 2000, in T. Malipurath and L. Stanislaus (eds.) *A Vision of Mission in the New Millennium*, Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2001, pp. 201-202.

40. *Ibid.*
41. A Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977, pp. 41-42.
42. S. Rayan, "The Earth is the Lord's" in *Vidyajyoti* 54 (1990) 3, p. 129.
43. *LG* 5.
44. *Ibid*
45. McBrien, *Do We Need the Church*, New York: Harper and Row, 1969, p. 131.
46. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 20.