



## Fr. Kurien Kunnumpuram SJ

### A Man of Vision and Commitment

- Thomas Karimundackal SJ

Fr. Kurien Kunnumpuram, SJ (1931-2018) is no more physically present in our midst. We are unable to comprehend the loss to the Church, particularly the Church in India, and I am sure that his physical absence will create a vacuum in the theological circles and discussions. Though my life with him was short, Fr. Kurien has left behind immortal memories in my heart with his unembellished life. It is the same feeling that most people share about the undecorated, exemplary and scholarly life of Fr. Kurien.

### Affable and Loving Person

Fr. Kurien was a simple and cheerful person who could hide a thousand feelings behind his innocent smile. He was a simple man who enjoyed the simple things that life offered. He enjoyed the spiritual enrichment of simplicity till the very end of his life. He could make life comfortable with very minimum needs and he never bothered about a secure life. I never heard him speaking ill of anybody. He was a virtuous man who never had any complaints in life.

Fr. Kurien showed great enthusiasm to visit his students and friends and to maintain close relationship with them. He used to walk with a meditative rhythm, and never in a hurry. So also in his quiet manner Fr. Kurien slowly walked into the lives of his friends and inserted himself into their hearts. He was always approachable.

He received everyone heartily, welcomed them cordially and treated them warmly. That was his personal trait of being hospitable. He remained an affable and friendly person to all, the lay staff, as well as the public. Many approached him for advice and counsel.

He was very systematic, regular, hardworking and totally committed to the task entrusted to him. He kept himself always busy, either reading or writing or counseling. One would never see Fr. Kurien sitting idle. He had a fire in him that kindled other fires. He was a man, who relentlessly gave love, received love and longed to love more. His family ties testify to this. His friends remember this. Even his detractors agree that he was a loving and lovable man.

### **Scholar and Academician**

Fr. Kurien's life-time achievement has been, apart from other things, the engaged way of teaching the essentials of theological anthropology, ecclesiology, and Mariology in a very clear and concise manner. As a teacher he was very much loved and appreciated by his students. He knew the pulse of each and every student and treated him/her very personally. He gave freedom to the students and allowed them to grow responsibly.

Indeed, he was known for his intellectual caliber and clarity of thought. He completed his PhD on Vatican II with a special reference to "ways of salvation" from the University of Innsbruck in 1968, just three years after Vatican II. He has studied the documents of Vatican II taking the concern of every Christian believer in India, such as how to understand the meaning of his or her salvation through Christ in the Church in the face of multi religious context of India which claims to have various "ways of salvation". As Jacob Parappally observes, "Kurien Kunnumparam's contribution to the understanding of the theological significance of other religions in God's plan of salvation according to the teachings and insights of the Vatican II not only highlighted the importance of entering into dialogue with other religions as an imperative to the self-understanding of Church but also showed the need for a theology of Non-Christian religions and developing a theology of Christian Missions." Indeed, his scholarly and erudite expositions

on various theological themes give an answer to the question: How can the Church remain a home for all peoples and religions in the light of the teachings of Vatican II?

## **Theologian Par Excellence**

Author of more than 15 books in areas of Ecclesiology, Anthropology and Spirituality, he has contributed significantly to evolve a method to theologize in the Indian context. He has articulated his creative theological reflections in the journal *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies*, a journal which he has founded in 1998. He has edited the Asian journal for Religious Studies (AUC) for more than ten years. He was the first editor of *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, published by Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth. He, along with Fr. Francis D'Sa and George Soares-Prabhu, Fr Francis Pereira SJ, Rui de Menesis, who belonged to the second generation of theology professors at JDV, brought about the emphasis on doing theology in the context. Thus, the scholarly contribution of Fr. Kurien exhibited a far-reaching influence in a number of areas.

## **Community of Freedom and for the Poor**

Fr. Kurien was a man of determination and total self-reliance. His 44 years of meritorious service in various capacities at JDV and Papal Seminary (1969-2013) substantiate this. As the dean of the faculty of Theology (1974-77), and the Rector of Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth (1987-93) he has given an orientation to the theological and priestly formation in India. He has dreamt dreams for JDV and realized them raising JDV to the standard of a premier theological institution in India. According to him theological formation is meant to form the clergy to liberate people from the bondages – social, cultural, religious, and economical – rather than forming clergy for the routine ritual celebrations. In his opinion, priestly and religious life is not a withdrawal from the world but it is a prophetic commitment to the people to enable them to experience God in the midst of their struggles and sufferings.

According to Fr. Kurien, the mission of the Church is to collaborate with God's salvific work for the fullness of the human person and the human community according to the pattern revealed in Jesus Christ. He says: "To follow Christ is also to identify ourselves with the poor and powerless as he did. The Incarnation is the symbol of this identification. Through his incarnation he inserted himself into the human family and became one with us". According to him "the members of the Church are called to be the disciples of Jesus Christ. And the disciples of Jesus are the children of God". Therefore, in his opinion, to realize the Church's mission, a radical commitment to the values of Jesus is indispensable and necessary; values like righteousness, love, trust, forgiveness, sharing, genuine worship, avoiding ostentation, non-judgmental attitude etc.

This eminent theologian is convinced that the Church, the dream of Jesus, is a joyful community and its mission is to proclaim joy and freedom, which calls for sensitivity to the needs of other. He says: "joy was in fact the most characteristic result of all Jesus' activity amongst the poor and oppressed". Therefore, according to him the experience of Joy that Jesus communicated to his hearers should inspire all of us to find great joy in our Christian life, and it should be the abiding quality of Christian life. The basis of such a liberating and enabling joy and freedom should be our Christian experience of God.

## **Genuine Spirituality Guided by Vatican II**

By integrating the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels and the Vatican II Fr. Kurien, through his writings and teachings communicated an inclusive spirituality, a spirituality that humanizes. According to him spirituality is not restricted to any particular religion, tradition or culture, rather it breaks the social, cultural and religious barriers leading to 'fullness of life for all'. This inclusive spirituality which he emphasized was against the traditional understanding of Christian spirituality. He made a distinction between piety and genuine spirituality; while the former is guided by the faithful performance of devotional practices and rituals, the latter is guided by the spirit of God which transforms the life and values of a person. He says: