

DIALOGUE FOR HARMONY IN ASIA

An exposition of 'Church in Asia', Chapter 5

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1. THE OCCASION

The occasion of the Apostolic Exhortation 'Church in Asia' is, obviously, the Great Jubilee Year 2000, which underlines the 'newness' of the 'Good News', in special manner. New possibilities of sharing the good news seemed to challenge the missionaries! At the advent of the new Millennium, various continental Synods negotiated the issue, in view of evolving a consciousness of a 'new evangelization'. The special fruit achieved was 'the spirit of dialogue' with other faith traditions (CIA 29, p.46).

2. FOLLOW UP

A spirit of dialogue with the followers of other religious affiliations is the sacred task handed over to the whole Church, by the declaration 'Nostra Aetate' (08.10.1965) of the Second Vatican Council. This is considered to be the guidelines or the 'Magna Carta' of religious dialogue for our times. This challenging duty is addressed to every Christian (CIA, 31, p.48). Spirit of dialogue would mean for the Church extending positive sentiments towards others and establishing a relationship with them. It is pursuing the very same concern expressed in the Encyclical 'Ecclesiam Suam' (CIA, 29, p.46). It is a shared responsibility as suggested by the Encyclical 'Redemptoris Missio' (CIA, 3, p.49). The Apostolic Letter 'Tertio Millennio Adveniente' is a further invitation to proceed with the spirit of openness at the opportune juncture of the Millennium (CIA, 31, p.48). Evidently, the CIA Chapter 5 is just a follow up of the dialogical spirit received in the sixties.

3. MOTIVATION

That which motivates the Church to maintain a spirit of dialogue with people of other religious persuasions is the renewed understanding of the evangelizing mission of the Church. It is the precious finding of a new search into the Person of Jesus. The inspiring motto for dialogue is 'a better world' and 'a brighter future' (CIA, 29, p. 46). The spirit of dialogue facilitates a joint acceptance of the divine call by the partners in view of a more human and spiritual existence. This noble gesture awakens a genuine hope in the future realization of this innocent motto, especially against the individualistic and market-oriented world of today!

4. CONTEXT

The spirit of dialogue is to be applied in the context of Asia. As the largest continent of the earth, Asia is a multi-dimensional ‘home to two-thirds of the world population. Plurality of the languages, cultures, traditions and religious sensibilities mark the unique characteristic of this continent. It has cradled a variety of major and minor spiritual streams of the world. It has an extensive treasure of religious and cultural values like silence, contemplation, thirst for learning, philosophical insights, art and music, compassion, solidarity, tolerance, family and community spirit, filial devotion to the parents, elders and ancestors, accommodativeness, closeness to the nature, yearning for God, wide spiritual insights, reformatory quality, etc. (CIA, 6, p.8-9).

Moreover, Asia has an economic reality of having in it highly developed, developing and the poorest countries of the earth at the same time. It has diverse political systems like democracy, theocracy and military dictatorship. There are many social situations and occasions of tense inter-play between minority and majority communities. Our continent is exposed to rapid changes on the globe. It is badly affected by cultural, ethnic, economic, linguistic, political and social selfishness, marginalization, isolation, exploitation and corruption. It is also challenged by population growth, communal conflicts, poverty, illiteracy, under-development, threat of other groups, etc. (CIA, 7-8, p.10-13).

The spirit of dialogue has to respond to this double-sided reality of Asia. A sense of complementariness and multi-dimensional harmony has to be awakened in us in response to the uniquely rich cultural heritage, which needs to be taken to further heights (CIA, 6, p.9). Besides, the abject reality of Asia is to be responded to by an honest commitment to a value-based approach of making a better Asia. Such a creative spirit of dialogue will highlight the privileged sense of ‘being Asian’ (CIA, 6, p.9). An unselfish and fervent solidarity with men and women of Asia (CIA, 29, p.47) is the starting point in this endeavour.

5. FOUNDATION

The spirit of dialogue is founded on Jesus. It is grounded on the logic of Incarnation (The Holy Bible, NIV, Michigan, Phil. 2, 5-11, p. 1337). Incarnation is becoming the other; and the Church proposes this other-oriented approach of Jesus for dialogue. Dialogue has originated from the Father’s loving dialogue of salvation with the humanity, through the Son in the Holy Spirit (CIA, 29, p.46). As a sacrament, the Church has to make the spiritual reality of peace present to others, by being avowed to peace-making (The Holy Bible, NIV, Mt 5.9, p.1097) and thus prove herself to be the offspring of the same heavenly Father Jesus holds on to. As an agent of unity she has inevitably to enter into dialogue with all peoples, in every time and place (CIA, 29, p.47). Dialogue extends beyond the Christian world to the

followers of every other religious tradition. The basis of this dialogical attitude to life is the religious yearnings found in every human heart (CIA, 29, p.47). The search for truth imbedded in the mind of the humans is the universal foundation for dialogue.

6. NEGATIONS

Dialogue is not simply a strategy for peaceful co-existence among peoples (CIA, 29, p.46). The spirit of dialogue does not accommodate the act of dialoging to be instrumentalized and made use of for some other end. It is not like a screwdriver by which the other can be fastened, loosened or tightened. It is not to be a hook to catch hold of or to handle the other. It should not be a diplomatic treatment of entertaining mere formal exchange of words or superficial dealings. It is not like a machine, which conditions the air in order to make it conducive to pleasant living. Dialogue cannot have any hidden agenda. It is not meant to dominate and win over the other. It is not for suppressing or sidelining the other. It is not for converting or replacing the other. The spirit of dialogue the Church inherits from her Master is a continuous call to go beyond the worldly motives and ways of mutual dealings, in all matters including faith.

7. REQUIREMENTS

The practice of dialogue requires a mature faith. Only genuine faith convictions qualify one to engage in the mission of dialogue. One who is not well settled in one's faith cannot interact with other believers successfully. As a Christian one should have imbibed an experiential knowledge of the fullness of salvation Christ offers. One has to be deeply immersed in the mystery of the person of Christ. One has to be endowed with the unique qualities of Jesus. Special qualities of Jesus make a Christian eligible for the mission of dialogue. Being humble and gentle like Jesus is the basic prerogative of a Christian who wants to dialogue with believers of other faith positions. A Christian has also to be happy living in the faith community he or she belongs to. Dialogue has to be harmoniously settled in the evangelizing mission of the Church (CIA, 31, p.49).

8. IMPLICATIONS

Inter-religious dialogue is a dialogue of life and heart (CIA, 31, p.49). It is first and foremost getting rid of prejudices, misunderstandings and intolerance (CIA 31, p.49). It is a basic openness to other believers. It involves a willingness to listen to the other, a desire to understand and respect him or her in his or her differences (CIA, 31, p.49). It is advancement in inquiring and experiencing the truth of the other. Further, dialogue would mean searching for good in the other. It is a readiness to learn from the other. It is passing over to the other and encountering the other. It is accepting the other and bearing witness to the other. It is being present to

the other and standing by the other. It means loving the other, promoting the other and serving the other. The dialogue partners are as if a 'mirror' to each other. They see their human and spiritual fitness in one another. Dialogue, thus, is a source of mutual conversion and transformation. It is a joint search for the Higher Power. It is walking together in life.

Dialogue is a way of life. It is a complementary way. One realizes the need of the other in one's human and spiritual journey. It is a democratic way where every one has a definite share of life, right and duty as well. It is a humble way of life. It means not biting more than what one's mouth can contain. It is a relational way of life. It means being a brother or sister, friend or companion to the other in seeking the Eternal. Dialogue knits the humanity into one single family or community. Dialogue is an integrated way of life. All the parts get fitted together to form a single whole. It is as if many parts share one body and functions together (The Holy Bible, NIV, 1Cor.12.12-28, p. 1306). It is a harmonious vision of life; it is an honest and peaceful approach to life; it is an aesthetic way of life, too.

9. DIMENSIONS

Dialogue is a multi-dimensional reality, increasingly so today. Scholarly exchanges between experts in the various religious traditions or representatives of these traditions, common action for integral human development and defense of human and religious values are some forms of dialogue already taking place with good results (CIA, 31, p.49). There is a dire need of exploring new ways of encountering other religions—more applied to the life contexts than doctrinal and dogmatic. Being in touch with each other, keeping alive a spirit of encounter at all levels and collaborating between one another for peace and good of the humanity is the noble motto that should constantly guide Christians and people of other religious persuasions.

Besides, the mission of dialogue has to take an integrated approach. Rather than having the interaction limited to the religious area, dialogue has to be inter-linguistic, inter-traditional, inter-cultural, inter-class, inter-caste, inter-professional, inter-national, inter-community, inter-family, inter-personal, and the like. Dialogue has to take place between the leaders and the members of the respective religions. It has to go between the fundamentalist-fanatic factions and the open-minded-generous sections of the respective religions. The mission of dialogue has inevitable to facilitate interaction between the economically high and low classes of the society as well as between the learned-educated and the illiterate-uneducated of the society. Only such a commitment of dialogue can assure advancement in achieving peace and good of the society.

10. FRUITS

The fruit of dialogue-attempts between the followers of different religious traditions is not a tangible one. It is qualitative and slow. It requires a great capacity for enduring patience. It eliminates certain misunderstandings (CIA, 31, p. 49), destroys certain deep-rooted prejudices, helps revise certain false assumptions and facilitates broaden certain overly narrow conceptions and outlooks. It awakens self-understanding in the partners in the presence of each other, as if a ‘mirror’ to each other. The quality of one’s person as a spiritual seeker as well as a human being comes into the limelight. Thus, purification of one’s faith is the first fruit of the mission of dialogue.

Secondly, mutual enrichment (CIA, 31, p.49) of the dialogue partners of different religious streams is another significant fruit of dialogue. Experiencing the other helps one discover certain aspects of life and certain dimensions of divine mystery at greater depth, which one has perceived less clearly in the religious tradition one has inherited. The partners thus get awakened to receive new perspectives and insights about one’s own faith positions and practices. The other understanding of one’s own faith vision thus developed makes it easy for one to go closer to the other. Journeying in to the faith world of the other gets coupled with securing renewed self-understanding. Thus dialogue assures mutual enrichment, par excellence, in the faith vision, faith position and faith style.

The third fruit of dialogue is the establishment of a community of harmony (CIA, 31, p.49) beyond the boundaries. Harmony presupposes a process of co-ordination and agreement between and the Creator the created and between the diverse items of creation. More specifically, harmony would mean an integration of various faith positions, with a joint focusing of the same object of faith. Without such a harmony perspective human life stands scattered, if not shattered. Only a socially situated faith is worth being lived. Harmony would mean an experience of togetherness between the divine and the human as well as between the diverse dimensions of human faith. An integrated faith vision sets the humans on a joint pilgrimage towards the divine, operating together in the details of life. Such a ‘we-feeling’ only can assure the common destiny of the human tally with their common origin. The harmony perspective of life is the surest way to the making of a human family, with the Divine or the Higher as the head of it. This is the most precious fruit of human and spiritual quality the mission of dialogue accords with. Such a spiritual ideal should motivate and foster appetite in the dialogue partners to tread the tedious path of dialoging with the ‘other’.

TO SUM UP

Church in Asia has to be born again after the fashion of Jesus’ incarnation. She has to discover anew the diverse possibilities of living her faith, so that she can have an integrated growth, enjoy a creditable existence and make a qualitative contribution, in line with the genius of the Asian soil. The Apostolic Exhortation ‘Church in

Asia' proposes a spirit of dialogue, which would facilitate the Church to rise up to a sense of complementariness and harmony, to suit the vital need of 'being Asian'. Deep spiritual experiences and elevating insights and as well as human maturity are the needs of the hour to make the above ideal a lived reality for her.

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