

# BP JOHN INITIATED RELATIONS WITH OTHER COMMUNITIES

Dr M.D. Thomas

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As a priest of the Diocese of Pala, Bp John Perumattam received a 'call within a call'. This call was an 'inspiration from above' and an 'inclination from within' to become a 'missionary'. He deemed it right to join the Missionary Society of St Thomas the Apostle, in view of helping his inclination grow towards fuller degrees. Coming to the 'homely city' of Ujjain as a pastor was indeed the spontaneous 'journey' of the new-born missionary to 'further altitudes'. It could be said without exaggeration that the diverse 'initiatives' that emerged in the missionary region of Ujjain thereafter were mere realizations of the 'missionary dreams' of Bp John.

He spared no pains in exploring the geographical, historical, cultural and religious genius of the sacred land of Ujjain. The ancient tales of Ujjain', like royal ancestry, legends, education, art, music, literature, religious devotion and peaceful co-existence of people, whispered volumes of 'missionary prospects' to him. The 'remarkable cultural heritage of Ujjain' and of the 'Malwa region', along with its characteristic rule by king 'Vikramaditya', the heart-thrilling poetic classics of 'Kalidasa', the twelve-yearly 'kumbha mela', the auspicious dip in the holy river 'Kshipra', the spirit-filling 'darshan' of the Jyotirlinga of 'Mahakaal', the conscience-provoking 'observatory', the 'Malwai folk culture', and the like, invited Bp John to venture into superior heights in his missionary reach out.

Bp John experienced an inner urge to improvise diverse ways of reaching out to people of Ujjain and around, in the tradition of values lived by Jesus. The educational institutions, the medical care units, the social welfare projects, the non-formal schemes of social integration, the attempts of special care for the handicapped, etc opened immense opportunities of extending humanitarian service to people. Obviously, all the above missionary activities were effective means of securing a lot of friends and acquaintances among people of all communities of caste, class, religion, ideology, profession, social tradition, etc. The natural outcome of all such involvements was a 'hallowing friendly atmosphere' all around as well as a 'satisfaction within' of being of assistance to others in living fuller lives as human beings.

'Initiating relations with people of other communities' was indeed a 'milestone' in the missionary journey of Bp John. This was a new way of perceiving people of other affiliations of faith and ideology, in line with the exceptional spiritual insight discovered and handed over by the Second Vatican Council in the sixties of the last century. He opened a 'Centre for Inter-Religious Dialogue' in the 'multi-religious' as

well as predominantly 'Hindu religious city' of Ujjain. He appointed missionary priests who had facility for the local language 'Hindi' and depth in Christian faith as well as taste and skill in the field of making friendships. Engaging in friendly dialogue and interaction with people of all faiths, ideologies and cultures was the objective of the Centre. The orientation of this 'new commitment' was 'establishing harmonious relations' with all people, irrespective of their personal and communitarian affiliations.

'Staying in creative and sustainable relations with people of other communities' is without a doubt an art. That is the 'new way of being a Christian and a missionary', as well. The foundation of this new way is sharing a 'common origin, common existence and a common destiny' in the life of the humans. This 'new mission' is 'grounded in the mission of Jesus', who was, without even a pinch of discrimination, a 'man for all', especially the so called 'others' and the 'unsociable'. His model was his 'Father in Heaven' who 'does not discriminate even the good and the evil or the righteous and unrighteous'. Pope John Paul II affirms the 'two-sided spiritual character of this mission' when he says, 'as we open ourselves to one another, we open ourselves to God'. 'Making friendship with persons of all walks of life' from different communities and sectors of the society is in fact a 'mutually enriching endeavour' and is both 'humanly and spiritually' beneficial. It is not an undertaking of leisure or convenience, but is an integral duty for all times, as a Christian as well as a noble human being. This 'special mission' of promoting creative relations with people of all communities is as inexhaustible a journey as human life is.

'Pioneering and guiding the destinies' of such 'cross-border relations' and 'harmonious living' in the soil of Ujjain, which was unheard of till then, is to be credited into the account of Bp John Perumattam. His memories, I am sure, will be cherished by all concerned persons in the large multi-faith and social network thus built up through the significant contribution he has made. Now it is up to the successors of Bp John to facilitate the process of blossoming of this 'special mission' towards its fullest realization, in line with the 'multi-cultural human and spiritual fibre of Ujjain'. Bp John Perumattam deserves a singular reward from his divine Master and Inspirer Jesus for 'opening the way' for the 'qualitative dimension of Christian mission' in the universal sense.

May Bp John Perumattam Rest In Peace!

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