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## **To Be a Relevant and Responsive Church: The Indian Church in Need of Liberation from Clericalism**

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**Abstract:** Prof Kurien Kunnumpuram's dream for a Church was radical and his thinking and teaching were both marked by sound learning, lucidity, rigour, solidity and depth. He wanted to see the reformatory process of the church initiated by the Second Vatican Council more fully realized in the life and practice of the church in India. With this aim and focus, he taught and wrote with passion and commitment. His theological writings aimed at the radical renewal of the church, the Indian church in particular, in its internal life and organization and also in its mission *ad extra*. He knew that without such renewal, the church would increasingly become irrelevant for the Indian people. Only a transformed church could read and relevantly respond to the signs of the times. This ecclesial and ecclesiological passion of Kunnumpuram is behind the choice of the topic of this essay in his honour. Then he elaborates on the challenges before the Indian Church, including the evil of clericalism. He pleads for a Church, led by the Holy Spirit and enters into creative dialogue with political, economic and cultural factors of the

nation. This needs a radical conversion, a continual metanoia, leading to a way of the beatitude.

**Keywords:** Indian church, clericalism, dialogue, metanoia, beatitude.

### **Introduction**

I consider it a privilege to be invited to contribute to this festschrift that felicitates Prof. Kurien Kunnumpuram SJ, an accomplished theologian and passionate teacher. As a visiting professor he taught two ecclesiological courses—*theology of the church* and *theology of the magisterium*—at Vidyaajyoti, Delhi in the years I was an undergraduate student of theology. As a professor he commanded the respect of all students. His thinking and teaching were both marked by sound learning, lucidity, rigour, solidity and depth. He wanted to see the reformatory process of the church initiated by the Second Vatican Council more fully realized in the life and practice of the church in India. With this aim and focus, he taught and wrote with passion and commitment. The conferences he gave as well as his theological writings aimed at the radical renewal of the church, the Indian church in particular, in its internal life and organization and also in its mission *ad extra*. He knew that without such renewal, the church would increasingly become irrelevant for the Indian people. Only a transformed church could read and relevantly respond to the signs of the times. This ecclesial and ecclesiological passion of Kunnumpuram is behind the choice of the topic of this essay in his honour.

### **The Challenges before the Indian Church**

Dehumanizing poverty and iniquitous distribution of economic resources, caste-based social organization and all

attendant evils, and difficulties involved in proclaiming the gospel in a multi-cultural and pluri-religious environment are some of the perennial challenges before the church in India. There have been substantial reflections on how the church may face these challenges as it carries forward the mission Christ has entrusted to it. In recent times the church has come face to face with some other intimidating challenges. I have in mind some explosive developments during the past two or three years—developments which had been for a long time waiting to erupt. These include, *inter alia*, the more recent accusations and reports of i) irregularities in the administration of the temporal goods of the church, in which the accused included members of the episcopate, ii) sexual exploitation of minors and vulnerable adults by clerics, and iii) legal proceedings, which led to the arrest and judicial confinement in jail, against a bishop accused of repeatedly raping a senior religious woman.

These issues revealed not only the personal failures of the priests, bishops and religious involved but also—and this is more serious—the inability of the church-system in India to deal with these and derived issues in a pro-active, fair, transparent, prompt, effective, and dignified manner. Often the authorities involved either sought to take refuge in their not having ‘canonical powers’ or tried to push the ball into someone else’s court. Can we say that the authorities saw these happenings merely as canonical-legal cases? The church failed miserably and also in public view, thereby, taking a nosedive in its credibility as an effective organization and a public moral voice. It all pointed to a vacuum of moral and spiritual leadership in the Indian church. To some extent the church became the laughing stock of the people of this country.

Ordinary believers, lay people of goodwill, were shattered by these happenings. They felt let down, hurt and disillusioned. These developments also raised doubts in their minds about the faith—practical and also doctrinal and theological doubts. Can we believe our bishops, priests and religious when they teach us religion and morality? They seem to be teaching what they themselves don’t practise. Maybe they don’t believe in what they teach? The church authorities were reactive in their approach to the problems. The victims in these cases did not get the compassionate support and understanding that they deserved from the church of Christ. Apparently there were also attempts to shoot the whistle-blowers. Was it that the authorities were flummoxed and overwhelmed, and did not know what to do?

Financial irregularities, sexual exploitation of minors and vulnerable adults, accusation of rape of a senior religious woman by a bishop, absence of a fair and effective system to deal with such cases are real issues that need to be addressed. But there is a deeper issue which underlies all these and many other issues. That is clericalism.

### **The Evil of Clericalism**

Writing mainly in the context of the media reports of widespread sexual abuse of children by clergy in many countries and the way the ecclesiastical authorities dealt (or did not deal) with the issue, a Jesuit journalist of India explains what clericalism is all about. It is “the sense of entitlement, the lack of accountability, and the arrogance of power. It is the smug awareness that ‘whatever I do, no one can touch me.’ It is this attitude seemingly held by the clergy and the upper echelons of power, as though they belong

to a superior caste, which lies at the heart of this sickness.” He also referred to the “corrupt system of governance” in the church that “can weaken and even destroy the very fabric of the Church.”<sup>1</sup>

A 1983 Report submitted to the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM) in the United States offers a fairly detailed analysis of the phenomenon of clericalism in the church, especially in the United States.<sup>2</sup> It gives a working definition of clericalism “as the conscious or unconscious concern to promote the particular interests of the clergy and to protect the privileges and power that have traditionally been conceded to those in the clerical state.”<sup>3</sup> It has “attitudinal, behavioral and institutional dimensions.” The Report lists its main manifestations: “an authoritative style of ministerial leadership, a rigidly hierarchical world view, and a virtual identification of the holiness and grace of the Church with the clerical state and, thereby, with the cleric himself.” Even though one cannot altogether exclude religious men and women and lay people from its stranglehold, it is basically a problem among the members of the ordained clergy. However, the Report points out that clericalism is not a necessary consequence of priesthood but its diminishment and distortion.<sup>4</sup>

Seán McNully understands clericalism as “the abuse of clerical power with regard to the people of God” and compares it to “the iceberg of which pedophilia is the tip. Exercising sexual power over minors is a small part of the larger abuse of exercising inappropriate power over the whole people of God.”<sup>5</sup> McNully is speaking from the context of the Catholic church in Ireland. He considers that the issue is not only the personal and professional failures of individuals but also systemic. John J. Dubay brings a psychological component to the phenomenon of clericalism

when he says that “clericalism for many is an addictive way of life.”<sup>6</sup> Addiction controls the life of the victim who in turn becomes powerless. The victim is not willing to give up addiction and make his/her life richer and fuller. The victim is even unable to see the reality—the elephant in the room—and opposes whoever speaks the truth and exposes the reality.<sup>7</sup> However, the addiction of clericalism is not to be seen as having affected only individuals. McNully and Dubay both agree that the problem is more of a systemic nature. Such a system tends to defend itself always, seeks to control its members and demands compliance from them, tends to dehumanize those who make up the system and even affects their ethical integrity.<sup>8</sup>

Pope Francis is deeply aware of the evil of clericalism in the church, which he denounces at every available opportunity. In *Evangelii gaudium* he wrote:

Lay people are, put simply, the vast majority of the people of God. The minority—ordained ministers—are at their service. There has been a growing awareness of the identity and mission of the laity in the Church. We can count on many lay persons, although still not nearly enough, who have a deeply-rooted sense of community and great fidelity to the tasks of charity, catechesis and the celebration of the faith. At the same time, a clear awareness of this responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation, does not appear in the same way in all places. In some cases, it is because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on important responsibilities. In others, it is because in their particular Churches room has not been made for them to speak and to act, due to an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision-making (no. 102).

The pope knows that clericalism tries “to replace, or silence, or ignore, or reduce the People of God to small elites” and the results is that “we end up creating communities,

projects, theological approaches, spiritualities and structures without roots, without memory, without faces, without bodies and ultimately, without lives.” The pope says that this is manifest “in a peculiar way of understanding the Church’s authority, one common in many communities where sexual abuse and the abuse of power and conscience have occurred.” This is the problem with clericalism, “an approach that ‘not only nullifies the character of Christians, but also tends to diminish and undervalue the baptismal grace that the Holy Spirit has placed in the heart of our people.’” He continues: “Clericalism, whether fostered by priests themselves or by lay persons, leads to an excision in the ecclesial body that supports and helps to perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today. To say ‘no’ to abuse is to say an emphatic ‘no’ to all forms of clericalism.”<sup>9</sup>

Clericalism does not fully explain the sex abuses in the church and the disinclination of the authorities to deal with them as justice demands. But it is definitely a major contributing factor. The sexual predators of innocent children exploit the power and trust they command as ‘sacred persons’. Because of the culture of clericalism the bishops and religious superiors easily identify with the priest-predators rather than the abused children and their families.

Reflecting on the phenomenon of clericalism in the church, Jose Puthenveed points out: “Clericalism may command a superficial deference, but it blocks honest human communication and ultimately leaves the cleric practicing it isolated.”<sup>10</sup> He also highlights how it negatively affects the Bishop-Priests relationship in the local church:

A bishop caught up in a clerical mode of functioning seldom enjoys the kind of fraternal relationship with his priests that both he and they need in order to meet the draining needs of pastoral care and to assuage the burden of loneliness inherent to celibacy. Episcopal clericalism often finds expression as arrogance and at times as pompous arrogance in an unconscious manner.”<sup>11</sup>

Needless to say that the adverse consequences of the breakdown of normal bishop-clergy relationship are quite damaging for the unity of the local church, for its liturgical life, for its pastoral care of the faithful, and for its mission in the world.

Clericalism is a lie. Its source is not in Jesus Christ, nor in his gospel of God’s reign. It is an undesirable intrusion from a culture alien to the message of Jesus. The culture of clericalism is directly and destructively opposed to priesthood, both the ministerial priesthood of the ordained and the common priesthood of all the faithful. It also contradicts the true nature of the church. In order to liberate the church from the stranglehold of clericalism, it is important that we capture the true essence of the church.

### **True Nature of the Church**

In order to be relevant and responsive, the life and practice of the church must always be true to its origin and at the same time creatively attentive to the needs of the time. The church being a community of fallible men and women, false developments and accruals are always possible. Therefore, it is imperative not to idolize the church in its phenomenological concretions. We must refrain from defining its nature from how it actually appears in history. The church has a fundamental nature, which is not its own

making but received. Every structure, every system, which is in vogue in the church must be tested against its authentic nature.

Some fundamental elements and perspectives are given to the church at its decisive origins in Jesus Christ and in the apostolic community created and guided by the Spirit of the risen Christ. However, the nature of the church may not be understood statically but in a dynamic sense. The church expresses itself in varying forms and shapes across geographical and cultural differences and over time. The nature of the church is permanent but the historical forms are not. These varying forms and shapes must, however, be in dynamic congruence with the evolving nature of the church. Without this congruence, the church will lack authenticity and fail in its mission to be a prophetic witness to and an efficacious instrument of the saving work of Christ today. The historical church has always been wanting in this regard, even in the apostolic times as is evident in the NT epistles. Heresy, disunity, corruption and manipulation have always been present in the church, sometimes to a lesser degree and sometimes to a greater degree. The holy people of God, whether of the first covenant or of the second covenant, has always been sinful and rebellious and so in need of purification, renewal and reform. To renew itself, while remaining true to its authentic nature, the church must constantly return to its origin, its source.

The foundation of the church is in the concrete act of God's saving work in Jesus Christ. The church is of the Lord in its origin and must always be. The NT gives different images of the church with different emphases, tensions and at times mutually conflicting. The NT church was not a perfect church. In fact a perfect church never existed in history. The message of the NT continues to be

the criterion to judge the church today and at any time. The *raison d'être* of the church is its mission to continually proclaim the message of Jesus to itself and to the world. The NT message and tradition have to be re-read and re-interpreted critically from the living context of the people of God and according to the signs of the times. The rereading and the re-interpretation must be done always in the light of Christ's Spirit, who is a living reality within the church. It is the Spirit who sustains the church in the truth of Christ.

To save the church as church calls for a new vision of the church, a new way of being church. Contemporary efforts at the renewal of the church calls for a retrieval of the pneumatological ecclesiology implicit in the NT.

### **A Church that Lives from the Spirit**

The church had its beginning in the Pentecostal Spirit. The birth, the growth and the expansion of the church has been in the power of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit constitutes the church, animates it and guides its course. Referring to St. Paul, *Lumen Gentium* says, "The Spirit dwells in the church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple" (LG 4; cf. 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19). The Spirit constitutes individuals as Christians and the church as the community of faith, hope and love. Apart from the Spirit nobody is a Christian, and apart from the Spirit there is no church. The NT presents the church as a Spirit-filled community on a missionary pilgrimage. The church journeys as a fellowship of Christ in the power of the Spirit. This is our faith, which is true today just as it was in the NT times.

The Spirit empowers Christians, through manifold charisms, to participate in the life and work of the church. Jürgen Moltmann points out:

Every charisma is both gift and charge. ... The Spirit descends upon the talents and potentialities which an individual possesses and activates them for the kingdom of God, for the liberation of the world. ... Through the Spirit the whole of life—a person's profession, his political responsibilities, his relationships in the family, ...—is taken possession of by Christ and quickened for the liberation of the world. ... Charismatically, the whole people of God is involved religiously, politically and socially in the all-embracing liberation movement of God.<sup>12</sup>

The vitality of the church depends on the charismatic gifts the Spirit showers on its members. But we are aware how ecclesiastical structures and personnel can either promote or discourage the charisms of the faithful, from the parochial level to the level of the universal church. It grieves the Spirit when the many and varied charisms that the Spirit generously bestows on people are not allowed to mature and bear fruits in the church. Fostering the varied charisms of Christ's faithful is a sacred duty of the pastors in the church. Cardinal Suenens stated in the aula of the Vatican II:

Pastors must make efforts to hear out with open heart, and again and again enter into living dialogue with laymen who, each and every one of them, is enriched with his own charismatic gifts, and most often has a greater experience in the life of today's world. ... The complex of charismatic gifts and ministries cannot actually build up the church, or serve the church, except in the liberty of the sons of God, which after the example of St. Paul every pastor ought to protect—and also promote.<sup>13</sup>

Wherever in the church honest efforts are made to promote the charisms of Christ's faithful and to bring them to fruition in the church's life and mission, we can affirm the dynamic presence of the Spirit, who animates the church.

The Spirit guides the church not only through its pastors but also through its prophets. When prophets are silenced, the Spirit who is the source of prophecy is stifled. Paul cautions us against disregarding the gift of prophecy. "Do not stifle the Spirit or despise the gift of prophecy with contempt; test everything and hold onto what is good and shun every form of evil" (1Thess 5:19-22). Prophecy directs the church to repentance of hearts, to renewal of structures and to new experiences and adventures. A church that looks at whatever is different from the already known with suspicion and decides to suppress it without testing seeks its security not in the Spirit but in its structures and establishments.

The Spirit given to us is not of slavery but of freedom. The Spirit frees us from all sorts of fear—fear of one another, fear of the new, fear of changes. The Spirit helps us to open ourselves to new experiences, welcome one another and test one another's views. Such an environment is possible only when we trust in the Spirit's abiding and enlivening presence in the church and in its members. An environment of trust and freedom in the church is a clear sign of the living presence of the Spirit. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (1 Cor 3:17). Reflecting on "The Indian Church of the Future" Kurien Kunnumpuram writes:

The Indian Church of the future will be a community of radical freedom. Freedom is one of the parameters of the Kingdom of God which Jesus proclaimed. ... One important aspect of freedom is the freedom to express one's views fearlessly and frankly. ... Today the most effective way of arriving at truth while respecting the freedom and dignity of the faithful is through honest dialogue. And the pastors of the Church have a duty to foster it. ... The Church of the people will be a participative community. All the faithful will have a say in the making of decisions in the Church.<sup>14</sup>

The Spirit liberates us from servile submission to law equipping us to follow the law of the Spirit in freedom. The freedom the believers experience in the church is a measure of the freedom the church grants to the Spirit in it.

The freedom of the children is not an antinomian licence. It is a freedom for righteousness. Those who are guided by the Spirit are free. Those who are not, are slaves to self-indulgence and do not inherit the life of the kingdom of God (cf. Gal. 5:18-23). The Spirit dwells in us, makes us God's children. The Spirit infuses a new and fuller life into us today, liberating us from the slavery of self-indulgence to the freedom of God's sons and daughters. Paul reminds the Christians at Corinth: "Do you not realise that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you and whom you received from God?" (1 Cor 6:19). We live by the Spirit; so we ought to walk by the Spirit. The Spirit leads us out of enslaved service to law to a new service, that of the Spirit (cf. Rom 7:6; 8:2). The law of the Spirit is love which does not enslave us but, on the contrary, empowers us.

The Spirit moves our freedom to noble acts of love and we offer ourselves as a living sacrifice dedicated and acceptable to God (cf. Rom 12:1). The Spirit of God invites us and the church to be vehicles of freedom and justice. Guided by the Spirit, the church participates in the liberation of men and women from all that enslaves them. It participates in the struggles of the poor and oppressed for life and bread. The discerning church is able to recognise the movements within the church which affirm the freedom, equality and dignity of marginalized groups and classes as vehicles of the Spirit's action. Jürgen Moltmann says, "The community of Christ is a community of free and equal people (Gal. 3.28f.), who in the charismatic diversity of their gifts and vocations live with one another and for one another, and in

the unity of the Holy Spirit together serve the kingdom of God in the world."<sup>15</sup>

### **Towards the Future**

Even though Vatican II did not explicitly speak about clericalism in its documents, the bishops were aware of the reality of this evil entrenched in the pre-conciliar church and its theology, and wanted to liberate the church from its stranglehold. The conciliar vision of the church offers the basics for a shift towards a de-clericalized church, though in a seminal form. Accordingly, our focus must shift from the church as a hierarchical institution to the more democratic concept of the church as the people of God. In this vision, the church is a sacrament of the reign of God in the world. It is the privilege of the church to be at the service of God's reign.

In order to avoid the pitfall of clericalism, it is important that priests understand, embrace and live out servant-leadership after the example of the Son of Man who came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). The church hierarchy must embrace the spirit of Jesus' servant-leadership and get rid of every image that is contrary to the servant-shepherd image of Christ. "Priesthood is not about your status, but about serving people by proclaiming the good news and attending to their religious needs, and the commitment to and solidarity with the poor or oppressed."<sup>16</sup> The church is a humble servant of the people of the world and so are its leaders. Kunnumpuram lays much emphasis on this gospel ideal of leadership and authority as service and its special significance in the Indian society and culture:

Ours is a country in which the priestly caste has for centuries oppressed and dominated over the Dalits. It is also a country where the rich and the powerful have been exploiting the poor and making them totally powerless. As a prophetic community, the Indian church needs to raise her voice in protest against the abuse of power and authority in the secular society. One way to make its protest credible is precisely to ensure that in the Church there is no place for power and domination over people. This calls for a return to the gospel ideal of leadership.<sup>17</sup>

What does such leadership style enjoin upon the bishop? *Pastores Gregis* has some indications:

This requires of the Bishop an attitude of service marked by personal strength, apostolic courage and trusting abandonment to the inner working of the Spirit. He will therefore strive to adopt a lifestyle which imitates the *kenosis* of Christ, the poor and humble servant, so that the exercise of his pastoral ministry will be a consistent reflection of Jesus, the Servant of God, and will help him to become, like Jesus, close to everyone, from the greatest to the least. ...

... Unless the episcopal office is based on the witness of a holiness manifested in pastoral charity, humility and simplicity of life, it ends up being reduced to a solely functional role and, tragically, it loses credibility before the clergy and the faithful.<sup>18</sup>

What is spoken of the bishop here applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the priests as well. As *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (PO) says, priests are consecrated, set apart, for the work of God. They are witnesses to Him and “dispensers of a life other than that of this earth” (no. 3). However, as the document says a little later, they are, “together with all Christ’s faithful, disciples of the Lord, made sharers in his Kingdom by the grace of God’s call. For priests are brothers among brothers and sisters with all those who have been

reborn at the baptismal font. They are all members of one and the same Body of Christ, the building up of which is required of everyone” (no. 9).

The church must increasingly become the dialoguing church envisioned by the council. In the very introduction, *Gaudium et spes* expresses the desire of the church to enter into dialogue with the world on all problems faced by humanity (cf. *GS*, 3). The council promotes dialogue as an ordinary way of the church in its inner life and in its external relationships. The church cannot promote the spirit of dialogue in the world for resolving conflicts, advancing common good, and strengthening human solidarity unless it promotes the same spirit in its inner life (cf. *GS*, 92). Within the church, the Council desires dialogue between the younger and older generations (cf. *AA*, 12), among lay-people (cf. *GS*, 43), between priests and people (cf. *AA*, 25), and between the bishop and the priests (cf. *CD*, 28). The priests must be willing to listen to the people whom they serve. The council recommends that young Christians and seminarians be adequately trained for dialogue (cf. *GE*, 1; *OT*, 19).

It is important that the laity claim its legitimate space in the ecclesial affairs. Myron Pereira suggests that bishops “share power and leadership with lay people.” He feels that “lay Catholics should be welcomed, not as an ad hoc response to the current crisis but as a fundamental structural support for a fully synodal Church.”<sup>19</sup> He quotes the church historian Massimo Faggioli: “Our best path is to reclaim from the institutional Church those ecclesial spaces that belong to the people of God, and not to the hierarchy.”<sup>20</sup> The Indian church has to take strong and effective measures to become the people of God. The hierarchy is a charism of service not a power structure in the church. The laity should



be recognized for what they are, namely, the church. When the potentiality, resources and charismatic gifts of the laity are played down, the church cannot effectively announce the good news and anticipate the reign of God.

## Conclusion

Clericalism is a deep-rooted sickness in the body of the church. It goes with and is reinforced by legalism, authoritarianism and centralization. This is true for the Indian church as well. The Indian church needs a radical conversion, a continual *metanoia*. Ordination does not exalt the ordained to a lordly status or to a holier domain. The primary truth is that in the Lord's church all are equal. In the church we need a culture of free, frank and fearless dialogue in an environment of equality. The ecclesiastical processes must be fair, prompt and transparent. The protection of the weak and vulnerable members of the Christian community—children, adolescents, young adults, women, the poor—need priority. The victims of sex abuse by the clergy need compassionate and sympathetic understanding. The rights of the accused come only after that. Victimization of those who dissent—many a time, not always, theirs is the prophetic voice of today—must end. There must be in the church a willingness to listen to them. An invitation to trust and dialogue is more helpful than show-cause notices. Finally, the way forward is the way of the Master, which is the way of the beatitudes.

## Notes

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## **Advaita and Theosis: The Spiritual Encounter be- tween the Spirituality of the Upanishads and the Experi- ence of Being in Christ**

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**Abstract:** This article explores the mystical convergence between advaita and theosis. Five elements of the Upanishadic advaitic tradition are located first: the Divine as mystery, and as the ultimate subject, the divinisation of the human, the immanence of the Divine in cosmos, and the resultant freedom. Then the three-fold dimension of the divine consciousness of Jesus is articulated: being sent by the Father, being in the Father and being one with the Father. John’s Gospel shows that Jesus wanted to communicate this threefold experience to us. This is what Church Fathers called theosis, the divinisation of the human; this is a birthing process. Having explained the terms advaita and theosis, the convergence and divergence between the two are explored. The article concludes with the proposal that Hindus and Christians could move on as spiritual co-