



REVIEW ARTICLE

# Exploring Frontiers: The Mission of the Church Today

- Andrew Francis OFM Cap

## Introduction

Exploring Frontiers is an enlightening and challenging book written by Indian's most famous Missiologist, Rev Dr Julian Saldhana SJ.<sup>1</sup> It is a good resource for missiologists and missionaries, particularly in India. It takes up the crucial challenges contemporary missionaries confront in today's India and proposes some creative answers.

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1 The book is published by Claretian Publications, Bangalore, India in, 2016. Julian Saldanha, SJ, is a catholic Priest belonging to the Bombay province of the Jesuits. He is currently a resident serving as the professor at St Pius College, Goregaon East, Mumbai, the seminary of the archdiocese of Bombay. He also extends his service in several other theological institute in India and is a well known figure among the catholic forum. He also serves on the editorial board of *Mission Today*. It may be mentioned that that the book is fondly dedicated to Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, the author's alma mater.

He holds a Masters in Philosophy and a Doctorate in Theology from Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, where he is an associate professor and doctoral guide in the department of Missiology. He has published so many books and articles in theological journals across the world. His publications include *Conversion and Indian Civil Law* which was published in 1997 and *Mission Today-Themes & issues* published in 2009 which have been appreciated well by all. *Exploring Frontiers* which is his latest book, is in fact a collection of articles discussing various theological and pastoral issues, which he has written in different journals over the years. The list of those journals are given in the end as the acknowledgement by the author.

There is a clarity of thought and logical flow in arguments which will help the reader to comprehend the ideas without losing its subtleties. One of the greatest advantage of this book is that even though the content of the book is really an engaging one with sound doctrines, author has maintained simplicity in his narration. He used simple Language and ensured not to engage with theological jargons as he intended readership from all walks of life, and not just academics alone.

As Dr Michael Amaladoss SJ who has written forward to this book rightly mentioned, 'His historical knowledge stretches from the gospels to Pope Francis. His explorations are not just personal, but based on extensive historical and theological approach. He has an integral approach towards many issues. Many a times he proves that He is an obedient catholic as well as a strong critic. There is a fine balance between discerning respect for tradition and today's pastoral needs. The writings of the theologians, provisions of the canon law, official documents and the pastoral practice of the church are all consulted and interpreted'. (p.9)

### **Main Insights: Mission of the Church Today**

The book opens in the first chapter with an exploratory search to identify a space for theologians to express their views without losing the sense of respect towards the Magisterium of the church. The author states that [a theologian] 'must make a sincere effort to understand the magisterial statements and their foundation' (p.18) at the same time he articulates that 'The role of the theologian cannot be reduced to repeating magisterial statements' (p.17). He says that suitable freedom to express oneself is a provision given by the church documents. This freedom which is given to everyone irrespective of his status is not just a provision but an obligation. He quotes LG 25 'an individual person, by reason of the knowledge, competence, or outstanding ability which he/she may enjoy, is permitted and sometimes even obliged to express his/ her opinion on things which concern the good of the church.' This is to be done 'in truth, in courage, and in prudence, with reverence and charity'

(p.16) and he exhorts that theologians should use their freedom to express their views for the good of the church

The second chapter throws light into doctrine of the infallibility<sup>2</sup> pope and the church. He distinguishes the difference between ordinary and extra ordinary Magisterium. The extra ordinary magisterial is understood to be infallible and is subjected to stringent conditions described in ND 839 and in canon 749. Author observes that “the vast majority of the church’s teachings belong to the Ordinary Magisterium, which could presumably be sometimes erroneous.”

The author laments that there is a lack of effort from the part of the Magisterium to admit the errors even after realizing the mistakes. The author substantiates his point with his lengthy discussion on one of the most misunderstood teachings of the Catholic Church “Outside the Church there is no salvation” (*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*). The author rejects strongly the theory of evolution of dogmas, i.e., they change from one meaning to another, different from the one which the church previously held (p.39).

The author also takes up the justification to given to this axiom by a famous theologian Francis A .Sullivan who argued that this axiom should be understood within the limited geographical horizon of the time: “the Magisterium, theologians and Christians would have been only “ vaguely aware of a world beyond the limits the Christendom” where faith life were very prevalent and his historical and geographical conditioning where ignorance played a decisive role must have been as a reason behind this axiom. The author enters into a thorough historical narration of the things happened to refute the argument of Sullivan and provides substantial historical evidence that the

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2 Papal infallibility is a dogma of the Catholic Church that states that, in virtue of the promise of Jesus to Peter, the Pope is preserved from the possibility of error “when, in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Church

popes and councils were aware of the people and their faith life outside Roman world.( pp.40-43)

The third chapter is analysis in the context of pluralism which calls for dialogue of cultures and religion at a deeper level for greater peace and harmony. The author discusses his scholarly observation in the back drop of controversial 12/11 episode of Pope Benedict XVI's address at the University of Regensburg in 2006. The author rightfully claims that "the analysis, observations and reflections are offered with frankness, honesty and respect as the part of dialogue of cultures and religions to which pope Benedict XVI invited us(the church) in the last paragraph of his address at the university of Regensburg" (p. 56)

The theological discussion in the fourth chapter is to be considered as a stepping stone for an Indian theology of the Eucharist. The author identifies a Hindu pattern for understanding the concept of transubstantiation and real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. The author compares Hindu concept of *pranapratishta*<sup>3</sup> with the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation from different perspectives and offers his conclusion that there are basic similarities between these two concepts though there are points of differences. (pp. 57-66)

The fifth chapter is a lengthy discussion on the need for renewal of church structures and calls for a new canon. According to the author The church's Episcopal structure belongs to her human, visible element. He argues that many of the church's internal problems today are the symptoms of deeper malaise which has to do with current church structures. Therefore a remedy must be sought in reformation of these structures. He envisages a church where hierarchy is not pyramidal but circular, where collegiality and subsidiarity is counted, where human dignity is respected without any gender bias etc. the author proposes that serious considerations are to be given to the

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<sup>3</sup> *Pranapratishta* is the ritual acts in Hinduism through which life is endowed on a representation of God, so that divine reality becomes active in and through the image.

renewal of the norms regarding the appointment of the bishops and cardinals and for the ordination of women.(p 90)

The next chapter is an outcry towards the moral theologians in India to become 'Indian' moral theologians. The author argues that Moral theology in India must confront the questions and problems which our people face here (in India). Author reminds that such mandate is given by Vatican II. He quotes Ad Gentes 22: "From the customs and traditions of their people, from their learning and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and sciences, these churches are to borrow all those things which can contribute to the revelation of the saviour's grace, or the proper arrangements of Christian life" (p.93). This mandate was repeated by pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* with explicit reference to India. "in India particularly, it is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian Thought" (p. 93). This challenge arises from the need to take seriously the multiplicity of cultures, when developing an ethics and orienting it in the light of Christian faith. The diverse ethical systems and behaviour patterns (laws, customs, etc.) are historically conditioned. (p. 94). Author observes that Indian has highly developed ethical systems which need to be assimilated critically into a Christian moral theology and he gives the examples like the teachings of Buddha and Patanjali and suggests that 'the ethical values and outlook of Gandhi in modern times could become a starting point for an incultured Christian moral theology (p.100).

The seventh chapter is an attempt to understand the difference of perspective and approach towards other religions, between the Asian and roman mentalities, in their broad contours. He concludes his article saying that given the current situation of the Christianity becoming south, a new way of being church is taking shape where followers of other religions are being understood without any prejudice. It calls for a spirit of consultation and collaboration and proper exercise of collegiality and Subsidiarity from the Magisterium to comprehend this new way. It is observed that the negative evaluation of the

other religions has prevented Christians from deriving from their contact with the followers of these religions and this form of exclusivism does more harm than any good. 'The Indian Christological approach seeks to avoid negative and exclusivistic expressions. Christ is a sacrament, a definitive symbol, of god's salvation for the entire humanity... that however, does not mean there cannot be other symbols, valid in their own eyes, which the Christian sees as related to the definitive symbol, Jesus Christ' (p.117)

The eighth chapter is a lengthy discussion on the gentile back ground of Jesus and his mission and the author intends his narration as an indication on how Jesus' gentile back ground affected his approach to gentiles. He quotes the apostolic exhortation of Pope John Paul II, "Ecclesia in Asia," the incarnation of the Son of God took place in definite historical context and that context exercised an important influence on the life and mission of the redeemer as man. The proposition the author infers from these observations is that Jesus' life, mission and message would have taken on another form in a different context (p.121). From these arguments author opens another important key to world of 'inculturation' where the mission of the church is defined and articulated and lived in *Sitz im Leben*.

Chapter nine discusses about the need for paradigm shift in the concept of priesthood and pastoral ministry. The author laments that the present day understanding of the priesthood is not proper. he says 'the Christian priesthood is sometimes interpreted on the pattern of non-Christian priesthood'. It is important to capture the originality of the priesthood instituted by Jesus Christ, the origin and source of Christian priesthood, which was totally different from any other form of priesthood'. What is remarkable about Jesus priesthood is that he offered his sacrifice, not in liturgical solemnity or in the temple, but in the hour of conflict, the culmination of a life of faithfulness to his father and to his fellow humans, especially the deprived and the marginalized. The author goes on clarifying the issue saying that Even though the letter to the Hebrews applies cultic categories to the passion and death of Jesus Christ, the priority of the real life

sacrifice of Jesus over the temple sacrifices cannot be ignored.(p.132)

The author is very emphatic in rejecting the water tight compartmentalization of sacred with the secular when he stated “Jesus did not fit into the established priesthood of his time and appeared as a lay man.” He quotes famous theologian George Soares-Prabhu to substantiate his thesis. “And in Jesus the sacred interpenetrates secular and becomes one just like the soul interpenetrates the body and becomes one entity.” Incarnation impregnates the idea that sacred and secular are not two separate realities but’ two aspects, two dimensions , two levels of the same one world’ The striking features of the resurrection appearances is that Jesus appears to his disciples in secular contexts: while they were fishing, travelling or huddled together in fear etc. he is mistaken as gardener , a fellow traveler, a stranger. It is as if he wanted to remind his disciples , that he is to be found in the ordinary, “secular” events of daily life (p. 135).

He quotes German theologian L Rutt to substantiate his observation that the separation of salvation history from profane history results in truncated understanding of the presbyteral ministry while salvation history is to be distinguished from profane history, nevertheless it lies hidden and takes place within the history of the world, as a dialogue of divine offer and human response, of summons and decision. A part of this history of salvation has been given official, special and explicit interpretation in the bible (p. 136) we should have broader understanding of some of the key elements in Christian life and show that this ministry cannot be limited to the temple or sacred place. As a conclusion, he states quoting Vatican decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*<sup>4</sup> that the pastoral ministry aims at the building the kingdom of god and no activity which fulfills this goal is foreign to the presbyteral ministry except that which may incompatible with the nature of the ordained ministry which clearly defined in the congregation for the clergy ( CD 1755).

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<sup>4</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis* is the decree on the ministry and life of priests, promulgated by his Holiness, Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965.

The tenth chapter focuses on certain issues with regard to conversion which the author rightfully feels requires further discussion and deeper reflection. The author finds clear paradox in the catholic practices in India regarding conversion. When it is feasible for a non-Catholic or non-Christian to convert oneself into the Catholicism as per the provisions of the law, the conversion from one rite to another is impossible. The author recommends CBCI, the forum of the Indian catholic church comprises of three ritual churches to take initiative and settle the irregularities ( p.149). Another issue under discussion is the alarming situation of the troubles faced by the catholic church as a consequence of the aggressive approach of evangelical churches regarding mission who have a negative view of other religions and their faith. Today the press and critics of mission often do not distinguish between the attitude and approach of the Catholic Church and the evangelical groups that are active India ( p.151).

The author emphasize the need to exhibit the catholic understanding regarding the missions to the brothers and sisters who belong to other faith communities and advises that 'all the churches and groups engage in both inter religious and ecumenical dialogue, not only on the international but also on the local levels wherever it is feasible. And the church should have the courage to publicly distance themselves from these groups when the dialogue with them doesn't help to pacify the situation (p.152).

The spiritual life of man as presented in the eleventh chapter is like a journey from the garden to the city. The human life begin from garden which is the work of god and the life ends in the city is which is the outcome of human effort. It is important that man builds a city that can rightfully claimed by god but unfortunately the greed , pride and wickedness of human give rise to another city, which is in perpetual opposition to the city of god.(p.165) This article is also a good preview of St Augustine's famous novel City of God which tells the story of the dichotomy between city of God and city of Man (p.163).

Chapter twelve is a detailed study on the historical



and biblical background to the practice of giving a name or 'christening' and the canonical and liturgical prescriptions for this practice so as to enable Catholics to discern better for the proper use of the names. The author concludes saying that 'it seems best, in the present circumstances, to trust in the good sense of Catholics and to leave them free in the matter of name giving, as the church during the most of church history. Canon 855 acknowledges such freedom when the only restriction it mentions is, that the name should not be "foreign to Christian sentiment" (p. 174)

The next chapter is, in fact, an exhortation to the church in India which is branded as one of the 'Young churches' in the catholic church. The author encourages everyone to respect and veneration towards our ancestral dimension of Hinduism, a spiritual patrimony that has been handed down to the present generation. We should consider this heritage as blessing and as a matter of pride and not as a botheration. The author substantiates his argument with reference from bible and conciliar documents (pp.175-182).

The fourteenth chapter focuses Christianity is general with special focus on church in India. It emphasizes the fact that Christianity is not merely a religion but a way of life and the author suggests some practical tips for an Indian way of being a Christian (pp. 190-193).

The fifteenth chapter is a continuation of the chapter fourteen. It is a testimony to the fact that life and teaching of Jesus Christ exerted an enormous influence on Hindus in India. Among many other stories, a special attention is given to the example of Magnesh Padgaonkar, a well known Marathi writer, who published his own translation of the new testament with his insightful reflections. The author wants to emphasize a point here that discipleship of Jesus Christ carries more weight in Christianity than the mere membership in the church.

In the sixteenth chapter the author substantiates his arguments with statistics saying that the Asian churches in general and Indian church in particular hold a special responsibility for

the universal mission of the Catholic Church. He observes that already in 1986 hundreds of Japanese missionaries were found working in about 50 countries. Indian missionaries are present in about 160 countries around the world (p. 210). Among the Asian churches, Indian church stands out in terms of scholars, theologians, faculties of theology and pastoral institutes; also in terms of theological, scriptural, missiological and pastoral reviews (p.212)

The final chapter is a historical exposition of attempts by the church to defend its faith against the heretics, that had turned out to be very offensive and inhuman, which was later acknowledged and apologized by the catholic church during the reign of Pope John Paul II. Pope had Cardinal Ratzinger, then prefect of Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith Confess: ‘We recognize that even men of the church, in the name of faith and morals, have sometimes used methods not keeping with the gospel in the solemn duty of keeping the faith’ (p.237). He discusses those issues in the back ground of the genocide supervised by the church in the 13th century against ‘Cathars’ who were heretics. The author observes that these issues could have been dealt with through ordinary recourse of the law, but the catholic church dealt with it in the most unchristian way that could be possible.

## **A Critical Appreciation**

While appreciating intensity and the passion with which the author approaches the various topics discussed in the book, I respectfully disagree with him on certain reservations.

There is a dichotomy between what the author intends to achieve and what he has actually achieved. I have full appreciation about the former as the author is very successful in defining the certain theoretical and practical issues and positing a solution, while I am bit skeptical about the latter.

The great authors always ensured that each of their writings is a whole by itself, even if that means duplication of content from other books already published. This is done in

view looking at the potential readership of the same so that a reader gets all the author wants to communicate in full without depending on other sources. I get a sense that the author wasn't careful in this regard as a few concepts are taken for granted. Though the author considers them as simple and negligible, the common reader may not fully grasp them.

For example when discuss about the infallibility of the pope, the author went on challenging the concept without even clarifying the very concept itself. While the author is engaging with the various dimensions of inculturation in most of the articles, the author does not give a proper definition of inculturation. Another observation is that author is quoting conciliar and other church documents practically in every pages of the book in their abbreviated form. Unfortunately the list of abbreviations are missing which might keep the reader guessing.

When we speak about the gospel without compromise, we discuss only the gospel values not the person of Jesus. It is true that Jesus never compromised with the values, but he was always a man of compromise. He always compromised with the people. In this book the author is focusing more on the uncompromising value which is very commendable but ending up committing the mistake of not compromising with the people. The author launches a heavy criticism against the church hierarchy due to their intolerance and arrogance, but in the process ended up being an intolerant and arrogant himself.

Everyone knows about the bureaucratic politics in the world that manipulate systems and policies and Vatican is no different. The only difference is that while in the other secular context it is controlled by a group of professionals while in Vatican it is controlled by men in cloth with white collar who pretend to be professionals. In every case the signing authority has only minimal role though he/she assumes the full credit by virtue of his/ her signature. Everyone who is level headed will consider these aspects of reality when he/she enters into a deeper analysis of a situation unless there are ulterior motives of politicizing. Fr Julian could have spared a thought in this regard before launching an outright criticism against the papacy.

The author exhibits his shrewdness in plotting traps in his attempt to kill many birds with one stone, but in the process commits some marginal errors which might become too costly. There are some moments when a reader might ask ‘why we discuss what we discuss?’, though most of the times author is not side tracked. The author is very careful in dealing many interrelated issues without losing the focus of the main topic under discussion with a rational approach but it is clearly evident that at times passion takes over reason.

For example there is a reference about letter sent to pope Benedict from the Japan bishop’s conference against Neo-Catechumenal way requesting the pope to suspend this group for five years as it has spread “rampant confusion , conflict, division and chaos” in the Japan church. The author alleges that pope refused to listen to the request (p.72). The author does not reflect the logic behind it. One wonders why the bishops in Japan wanted the Rome to act when they themselves have the freedom to regulate renewal movements and covenantal communities of the church in their own jurisdiction, whenever it is required. Again why Rome has to suspend or suppress a covenantal community which is doing a great mission of re-evangelization in the Catholic Church especially in Europe because of some regional conflict such as in Japan.

The author presents himself as an opportunist when he is trying to present the pontificate of Pope Francis in the good frame in contrast with other pontificates especially against the pontificate of pope Benedict which the author wants go for an outright onslaught with his arguments.

Being a missiologist himself, the author seemed to have ignored the missionary dimension of the life and ministry of Pope Benedict XVI. It is very well known that the very choice of the name Benedict is itself is a symbolic expression of his missionary priority. He was shepherding the church against the danger of multiplicity and relativism which he considered as the greatest threat for the catholic faith and morals. One can only appreciate Pope Benedict for his brevity and courage. He was someone who took the fundamental approach of putting the

question of God and the question about Christ in the very centre, which then leads to a “narrative Christology” and demonstrates that the place for faith is in the Church. According to him our journey towards other realities should start from this gravity of faith otherwise there is a danger of getting lost in the ocean of multiplicity. He was someone like who kept reminding the sailors to fix the anchors ready before the journey embarks. Though it can be considered a back hand compliment for someone who was holding the panic button in the church for being very vigilant and committed, pope Benedict deserved a better deal than what he got in this book.

Finally, I sense a lack consistency with regard to some doctrines he refers to in the book. When he discusses about the axiom, “outside church there is no salvation “ his position on the theory of the evolution of dogmas can be read like this ‘ I submit that this explanation may be applicable to many other church teachings..(p.38), which also include some dogmas, at a later time in the same chapter author rejects this evolution of the theory of dogmas and call it heretical (p.39).

## Conclusion

This book, without any doubt, can be used as a guide for someone searching for a methodological tool to prepare theoretical foundation for any concrete issues either in social or ecclesiastical realm. He adopts a sort of phenomenological methodological approach bracketing all the readymade answers and initiate a exploratory research by reflecting theology, history , experience and common sense

This book is truly a remarkable contribution to theology in assisting the church in their task of facing the modern day challenges caused by change of times as Fr Julian has rightly mentioned in the introduction (p. 14). The entire text in the book can be considered as a preface for a future encyclopedia of Theology and Fr Julian is like a whistle blower who is trying to wake up many catholic brains who remain sedated in safety mode. Hence the actual challenge is place both the church

hierarchy to place the horse before the cart and to the Indian theologians to come out their comfort zone to engage in the intellectual pursuit of church to present message of Jesus more meaningful and the church more significant in Indian context.

The author intends to strengthen the feeble hearts in this regard by giving a clue to the mind of church when he quoted Pope John Paul II: “The church desires an independent theological research which is distinct from Church’s Magisterium, but shares with its common ministry to the truth of faith and to the people of god. Tensions and conflicts cannot be avoided” (p.14).

In most cases, the stream of water dries up before it reaches the sea shore unless it becomes a river! I am sure Fr Julian’s stream won’t dry up as there will be many streams to follow through to make it a great river. A magnificent river with many tributaries joining the vast ocean of the Catholic traditions

Date Received: 14 March 2018

Date Accepted: 24 Aug 2018

No of words: 4715

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## ON CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

“The authority by which the Christian leader leads is not power but love, not force but example, not coercion but reasoned persuasion. Leaders have power, but power is safe only in the hands of those who humble themselves to serve.” -John Stot

“A minister may fill his pews, his communion roll, the mouths of the public, but what that minister is on his knees in secret before God Almighty, that he is and no more.” -John Owen

“A spiritual leader will first and foremost, have a calling from God. His work will not be his profession, but his calling.” -Zac Poonen

“A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way.” -John C. Maxwell

“The Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self. That is the way Jesus came to reveal God’s love. The great message that we have to carry, as ministers of God’s Word and followers of Jesus, is that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because God has created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim that love as the true source of all human life.” -Henri J.M. Nouwen

“Every leadership role has a character driving force that will fulfill or decimate the ultimate purpose of the role.” -Ikechukwu Joseph

“Do not wait for leaders; do it alone, person to person.” – Mother Teresa