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The Priest and Politics: A Critical Examination of Some Common Assumptions

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Abstract: There are doubts in the minds of people about the role of priests in politics. Among the reasons being the confusion between governance for the common good, and narrow party politics; and the role of one who has renounced the world. Clarifications are provided about the role of lay persons and of the clergy in politics. Priests as leaders of their faith community have a legitimate role with regard to politics. Official Church documents are quoted in support of the position taken by the author.

Keywords: Priests, politics, elections, pastoral letters, community leadership, social mission, conscience formation.

1. Introduction

As elections approach, controversy about the priests interfering in politics also arises. Politics is still regarded as the sacred territory of professional politicians, scrupulously guarded by them irrespective of the colour of their flag. Comments and remarks that often appear in the news media are indicative of the outlook: "Priests stepping into politics is dangerous to the secular fabric of our nation", "It will reinforce the communal forces operative in our society", "Let the priests and bishops confine themselves to their proper field, viz. the spiritual field". The context of these comments is that of some priests/bishops making public statements on 'non-Church'

topics, speaking on public issues from the pulpit, or issuing pastoral letters giving guidelines to the faithful on the approaching elections or on issues that concern the Christian community. Pastoral letters, especially in states where Christians are a significant group, have come in for criticism.

The following themes seem to be the assumptions underlying the perception: (i) a priest, because of this identity, does not possess the normal rights a citizen possesses; (ii) it is not proper for a priest, as a leader of the community, to engage in the affairs of the community that are not strictly spiritual. By this logic, all the burning issues of the day like caste conflict, terrorism and war, environmental crisis, denial of human rights, etc. fall outside the purview of the strictly spiritual; (iii) public statements by priests that do not play the tune of one political group or another are easily branded as political interference; (iv) once branded, then it is only a short step to its being projected as communal. But these assumptions need to be examined critically.

2. Priestly Ministry in a World of Politics

There was a time when Christians kept away from politics which was regarded as being dirty. Today in the Church there is a better appreciation of the political field, and a growing awareness that the identity and role of a priest is closely aligned with the concerns that are generally considered political. This view assumes that a priest is also a political person, properly understood. However, this thinking is still mired in controversy both within the Church and in secular circles so that priests are left to defend themselves if they touch upon issues of a political nature. Often they feel unsupported or left alone

by their own brethren in faith as a result of the prevailing confusion. This article is an attempt to explore the identity and role of the priest as a political person in today's context. I confine my discussion primarily to the Catholic priesthood.¹

Politics is generally understood as public activity associated with the conduct and management of the affairs of the community (as different from private concerns). It is based on Aristotle's belief that it is only within a political community that human beings can live the good life. The nation-state is a modern form of political organization and an autonomous political entity based on citizenship and nationality. We need to be aware of the two senses in which the term politics is used, the broad sense which refers to the dynamic organization of society towards the common good, and the narrow sense which refers to activities carried out by persons, groups or parties in order to attain and preserve the power of governing in a given society. The latter is usually referred to as party politics. "If politics is the way of organizing man's secular life in view of the common good, political life is not to be the preserve of a few power-hungry politicians and vested interests behind them, but the concern of all who are devoted to that common good."²

"My first political act was at the moment I was born" – whoever has said it has said it well. No one can escape being political, properly understood. Today we live in a context where politics embraces all spheres of our everyday life, and we, as Christians, cannot be oblivious of this fact. Theological rediscovery of politics is a new phenomenon the Church is yet to come to grips with. The social encyclicals have paved the way for an enlightened appreciation of political engagement on behalf of justice

and peace. The era of watertight compartmentalization of disciplines is over. The trends of blind anti-communism or anti-capitalism also belong to a bygone era. The recent call of the Archbishop of Thiruvananthapuram to the members of the Latin Catholic community to actively participate in the civic body elections scheduled to be held in September 2010 is one illustration of the new awareness.³ The time is ripe for the priest to look afresh at his role in a world undergoing fast political changes. New analytical tools and practical skills may become necessary to take on the new role, and that remains the urgent task ahead. The context of Dalit and Tribal theologies, environmental movements and resistance to human right violations, and more recently anti-communal interventions make this task more urgent.

3. The Priest is a Political Person by Right – As a Citizen

“Priests and religious are to be debarred from practicing law in the courts, since they are otherwise engaged in a religious profession” – this stand of the bar association has been making headlines recently. Does being a priest or a member of a religious congregation make one a professional in the technical sense? Does it confine a person strictly to the private sphere and deny the right as a citizen to engage in a public profession? Does a person become less of a citizen because he serves a faith community as its priest?

A closer look would show that the Christian priesthood is a fine example of grassroots democracy at work; candidates to priesthood come not from hereditary families or caste groups, but from each and every stratum of society. Any male individual from any social strata of

the faith community can aspire to become a priest. The years of formation culminating in the ordination, with the attached status and privileges, may be understood as designating them into a priestly class. That is beside the point. The priest comes from the common background of every citizen, impelled by a call for a greater service for God and human beings. It requires of them self sacrifice and renunciation of certain worldly comforts and pleasures.

From a secular perspective a person opting for the priesthood does not mean that he renounces any of the civil and political rights that are his due as a citizen of the country. Nor can anybody deny him these inalienable rights. Basically he is a citizen like anybody else with the accompanying rights and duties. He can reside and work in any part of the country, he can own material assets, and he can stand for elections or campaign for political ideologies of his choice. He can also choose not to exercise these rights, but that is his own choice, and not something imposed upon him. In short the priest, as an individual, is fully a citizen of the nation with all the accompanying rights and privileges that the Constitution and the UN Charter ensure.

Why does the public perception, in spite of the above assurance, tend to deny the priest the legitimate rights of a citizen? This seems to emerge from a confusion around priestly identity vis-à-vis that of the *sannyasi* in the Indian context. The *sannyasi* is seen as a 'world-renouncing ascetic' deep in meditation undisturbed by the affairs of everyday life. Sociology would present the *sannyasi* as one of the functional roles in a faith community; but the priest, in the Christian tradition, incorporates many roles into one' (a cultic priest, a teaching guru, a community

leader, an administrator, etc.), and so cannot be identified with that of a *sannyasi* alone. It is this faulty perception that needs to be corrected to be fair to the religious identity of the priest. The priest, in Christian understanding, is not a person who renounces the world, but a person who engages the world in order to transform it. What Gandhi wrote about a *sannyasin* may be more appropriate in the case of the priest: “A sannyasin is one who cares not for himself but cares all his time for others. He has renounced all selfishness... Politics properly so called rule every detail of our lives today.... The state affects our moral being. A sannyasin, therefore, ... must concern himself with the relations of the people with the state...”⁴

4. The Priest is a Political Person by Role – As Leader of a Faith Community

The Church understands the role of the priest as that of ‘ministerial priesthood’ in relation to a faith community called the parish. A priest or bishop acts not only in ‘*persona Christi*’ but also ‘*in persona ecclesiae*’, thus emphasizing his sanctifying mission in and for the community of the faithful. The ordained ministers are conferred “a sacred power for the service of the faithful”, and they “exercise their service for the People of God by teaching (*manus docendi*) divine worship (*manus liturgicum*) and pastoral governance (*manus regendi*)”.⁵ The priest acts in the person of the parish community, and the specifically religious functions entrusted to him are listed under Canon 530. But these do not exhaust his role as a community leader on account of his distinctive participation in the threefold ministry of Christ, viz. as priest, prophet and king.⁶ In modern terminology these

would amount to various leadership functions required in any human community, political not excluded. It is evident in traditional faith communities even today, in spite of the modern attempts at differentiation and specialization of leadership functions.⁷

The priest's ministry of leadership presupposes three things:

i) The faith community the priest serves is a political entity.

There has been an inherent struggle in the church to theologically situate the priest as leader of the faith community, on the one hand, and of the political community, on the other. Initially the political entity called the State was seen as merely providing the 'locus' for the church in its spiritual mission. The priority was on the social order over claims of justice and rights. Gradually the State came to be understood as the provider and the guarantor of conditions necessary to ensure justice and wellbeing. It was a transition from the notion of an individual to that of a person with political rights and responsibilities. The multi-religious, multi-ethnic nature of the Indian society forces the Indian church to define itself in broader terms as a political entity operating within the reality called the State. Questions of discrimination, denial of basic human rights, attacks on the community in the name of religion, etc. unfold the political dimension of a faith community in vivid terms.

ii) The priest's engagement in political affairs is integral to his mission.

The priest in the pre-Vatican II Church was defined primarily in terms of his cultic functions. In focusing on the conversion and transformation of the individual, it

failed to take note of the collective/political dimension of society. Should the priest refrain from commenting on current political issues that affect the lives of people? “No politics from the pulpit” is a refrain often heard, especially in times of elections. The fact is that the priest need not be and cannot be apologetic about his involvement in politics. We have to deepen our conviction that engagement in politics is an integral part of the church’s task of witnessing the Gospel in concrete socio-political situations.⁸

The FABC states it emphatically:

If the Church must be involved with the human being in his or her concrete historical reality and temporal dimensions, it cannot avoid involvement in political concerns and questions which pervade, influence and sometimes dominate the temporal life of people and affect deeply their salvation. Politics is an inescapable concern of the Church. There is thus necessity for the Church to involve itself with political concerns.⁹

iii) The social ministry of the Church necessarily takes the political into account.

The social ministry of the church has gone through much transformation over the past few decades – from charitable activities through development programmes to interventions of a political nature. Problems of poverty and illiteracy, homelessness and discrimination have come to be seen as resulting from institutional and structural defects that call for reform of the society rather than of the individual. Here social engagement takes the form of socio-political intervention aimed at changes in societal structures and policies. The agency gets transferred to the affected people; their empowerment and capability enhancement makes them participants in decisions that

affect them. It may take the form of collective action or struggles against injustice or popular movements that bring better bargaining power to the affected people. Priests' involvements in movements for human rights and environmental rights, against the exclusion of Dalits, etc. thus have come to be accepted as legitimate. *Caritas in Veritate*, the recent encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI, insightfully points to the *political path* in the practice of charity.¹⁰

The new understanding is well articulated by the FABC. It says:

Since the Church must concern itself with concrete human beings and communities, it cannot be unconcerned with politics. Its mission does not allow the Church to be uninvolved in the organization of society towards the common good, which should be the task of politics. It cannot be indifferent to political decisions and arrangements which have such a far-reaching and lasting impact on the people to whom Christ came to give life. The Church as a community of Christ's disciples must become more and more politically conscious in order to infuse more life and grace into human and societal life... The Church needs to enter the political field, not to gain temporal advantage, but to be a servant ready to make its unique contribution, together with others, to a wounded humanity that needs the service of healing and promotion of life.¹¹

Over the centuries there were various models of priestly ministry in the Church: the jurisdictional model, the cultic model, the pastoral model, the prophetic model, monastic model, etc.¹² The fact is that in the contemporary context the priest incorporates many of these roles within the nomenclature of the priesthood.

5. Internal Restrictions by the Church on the Political Role of the Priest

Why should the priest assume political leadership? Is it not best left to the laity? These questions need probing. Vatican II has rightly highlighted the role of the laity in working for the renewal of the temporal order including the institutions of the political community. It affirms that qualified Catholics should not decline to enter public life, since it provides opportunity to work for the common good and the Gospel.¹³ Recent church documents further specify that direct political involvement is the duty of the laity vis-à-vis the clergy. Experience shows that the church either fails to promote the laity for effective participation in politics, or alienates those lay persons who get into party politics actively. The framework of Christian analysis of the socio-political realities to guide Christian politicians remains still vague.

The political role of priests and the hierarchy often presents a very confusing picture, and deserves urgent examination. In today's aggressive media culture, expressions of public opinion on controversial political issues are in high demand, and channels seek out diverse opinions to make issues sensational. Isolated bishops or priests are often trapped into it, and their words are presented as solemn statements of the Christian community, and at times manipulated as caricatures. Adequate structures incorporating lay competence to formulate and present well thought-out Christian positions on critical political issues are lacking. The merging of the spiritual, ecclesiastical and political leadership of the community in the person of the bishop/hierarchy is detrimental to cultivating proper political leadership in the community.

The attempt of this paper to underscore the political role of the priest is in no way meant to be an unreserved

promotion of the priest as a political figure. The age-old wisdom of the Church has taught her the value of internal restrictions on the political functioning of the priest in spite of the rightful claims for civil and political rights. Priests “are not to play an active role in political parties or in directing trade unions unless.... this is required for the defense of the rights of the Church or to promote the common good.”¹⁴ The reason for this prohibition emerges from the essential nature of the priest’s ministry which requires of clerics “always to do their utmost to foster among people peace and harmony based on justice”.¹⁵ His ministry, in normal situations, has to take into account all the faithful irrespective of their political or trade union affiliations. We may note that the Canon provides space for the priest for playing an active political role in special situations. Therefore the prohibition is not absolute.

There is also another dimension to the restriction on priest’s involvement in politics, and that relates to the political role of the lay faithful vis-à-vis that of the priest. “Clerics are to acknowledge and promote the mission which the laity, each for his or her own part, exercises in the Church and *in the world*.”¹⁶ (Italics added) Unfortunately the phrase *in the world* is often forgotten as clerics tend to assume the political role themselves instead of acknowledging and promoting the laity for the political role that is duly theirs. *Deus Caritas Est* states in clear terms that direct politics is proper to the laity, and that the clergy has an indirect role of promoting it through proper training and guidance.¹⁷

6. Insights from *Deus Caritas Est*: Purification of Conscience as Key

Deus Caritas Est, the first encyclical letter of Pope

Benedict XVI, reflects seriously on this thorny issue of the Church's role in the political sphere. Acknowledging that the just ordering of society and the State is a central responsibility of politics, it presents the role of the Church as helping to "form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly". Building a just social and civil order is a political task, which is not the Church's immediate responsibility. "She cannot and must not replace the State." This, in no way, reduces the responsibility of the Church, for "she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper." This is done "through the purification of reason and through ethical formation".¹⁸ Much work is required to convert these principles into action plans in concrete situations.

The encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* affirms unambiguously that "the just ordering of society and the State is a central responsibility of politics" respecting the autonomy of the temporal sphere as shown by Vatican II.¹⁹ Justice is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics. The document understands politics as "more than a mere mechanism for defining the rules of public life: its origin and its goal are found in justice, which by its very nature has to do with ethics." In its attempt to clarify what justice is, and how to achieve it here and now, the State resorts to practical reason; "but if reason is to be exercised properly, it must undergo constant purification, since it can never be completely free of the danger of a certain ethical blindness caused by the dazzling effect of power and special interests." Then the document adds: "Here politics and faith meet. Faith by its specific nature is an

encounter with the living God—an encounter opening up new horizons extending beyond the sphere of reason. But it is also a purifying force for reason itself. From God's standpoint, faith liberates reason from its blind spots and therefore helps it to be ever more fully itself. Faith enables reason to do its work more effectively and to see its proper object more clearly.” It is here that the political role of a priest as the leader of a faith community becomes evident. In other words, a priest as the leader of a faith community has the inevitable responsibility to help the community to purify its practical reason. Here the priest assumes a political role.

According to the first guideline the political role of the priest includes helping to “form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest.” Its base is the very understanding of the mission of the Church of which the priest is a functionary: “Building a just social and civil order, wherein each person receives what is his or her due, is an essential task which every generation must take up anew. As a political task, this cannot be the Church's immediate responsibility. Yet, since it is also a most important human responsibility, the Church is duty-bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically.”²⁰ It is all the more important in our context where everybody laments the erosion of values and ethics in the political field.

The document is also realistically cautious about the dangers involved. “The Church cannot and must not take

upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice.” Yes, a priest cannot and must not replace a politician; he is not meant to be that. Yet he cannot and must not remain on the sidelines when issues of justice are involved. Here is the crux of the matter: In what manner should a priest involve in political issues? Unfortunately the document does not enter into a discussion of this aspect; perhaps it is left to us to explore in our own concrete religio-political context. “A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply.”²¹

The document affirms that “the formation of just structures is not directly the duty of the Church, but belongs to the world of politics, the sphere of the autonomous use of reason. The Church has an indirect duty here, in that she is called to contribute to the purification of reason and to the reawakening of those moral forces without which just structures are neither established nor prove effective in the long run.”²²

The second guideline tries to distinguish the political role of the priest from that of the lay person. “The direct duty to work for a just ordering of society, on the other hand, is proper to the lay faithful. As citizens of the State, they are called to take part in public life in a personal capacity. So they cannot relinquish their participation ‘in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the *common good*.’

The mission of the lay faithful is therefore to configure social life correctly, respecting its legitimate autonomy and cooperating with other citizens according to their respective competences and fulfilling their own responsibility.”²³ The priest needs to avoid encroaching on the specific political role the Church expects the laity to play. Sadly this awareness is found wanting in many priests and bishops.

7. Some Pointers

a) Education for Political Engagement

Most Christians in our context are still confused or unsure of the place of politics in the plan of God, and of the political demands of their faith. They hardly see any political message in the Bible. How to prepare such Christians to assume political responsibility? This remains a major task for the priest. This would require equipping the priests in formation for this crucial task. Raising questions about the quality of formation of the army of sisters in the country for political engagement, T.K. John observes: “From a close scrutiny of that which trains these large number of personnel it becomes evident that the social, economic and political content of their formation syllabus is virtually zero. Enter the seminaries and formation houses of the men religious. There too the social, the economic and the political content of their syllabus is virtually zero. What most of them got at their university/school level is all that they have.”²⁴ The situation demands urgent remedial measures.

Political science is a popular subject being taught in many of our Christian institutions of higher education. But unfortunately their sphere of interest is confined to the merely academic, and so they do not equip students for

effective political analysis or political engagement. Topics like political science, philosophy of politics, political theology, etc. remain largely unknown in our faculties of philosophy and theology. An inter-disciplinary approach in theological formation is necessary to make theology more politically sensitive and responsive. The National Commission for Justice, Peace and Development of the CBCI issued *Ten Commandments for Indian Voters* indicating a healthy approach to politics and political education.²⁵ Four principles seen to be underlying it: the basic duty to be on electoral rolls and to exercise the right to vote or not to vote; acquiring the skill in analyzing political manifestos; discerning and critically assessing political parties and candidates; and finally, taking steps to report malpractices to the authorities concerned. Here the Church is only fulfilling its duty.

b) Pulpits and Pastoral Letters – Double-edged Sword

Pastoral letters have acquired a new political status in the emerging dynamics involving the state and religion. The shrinking-space phenomenon is forcing both of them to regain lost space, or to appropriate space they consider their legitimate zone. The pastoral letters of bishops as instruments of public intervention has been noted in the current discourse, especially in the run-up to the parliament elections in April-May, 2009. Elections have always remained the sacred territory of political parties; does religion have a role here? Do the priests/bishops have a role here? The church is convinced that it has a definite role, and these documents could be seen as attempts at asserting this role.

Pastoral letters, traditionally, were intended for the Christian faithful. Now we see its sphere expanding

suddenly. Pastoral letters remain no more private documents. First, the church leadership consciously uses the pastorals not only to instruct the faithful, but also to answer the state with which it is at loggerheads. Second, the mass-media, particularly the visual channels, pay close attention to the pastorals, take up their contents for public discussion, and even celebrate them in a politically charged atmosphere. Pastoral letters have *discovered* their potential as instruments of political intervention, on the one hand; they are *being discovered* by the secular society as a new entrant in the same arena, on the other. We need to be judicious in the use of pastoral letters, at the same time. By their very nature pastoral letters communicate only in one direction, and are not consultative or dialogical. It should be possible to remedy this flaw.

c) Dialogical Approach with the Political Establishment

Politics is still seen by the Church in general and the priests in particular as the murky field of corruption, casteism, criminalization and opportunism, and hence to be shunned. Inefficient administration and anti-people policies of the ruling government often frustrate churchmen that they develop an attitude of contempt for the political establishment. Given their role as community leaders, this attitude can have a devastating effect on the faith community, and can discourage the faithful from active political participation. Some priests yield to the temptation to set up parallel administrative structures disregarding the government. Priests need to be cautious of this danger.

In spite of all its inadequacies, politics still has an overarching function of coordinating various functional units of a society into a harmonious unity that ensures

every unit what is due to it. Attempts to set up parallel government imply a denial of this rightful role of politics. The priest, as leader, has a duty to help cultivate an attitude of reverence for the political establishment. This is a basic requirement for a political awareness that would enable the community to influence policies and decisions that affect their everyday lives. The National Consultation on Christian approach to general elections 2009 prepared and presented a memorandum to political parties and candidates. To object to these as priests interfering in politics betrays ignorance or a malicious outlook. It is part of a priest's mission to help purify politics by engaging responsibly in the political process.

8. Conclusion

The intervention of the priest in the political field will continue to bother our thinking on priestly ministry for many more decades. This is because of the overarching function of politics in any society in harmonizing the different spheres including the religious. Gone are the days the spiritual and the political remained antagonistic. The Church documents assure us that the priest engaging in political issues need not be defensive or secretive. Instead, it may be demanded by the very nature of his priestly mission. The present state of affairs asks of us to help clarify the nature not only of the priesthood but also of politics. The prophetic words of the 1971 Synod of Bishops still remains instructive: "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."²⁶ No

sphere of human life is alien to the mission and ministry of the priest.

¹ The term priest is used as inclusive of the three degrees of the ministerial priesthood as understood in Catholic theology, viz. bishops, priests and deacons. Cf. LG 28; CCC 1593.

² Vimal Tirimanna (ed.), *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil* (Collection of TAC and OTC Documents 1987-2007, Bangalore: Claretian Publication, 2007, 76.

³ See *The Hindu*, July 12, 2010. Archbishop Susaipakiam was speaking at the Convention of the Kerala Regional Latin Catholic Council (KRLCC). Indifference towards politics and reluctance in developing leadership skills in the community resulted in not getting due representation in governance or in the leadership of political parties, he said.

⁴ M.K.Gandhi, *In Search of the Supreme*, Vol. 2, Ahmedabad: Navjivan, 1961, 269.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Theological Publications in India, 1994, No.1592. (Hereafter referred to as CCC).

⁶ LG21, PO1, CCC1581

⁷ For a discussion on the leadership roles of a priest in a fishing community, see P.T.Mathew, *We Dare the Waters – the World and Worldview of Mukkuvar*, Chennai: University of Madras, 2001, Chs. 6&7.

⁸ G.S. 39.

⁹ Tirimanna, op.cit. 85.

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 7.

¹¹ Tirimanna, op.cit., 70.

¹² For a detailed discussion of these models see Isaac Padinajarekkuttu, “Priestly Ministry – Historical Perspectives and Theological Responses”, in *Towards Building up the Local Church*, ed. by T.Manjaly et. al, Shillong: Oriens Publ. 2004, p.2ff.

¹³ AA, nos. 7, 14.

¹⁴ Canon 287/2.

¹⁵ Canon 287/1.

¹⁶ Canon 275/2.

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 2005, no.28.

¹⁸ *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 28.

¹⁹ *Deus Caritas Est*, no.28. All quotations in this section are from the same number.

²⁰ *Deus Caritas Est*, no.28

²¹ *Deus Caritas Est*, no.28

²² *Deus Caritas Est*, no.29

²³ *Deus Caritas Est*, no.29

²⁴ T.K.John, "Christian Commitment to Nation Building", in *Christian Commitment to Nation Building*, ed. by A. Thumma and A. Sahayam, Bangalore: Dharamaram, 2003, 127.

²⁵ See <http://www.cbcisite.com/cbcinews2812.hlm>

²⁶ Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, 1971.