



Inaugural Address Befriending the Other

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His Excellency, Archbishop Salvatore Pennacchio, Apostolic Nuncio to India and Nepal, provides a clear understanding of the theme in the context of the present religious, social and cultural scenario of Asia, in order to better understand the theme “Befriending the Other.” Following Pope Francis, he holds that Dialogue of life and heart is essential for love and communion. The followers of Christ are called to have the gentle and humble heart of their Master (*Mt 11:29*). “Interreligious relations are best developed in a context of openness to other believers, a willingness to listen and the desire to respect and understand others in their differences. For all this, love of others is indispensable. This should result in collaboration, harmony and mutual enrichment.” Finally, he hopes that with the help of God’s Spirit who is always ready with surprises, we will befriend the human race. The second part of the article is the homily delivered by His Grace at the Inaugural Mass.

Keywords: Befriending, Asian characteristics, Pope Francis, dialogue, inculturation.

I am happy to participate in the International Conference on “*Befriending the Other*” conducted on the occasion of the completion of sixty years of the transfer of the Pontifical Athenaeum from Kandy to Pune. At the outset, I take this opportunity to wish every success to this great endeavor. I also take this opportunity to thank Rev. Dr. Selva Rathinam SJ, the president of Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, and Rev. Dr. Kuruvilla

Pandikattu SJ, the Chief Organizer of the Jubilee Committee for inviting me to this Conference.

“Befriending the Other” is the theme of this International Conference. Befriending literally means to make friends or become friendly with, or act as a friend without keeping any barriers of what so ever. To befriend someone is to cause him or her, to be a friend. It may be harder to befriend people from the other side, or people having opposite ideologies. Mahatma Gandhi once said, *“It is easy enough to be friendly to one’s friends. But to befriend the one who regards himself as your enemy is the essence of true religion.”* And Jesus exhorted his disciples and us today: *“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you (...) If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?”* *“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful”* is the theme of the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, announced by Pope Francis.

Before entering into a discussion I think it is better to try to have a clear understanding of the theme in the context of the present religious, social and cultural scenario of Asia.

1. Religious, Social and Cultural Realities in Asia

As we all know, Asia is the earth’s largest continent and is home to nearly two-thirds of the world’s population. The most striking feature of the continent is the variety of its peoples, cultures, religions, beliefs, traditions and languages. It is also the cradle of the world’s major religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. It is the birthplace of many other spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikhism and Shintoism. Millions of others embrace traditional or tribal religions. (*Ecclesia in Asia* no. 6).

At the same time the economic development in the Asian continent is really complex. Some Asian countries are highly developed, and others are developing. Some still find themselves

in abject poverty. In the process of development, materialism and secularization are also gaining ground, especially in urban areas. Organized forms of crimes, terrorism, abuse, and the exploitation of the weaker sections of society are also widespread (*Ecclesia in Asia* no. 7). The political panorama is tremendously complex, displaying an array of ideologies ranging from democratic forms of government to theocratic ones. Undemocratic regimes and atheistic ideologies are very much present. In some places Christians are not allowed to practice their faith freely and proclaim Jesus Christ to others and minorities are denied of their rights (*Ecclesia in Asia* no. 8).

Consequently, in effect, the Church's approach of "*befriending the other*" has a specific relevance in Asian context where there are so many tensions, divisions and conflicts, caused by ethnic, social, cultural, linguistic, economic and religious differences. While keeping her teaching faithfully, the Church in Asia has to foster greater communion of mind and heart through close cooperation among different Countries. This is even vital to her evangelizing mission. She has to develop a healthy relationship with other Christian Churches and ecclesial communities, and with the followers of other religions.

Certainly, in a society where we live, there are cultural tensions, competing religious identities and diversities in the articulation of Christian faith. But in spite of all these there is a common ground on which the human society can build up its dreams and aspirations that is "love". We have all been created by God to his own image. God is our loving Father. This sensibly brings up the perception of universal brotherhood. Thus, befriending the other is not merely a philosophical dream but also a practical need of humankind desired by the Creator. It is the fulfillment of the fundamental commandment of Jesus

Christ that “love one another” (Jn 15:17). Being all created by God we are called to love everyone, even our enemies.

Holy Father Pope Francis is a man of friendship, dialogue, committed to the culture of encounter, who looks for the best in people and is not judgmental. He is a peacemaker who contributed significantly to the rapprochement between peoples, countries, beliefs and cultures.

During his recent visit to USA on 23rd September last, the Holy Father Pope Francis stated that we want “a society which is truly tolerant and inclusive, one that safeguards individual rights and rejects every form of unjust discrimination,” but also respects the deeply held religious beliefs of citizens and the moral and ethical obligations that flow from them”.

Christians belonging to different Churches and ecclesial communities are no longer enemies or indifferent neighbors. Christian witness in a pluralistic world includes, befriending others, engaging in dialogue with people of different faith, religion and cultures (Acts 17:22-28). Christians are called to commit themselves to work with all people in mutual respect, promoting together justice, peace and common good. The purpose this International Conference is to help the Catholic Church in India to continue her dialogue with other Churches, religious faiths, various cultures, and individuals, while proclaiming the Word of God, and witnessing the joy of the Gospel.

As I have mentioned before, we are living in a period which is often characterized also by secularization, discrimination, religious fundamentalism and terrorism. In such an atmosphere it is not easy to realize befriend others. But, being Christians, it is our call to take positive steps to promote the pattern of befriending others. For this, I would like to suggest certain possible ways.

a. Dialogue is a way forward towards Befriending

Dialogue of life and heart is essential for love and communion. The followers of Christ are called to have the gentle and humble heart of their Master (Mt 11:29). “Interreligious relations are best developed in a context of openness to other believers, a willingness to listen and the desire to respect and understand others in their differences. For all this, love of others is indispensable. This should result in collaboration, harmony and mutual enrichment” (*Ecclesia in Asia* no. 31).

Saint Pope John Paul II in his ecumenical Encyclical “*Ut Unum Sint*” describes the fruits of the dialogues as “*brotherhood rediscovered*”. Today, the “universal brotherhood” of the Church has become a firm ecumenical conviction, bearing in mind the situations of the past, communities which were once rivals are now in many cases helping one another. Places of worship are sometimes lent out.

Scholarships are offered for the training of ministers in the Communities most lacking in resources. Approaches are made to civil authorities on behalf of other Christians who are unjustly persecuted (*no.42*).

The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the World Council of Churches, the World Evangelical Alliance and the ecumenical dialogues are fostering a friendly atmosphere in the world. But, still several social and cultural factors separate the human race. There are frustrations and oppositions.

Dialogue involves both listening and responding. It is a seeking both to understand and to be understood. It is a readiness to put questions and to be questioned. True and frank dialogue shall be guided by authentic love and truth. It allows members of different faiths to get to know one another, to identify matters of faith and practice which they share and

points on which they differ and thus build up a communion. The easiest way to befriend someone, however, is just to smile and say “hello,” and to look at people of different faiths without prejudice, keeping however our own identity.

b. *Inculturation, a pathway to Befriend*

A culture is the result of the life and activity of a human group. The persons belonging to that group are shaped to a large extent by the culture in which they live. As persons and societies change, the culture changes with them. As a culture is transformed, so are persons and societies transformed. “From this perspective, it becomes clearer why evangelization and inculturation are naturally and intimately related to each other. The Gospel and evangelization are certainly not identical with culture; they are independent of it. Yet the Kingdom of God comes to people who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building of the Kingdom cannot avoid borrowing elements from human cultures” (*Ecclesia in Asia* no. 21).

This engagement with cultures has always been part of the Church’s pilgrimage through history. But it has a special urgency today in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural situations of Asia, where Christianity is still too often seen as a foreign religion. “In the process of encountering the world’s different cultures, the Church not only transmits her truths and values and renews cultures from within, but she also takes from the various cultures the positive elements already found in them”. (*Ecclesia in Asia* no. 21).

“In every case inculturation must be guided by compatibility with the Gospel and communion with the faith of the universal Church, in full compliance with the Church’s Tradition and with a view to strengthening people’s faith.” (*Ecclesia in Asia* no. 22). Unity does not mean uniformity. On the contrary what we can think of is a unity in diversity and diversity in unity. We have to uphold a balanced position in this respect, while witnessing the full truth of the Gospel.

c. Caring and Sharing

A “culture of care” will make the way to befriending much easier. Pope Francis has spoken repeatedly of the need for a Christian identity that reaches out in relationship. In his first interview as Pope, he urged: “*The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity...*” Simplicity of life, deep faith and genuine love for all, especially the poor and the outcast, are luminous signs of the Gospel in action. Therefore, the Church shall also accompany those who are undergoing severe suffering, and persecution. She has to lend moral, spiritual and material support to them (*Ecclesia in Asia* no. 28). She has to promote and witness the quality of befriending because it is her way of life.

Last but not least, from the very outset the concept of befriending the other will continue to be an impulse and a gift of the Holy Spirit. As we embark upon the new period of time we need new vision of communion and friendship. But this does not mean inventing unrealistic dreamlands of the future. Patience is the little sister of Christian hope. Instead of staring at the impossible, and chafing against it, we have to live the already given and possible communion, and do what is possible today. By advancing in this way, step by step, we may hope that, with the help of God’s Spirit who is always ready with surprises, we will befriend the human race.

With these few words, in God’s name, I formally inaugurate this International Conference on “Befriending the Other”. May God bless us all!



Inaugural Homily Befriending the Other

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Readings: Jam 1: 27 -2:9 and Jn 15: 12-15

Dear Fr. Selva Rathinam, SJ, President of JDV, Reverend Fathers, Reverend Brothers, and all my Brothers and Sisters,

It is a matter of great joy and happiness that I am able to celebrate this Holy Mass, with you, on this auspicious occasion of the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations of the *Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth*. At the outset, let me express my hearty congratulations to all of you. As the representative of His Holiness Pope Francis, I impart to you loving greetings from the Holy Father. I shall also confer on you His Apostolic Blessings, at the end of the Holy Mass. As we celebrate this Jubilee Thanksgiving Eucharistic Liturgy, let us express our indebted gratitude to God for the various Graces, He has bestowed on *Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth* - on all its staff, students and well-wishers. I pray that the Lord might shower up on you his choicest blessings in the days and years to come.

1. Biblical References to the Jubilee Year Celebrations

In Leviticus 25: 8-12, 18, the Lord gave to the people of Israel the command to celebrate a *Jubilee Year*. Mentions

to the Jubilee Year are also found in Num 36:4; Neh 5:1-13; and Ezek 46:17. “Jubilee” literally denoted to trumpets and joyful celebration. The Jubilee Year, with its main focus on emancipation and restoration, was to be proclaimed by the blast of trumpets throughout the land. Slaves were to be set free. Property rights of land were returned and everyone got to go back home. The Jubilee Year thus, had brought jubilation and celebration everywhere and to all the people, especially to the under privileged, the poor and the slaves. ***“The Jubilee Law”*** further taught a merciful form of civil justice (De 15:1-18): “no one could remain very poor for long, and the rich were not punished, but rather blessed!” The most prominent promise of the Jubilee was that the Lord will provide safety for all his people (De 15:10,18). The Lord protects family, individual, and their freedom. Jubilee also demanded that one shall not use God’s Word for personal interest and to oppress people; instead righteousness and mercy towards others shall prevail always. (Lev 25:14-17).

Yes, the Lord wants to show mercy to his people and asks them to be merciful among themselves. Dear Friends, The ‘Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy’ starting from the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary on 8 December 2015 to the Feast of Christ the King on 20 November 2016 is a happy coincidence with your Diamond jubilee Celebrations. The Holy Year of Mercy will also be conducted in tune with the commands of the Lord about the Jubilee Year celebrations in Leviticus. Pope Francis writes about the Year of Mercy: “the celebration of the Holy Year to be for all believers a true moment of encounter with the mercy of God. It is indeed my wish that the Jubilee be a living experience of the closeness of the Father, whose tenderness is almost tangible...” The Pope wants that, in this Holy Year of Mercy, everyone should “experience the love of God who consoles, pardons, and instils hope”. Dear Fathers and Brothers, the Lord gives you a clear directive, how you shall celebrate your Diamond Jubilee:- it

shall be for you a Jubilee year of remission of sins and pardon of failures focusing particularly on forgiveness and mercy. ***“It shall be holy to you”***. Again, in Lev 25: 12, the Lord reminded the people that they shall keep the Jubilee Year holy, and in v. 18, He gave them directions, how they shall keep it holy: *“you shall do my statutes, and keep my ordinances and perform them; so you will dwell in the land securely”*. Dear Fathers and Brothers, the Lord gives you another command, how you shall celebrate this Jubilee: it shall be holy to you; you shall, all the more, do God’s statutes, keep His ordinances and perform them.

2. The First Reading: James 1: 27-2:9

The verse 1 reads: “My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ”. He says: you shall not make “distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts” (v.4). The intention of James here, is to teach the people not to show discrimination to the poor. He asks: “has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?” (v. 5). He reminds them that “religion, that is pure and undefiled before God,” is this: “to visit orphans and widows in their affliction” (1: 27). The concluding verse of the reading is strongly worded: “if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors” (v. 9). James aims in this passage to narrow the gulf between the rich and the poor. If we look deep at the command of the Lord about the Jubilee Year Celebrations, in Leviticus 25, we understand the Lord wants more mercy to the poor and to the slaves in the Jubilee Year. The Jubilee Year characteristics such as - “slaves were to be set free”; “everyone got to go back home”; “no one could remain very poor for long” – all these concentrate that, in the Jubilee Year, the difference between the rich and the poor need to be diminished. Therefore, both the Command of the Lord about the Jubilee Year Celebrations

in Leviticus 25 and the reading from the Letter of James for this Diamond Jubilee Year Celebrations have something in common:- there shall be no partiality or discrimination among the people of God whether they are rich or poor. There shall be no barriers or distance among them.

There are innumerable teachings of the Church and pronouncements of the Popes on the role of the Church in helping the poor. You, as Professors and Seminarians are well aware of them. I shall refer here to the words of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*. In paragraph 188 he writes: “In this context, we can understand Jesus’ command to his disciples: ‘You yourselves give them something to eat!’ (Mk 6:37): it means working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter”. Again, in paragraph 191 he notes: “In all places and circumstances, Christians, with the help of their pastors, are called to hear the cry of the poor.... Seeing their poverty, hearing their cries and knowing their sufferings, we are scandalized because we know that there is enough food for everyone and that hunger is the result of a poor distribution of goods and income”. Dear friends, you are going to be pastors. You make a promise to yourselves in this Jubilee Year that you shall not show any partiality or discrimination to any person because he or she is poor. Be on the side of the poor to diminish the gap between rich and the poor and to eliminate the distance between the members of the people of God. Pope Francis expects from you, as he writes in his *Letter* to the Consecrated Persons, dated 24 November 2014: “to come out of yourselves and go forth to the existential peripheries”. He continues: “A whole world awaits you: men and women who have lost all hope, families in difficulty, abandoned children, young people without a future, the elderly, sick and abandoned, those who are rich in the world’s goods but impoverished within, men and women looking for a purpose in life, thirsting

for the divine...Don't be closed in on yourselves, don't be stifled by petty squabbles, don't remain a hostage to your own problems. These will be resolved if you go forth and help others to resolve their own problems, and proclaim the Good News". As the Apostolic Nuncio, I exhort you to translate these words of the Pope in the multifaceted Indian situations. You shall extend your service reaching out to the existential peripheries where the great majority of India: the poor, the downtrodden, the Dalit, the uneducated, the unemployed live. Proclaim to them the "Jubilee Year" as directed by the Lord in Leviticus; proclaim to them the "Jubilee Year of Mercy" as Pope Francis desires.

3. The Gospel Reading today: John 15: 12-15.

Jesus tells his disciples: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (v. 12). He continues: "You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants... but I have called you friends..." (v. 14-15). Jesus reminds his disciples that their relationship is not of "master and slaves" but of friends. There should not be any gap or distance between them. They are friends. Moreover, there shall be no partiality, no discrimination and no differences between his disciples. He commands them: "love one another as I have loved you". They should be Friends of Jesus and friends among themselves.

Dear Fathers and brothers, the Gospel today, gives you a Jubilee Year Message: **You shall be Jesus's friends; you shall be friends among yourselves and love one another as Jesus loves you.** Learn and practice to develop an intimate and friendly relationship with Jesus in accordance with his commandments. I know that you are trained for this in this Institution. I make here only a few references. In the Book of Wisdom 7: 7-14, we read about the Great King Solomon who is known for his wisdom. He prayed to God not for "scepters

and thrones but for the Spirit of Wisdom” (v. 8) and “to obtain friendship with God” (v. 14). Yes, prayer leads to a friendship with God. We all know that St. Theresa of Avila, whose Fifth Birth Centenary we celebrate this year, had established a deep friendship with God. Pope Francis commends about it in his Letter to Fr. Saverio Cannistra: Her prayer consists simply in “a relation of friendship ... with Him whom we know loves us”. Theresa of Avila herself says about prayer: “Prayer is nothing else than being on terms of friendship with God”. Again, she adds: “Mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with God”. Dear Friends, there is no need to stress the importance of prayer in our life. You are well aware of it. The question to be asked intensively by all of you is: Does your prayer lead you beyond the prayer formulas, to “a relation of friendship,” a simple, warm and cordial “friendship with God”? If yes, let this Jubilee Celebrations intensify that friendship with God. If not, let this Jubilee Celebrations be a beginning for your deep “relation of friendship” with God.

Before I conclude, I thank the *Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth* for the magnificent service you are doing to the Indian Church through the formation of future priests. Once more, my hearty congratulatory best wishes for the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations. May God bless you with his choicest blessings through the intercession of Mary, Mother of God. Thank you.

