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Called to be Free and Joyous: The Challenge of Being an Indian Christian Today

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Abstract: Based on Kurien's last book, the author traces the person and theology of Kurien as "Freedom and Joy." The author shows that Kurien was a man of freedom and a larger vision. His commitment to the people was based on a deep and liberating experience of God. Truly, he was a man of joy. A liberated person who could accept and affirm everyone! A human (human, only and fully) and humane person, indeed! He was truly committed to the Church he loved and India, which was his home!

Keywords: Kunnumpuram, joy, freedom, Indian Christian.

Prof Kurien Kunnumpuram, SJ, one of the most creative Indian theologians, is quite convinced that freedom and joy are essential characteristics of our Christian existence. This article, meant to pay homage to a creative Indian theologian, founder of *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies* and author of more than 20 books explores the basic content of his final book, *Freedom and Joy*, which, I believe, characterises his own life!

We first familiarise ourselves with the person of Kunnumpuram. Then we focus on his understanding of freedom as essential to every Christian. This is followed by his appraisal of joy, the core experience of a Christian, in spite of all the suffering we experience. Then we briefly dwell on Kurien as a creative thinker and eminent theologian. Then we focus on freedom and joy as the essential features of being a Christian in today's world. We conclude by affirming the creative contribution of Kurien to the Indian Church in the light of Vatican II.

1. The Person: Indian Pioneer of Vatican II Reform

Prof Kurien Kunnumpuram, SJ (1931-2018) is no more physically present with us. He completed his PhD on Second Vatican Council from the University of Innsbruck, Austria, in 1968, just three years after Vatican II. The next year he joined Papal Seminary Community, teaching at Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth and remained here till 2013. This means he has spent half of his years (44 years out of 87) in Pune. On September 25, 2018, he was admitted in the hospital in a coma state, due to a blood clot in the brain. Sadly, after 29 days in a coma, he breathed his last on October 23, 2018.

He is an eminent thinker and creative theologian. He started the journal *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies* in 1998. He worked as editor of *Asian journal for Religious Studies* for more than ten years. Through both the journals, he has been attempting to promote an Indian Christian theology, which is rooted in the rich Indian tradition and the deep Christian heritage. He was the first editor of *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, published by Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune. Author of more than 20 books in areas of Church (Ecclesiology), Anthropology and Spirituality, he has contributed significantly to theologising in the Indian context. On 17-18, October 2018 a seminar was organised in Kozhikode, to honour his contribution to Indian theologising, where more than 40 participants studied 18 papers and explored the adventurous journey of a Christian.

One of the creative and significant Indian theologians, Kurien's last book, aptly titled "Freedom and Joy"¹ signifies his own life. As you know, Gandhi, dared to say, "my life is my message." Kurien would not really make that claim, but his life came very close to the message of this book. He is quite convinced that freedom and joy are essential characteristics of our Christian existence. As the pioneer who introduced the reforms of Vatican II to the Indian situation in general and Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, in particular, he had a tremendous impact on the new understanding of the Indian Church.

He, along with Francis D'Sa and George Soares-Prabhu, belonged to the second generation of theology professors at JDV, who brought about the emphasis on freedom (liberation theology) and Indian orientation (inculturation) in the campus.² Further, as you know, he followed the footsteps of great personalities like Scripture scholar Fr Francis Pereira SJ (1931-2014), liturgist Fr Lorenzo Fernando (1947-2017) and Indian philosopher Fr Noel Sheth SJ (1943-2017). They tried to promote an ambience of freedom, transparency and joy in the campus and theological thinking.

2. Freedom of the Children of God

After a careful investigation of the Kingdom of God which was central to the life and ministry of Jesus, the great Scripture scholar George Soares-Prabhu has concluded that Jesus was the supreme example of the freedom of the Kingdom of God. Soares-

1 Kunnumpuram, Kurien. *Freedom and Joy: Reflections on the Essential Characteristics of Christian Life Today*, Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune and Christian World Imprints, New Delhi, pp. 177+viii, ₹ 325/- ISBN: 977-93-5148-320-5. Most of the quotes are from this book. See also Fr Kurien Kunnumpuram SJ Passed Away | Papal Seminary, Pune, <http://www.papalseminary.in/2018/10/25/1202-fr-kurien-kunnumpuram-sj-passed-away> (accessed July 14, 2019).

2 The first generation being Fr Lionel Mascarenhas, Fr Carlos D'Mello SJ and Fr Joe Miranda SJ.

Prabhu states: “Jesus moves through the pages of the Gospel as the supremely free man. He is driven by no demons of greed or ambition – for the Son of Man “has nowhere to lay his head” (Lk 9:58) and has come “not to be served but to serve” (Mk 10:45). He is daunted neither by the pressures of heteronomous law (Jn 8:1-10) nor by the violence of established authority (Lk 13:31-33). With supreme freedom, he challenges the most sacred institutions of his people when his concern for his fellowmen urges him to do so. He breaks the Sabbath (Mk 7:1-15), touches lepers (Mk 1:42), dines with the socially outcast and with sinners (Mk 2:15-17).”³

Jesus’ mission was to liberate people. He said that the Spirit of the Lord “has sent me to proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Lk 4:18). Jesus frees human beings from sin and guilt (Mk 2:1-12). He frees us from the routine of ritualism (Mt 6:7) and the oppressive burden of the law (Mt 11:28-3 and 23:4). He liberates us from the terrible isolation to which we can be condemned by social ostracism (Lk 19:1-10), ritual uncleanness (Mk 1:40-45) or mental ill-health (Mk 5:1-21). He calls his followers to freedom from possessions (Mk 10:16-18; 10:21) and unhealthy family ties (Lk 9:61). He invites them to put all their trust in God so that they need no other security in life (Mt 6:25-34).

As a result of his personal encounter with Jesus, Paul exclaims: “For freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Gal 5:1).

In 2013 Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel* affirms: “God’s mercy has willed that we should be free”. Kurien will agree with it fully. So Kunnumpuram reminds us of the powerful words of St Paul: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters” (Gal 5:13). This call, issued many centuries ago, is most timely today.

3 See Fr Kurien Kunnumpuram SJ Passed Away | Papal Seminary, Pune, <http://www.papalseminary.in/2018/10/25/1202-fr-kurien-kunnumpuram-sj-passed-away> (accessed July 14, 2019).

3. The Joy of Being a Christian

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, an angel of the Lord told the shepherds: “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people” (Lk 2: 10). In the gospel of Mark, Jesus begins his public ministry by proclaiming the good news that the Kingdom of God has come (Mk 1:14-15). Now joy is one of the fruits of the Kingdom (Rom 14:17). Towards the end of his ministry, Jesus declared: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (Jn 15:11). After a careful examination of the life and ministry of Jesus, Kurien finds Albert’s conclusion relevant: “ Joy was, in fact, the most characteristic result of all Jesus’ activity amongst the poor and the oppressed. The meals he had with them were festive celebrations, parties. Jesus, obviously, had a way of ensuring that people enjoyed themselves at the gatherings. This scandalised the Pharisees. Rejoicing and celebrating with sinners was incomprehensibly scandalous (Lk 15:1). They could only assume that he had become a pleasure-seeker, ‘a drunkard and a glutton’ (Lk 7:34).”

Jesus tried to explain this joy and this celebration to the Pharisees by telling them three parables: The parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son (Lk 15). It is highly significant that each of these parables ends with joy and celebration. When the shepherd finds his lost sheep, he calls together his friends and neighbours and celebrates with them. And Jesus adds: “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Lk 15:6-7). Something similar happens when the woman finds her silver coin, which was lost. (15:9-10).

The last parable is extremely significant. After listening to the parable, one wonders: Who is the lost son? The younger son who went away from the Father and lived riotously with his women? Or the elder son, who, as a true Pharisee, kept the law most faithfully? The younger son was able to receive God’s forgiving love, rejoice in it and celebrate it. But the elder son was not able to

do so. So, he is really the lost son! To quote Nolan once again: “There can be no doubt that Jesus was a remarkably cheerful person and that his joy like his faith and hope was infectious... The poor and the oppressed and anyone else who was not too hung up on ‘respectability’ found the company of Jesus a liberating experience of sheer joy”.

Pope Francis points out that the whole Bible speaks of joy. Jesus himself “rejoiced in the Spirit” (Lk 10:21). He promises his disciples: “You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy” (Jn 16:20). Then he adds: “But I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (Jn 16:22). The disciples “rejoiced” at the sight of the risen Lord. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read that the first Christians “ate their food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46). Because of the preaching of Philip and the miracles he worked “there was great joy in that city” (Acts 8:8). The newly baptized eunuch “went on his way rejoicing” (8:39), while Paul’s jailer and his household “rejoiced that he had become a believer in God” (Acts 16:34).

Similarly, Pope Francis points out that the whole Bible speaks of joy. Jesus himself “rejoiced in the Spirit” (Lk 10:21).

4. Creative Thinker and Critical Writer

He certainly was one of the best and most eminent theologians of India. He has written scores of books and many theological articles based on research. His thinking and writings were marked by originality and creativity. He was bold in his thinking. Certainly, he remained within the faith of the Catholic Church, which was shaped by his study of the documents of Vatican II. His own doctoral thesis on the document of Second Vatican Council. He certainly was one of the best read persons on Second Vatican Council. He would profusely quote and refer to the documents of Second Vatican Council. It is he who helped the student body and staff members in Papal Seminary and Jnanadeepa Vidyapeeth to get more and more acquainted with Second

Vatican Council. He certainly was an epoch in the history of the Catholic Church. I would say, he has greatly shaped, fashioned and impacted by Second Vatican Council, which opened the doors of the Church to the world.

Gaudium et Spec guided him to take the realities of the world seriously, with its hopes and dreams. This is how Kurien pursued his theological thinking and writing. Courageously, boldly and in the light of Second Vatican Council.

Fr Kurien, apart from being our friend, was an eminent theologian, a skilled writer and a good formator.

Through the two journals he has been editing and more than 20 books he has written, he has impacted the theological life of Indian Christianity. The six Volumes of the Collected Works of Samuel Rayan he has edited have been remarkably influential in fostering a climate of freedom, responsibility and dignity.

At a personal level: He and I lived in the Papal Seminary for many long years. I can assert that even when I was a student and later as a staff that Kurien became the rallying point for the seminarians. The seminarians will turn to him in moments of difficulty. Kurien was always welcome them and make himself available to them. They trusted him, felt supported and encouraged by him. I could see that they loved him and they were very fond of him. So I would say Fr Kurien was a good formator in the seminary for the generations of priests in the modern world, after Second Vatican Council.

I thank God for the person, the theologian and the formator that Fr Kurien was. He was a creative thinker, an innovative guide and a courageous dreamer. He certainly was a gift to the church in India and in his way to the Universal Church.

Conclusion: Empowering Presence

These reflections based on Kurien's last book aptly entitled, "Freedom and Joy," published by Christian World Imprints,

was released on 17th October 2018 in a gathering of about 45 Christian thinkers, at SRC, Kozhikode, Kerala. They came together to reflect on the creative contribution that Prof Kurien Kunnumpuram to the Indian Church. Prof Kunnumpuram was then in a coma after a stroke and fall at Kozhikode. A few days later, on October 23, 2018, he breathed his last. May his soul rest in peace! May his vision of a Christian who is both free and joyous! And of an Indian who is truly open to other cultures and religions.

This experience of the joy of the first Christians should inspire all of us to find great joy in our Christian life. Unfortunately, according to Pope Francis, “there are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter”. Some of them walk through life as though they are taking part in a perennial funeral procession. Kurien reminds us of Pope Francis who invites Christians everywhere “to a renewed encounter with Jesus Christ”. For “with Christ, joy is constantly born anew.”

The freedom and joy that Kurien experienced and radiated make him an enabling, encouraging and empowering presence among us. He could accept and affirm everyone with their differences and unique qualities. It is because of persons like him that at Papal Seminary and Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, we can experience an atmosphere of freedom, joy and fellowship. Inspired by him, may we all become free and loving persons: enabling, encouraging and empowering each other, by accepting and affirming each one of us. In spite of our weakness, differences and inabilities!

In spite of his limitations, Kurien was a man of freedom and of a larger vision. His commitment to the people was based on a deep and liberating experience of God. Truly, he was a man of JOY. A liberated person, who could accept and affirm everyone! A human (human, only and fully) and humane person, indeed! He was truly committed to the Church he loved and India, which was his home!

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