

FOURTH PLENARY ASSEMBLY: WORKSHOP DISCUSSION GUIDE

THE LAITY IN POLITICS AND PUBLIC SERVICE

A PERSONAL SHARING BY AN INDIAN CATHOLIC

PART I**Introduction**

I use India as my immediate context to highlight the questions I shall ask. However, the basic thrust or probing on the role of the lay person in politics and public life would be the same in every Asian country.

I come from the world's largest functioning democracy based on a constitution that is committed to the rule of law and guaranteeing basic freedoms, including the freedom to worship the God of your choice.

It is a beautiful country of many contrasts: where the Green Revolution has happened, yet millions are hungry; where Nobel laureates have been fathered, but most people are illiterate; where children sleep in the sewers of homeless cities in the shadows of the Taj Mahal. A country that has staffed the world with doctors but cannot heal its own wounds; where in the firelight of cowdung men discovered the abstraction of algebra; where Mahatma Gandhi is more loved than his teachings; where a nuclear device has been detonated but not woken up its sleeping millions; where in the Babel of 14 official languages and over 200 dialects there is only one word for a magnificent land — India.

The Church in India

In this land, where 683,000,000 people occupy an area of 3,276 sq. kms., stands the Indian Church, Christians numbering 20,000,000 and Catholics numbering 12,000,000, a mere 1.71%, of which 12,000 belong to the clergy. The following statistics may be of interest:

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Numerical Distribution of Catholics:

	World 1980	Asia	India 1980
1. Total population in thousands:	4371266	2581687	683810
2. Catholics in thousands:	783660	62713	11308
3. Ecclesiastical Units:	2452	380	109
4. Pastoral Centers:	359253	47282	23377
5. Diocesan Priests:	257409	13555	6828
6. Religious Priests:	156191	13581	4905

Territorial Distribution of Catholics in India:

State	Total Population in 1000s	Catholics in 1000s	Density %	% of the Catholics in India
Kerala	25403	3649	14.36	36.27
Tamil Nadu	48901	2087	4.27	20.75
Maharashtra	62693	715	1.14	7.10
Andhra Pradesh	53403	648	1.21	6.44
Bihar	89923	560	0.80	5.57
Karnataka	37043	571	1.54	5.68
North East	26610	442	1.66	4.39
Goa	1082	383	35.40	3.81
Madhya Pradesh	52131	298	0.57	2.96
Bengal	54485	261	0.48	2.59
Orissa	26272	217	0.83	2.16
North West	114445	181	0.16	1.80
Uttar Pradesh	110858	48	0.04	0.48

The Indian Environment

In talking of the Christian in politics and public service it is necessary to understand the environment in which I live as a Christian. Particularly so because India's peculiarity is that there is no sphere of Indian life that is not politicized. From economics to education, from religion to culture.

It is an environment where customs are maintained, however anachronistic; where everything that is ancient is good; where smugness is a part of life; where there is a constant refusal to see what is happening around us, the ability to ignore the obvious either through withdrawal or through denial; an environment where most of the rich contribute nothing to society, not even to their own communities; where the beggar, like the priest, has his function; where the act of giving is enough; where degradation is accepted as a punishment for the evil of one's previous life; where most people refuse to get stirred up, to get angry, to get excited and worried about what is happening to them and to others; where rituals are everything, where symbols and labels are sufficient. It is enough to have a "tree planting week." No trees need be planted. In such an environment Mahatma Gandhi, when he returned to India from South Africa, gave a biblical message of service. He said "Before the throne of the Almighty we shall be judged not by what we have eaten nor by whom we have been touched but by whom we have served." But service is not an Indian concept and so Gandhiji is remembered and his message is forgotten. This is so because the accent is on the hereafter and not the here and now. It is a country where, as Nirad Chaudhuri says, poverty and humiliation are so much a part of our everyday life that we no longer get shocked about it; in fact we deny its existence and refuse to see it.

Another aspect of the environment is to live in the poorest country in the world. Let me describe it to you. The narrow, broken lanes with green slime in its gutters; the choked back-to-back mud houses; the jumble of filth, food and animals and people; the baby in the dust, swollen-bellied, black with flies; starved children defecating on the roadside while a mangy dog waits to eat the excrement. People with physiques which suggest the possibility of an evolution downwards, man to ape. Deformed beggars crawling and squirming on the ground in a form of degradation unbelievable and outrageous to a tourist or a visitor, but to us Indians something so obvious, so routine, that it is not seen.

The third aspect of the environment I live in is of a society that is full of contradictions. On the one side there are tremendous pressures to conform; on the other side there is a tremendous amount of tolerance. With this tolerance, coupled with the fact that we are a democracy politically, a Christian in India has tremendous freedom and it is this freedom itself that is a challenge. Because I am a Christian, I am more free than others; because the freedom of a Christian is a freedom from fear and discouragement, the freedom to labor in the name of Jesus Christ.

PART II

The Challenges of the Indian Environment

The Church in India, the Christians in my country, the Gospel we confess and proclaim here are challenged, I think, from some five different quarters. These five sources of challenge are surely distinct, but also as surely interrelated, even dialectically, as action and reaction.

There is *first, the challenge of the situation* which we have described earlier. It is a situation of social imbalance and insanity, with wealth and power concentrated in the hands of a few who therefore live in a world of their own, which is integrated into the affluent world of the West, while the vast majority of the country's immense population whose work produces the wealth of the land are forced to live in poverty and destitution and abject dependence. As Christians we are challenged to action. There is an urgency in the summons, the hour is pressing. For the situation is already on fire, burning like the bush Moses saw in the wilderness.

There is, *secondly, the challenge that comes from the people*. The challenge of the situation is indeed the challenge of the people. Today the people have made up their mind to struggle for their liberation, to win back their land and their right to live in dignity as human beings in a society which is free and just. Their resolve is to take their life into their own hands, and shape the future with responsibility. They are discovering an universal fellowship of suffering, and are transforming it into an ecumenical movement of liberation struggle. This is the challenge to the Church and its faith.

A third source of challenge is the mounting repression with which the people's movement is being met. The ruling class is unleashing its reserves of violence against the dalits, the workers, the landless, the women, the powerless masses of the Indian people. The poor are being tortured, raped, maimed, massacred, and dispossessed by the rich and their private police, and by the governments at the behest of their masters. Bills are introduced, laws are enacted, ordinances are passed, arbitrary orders given, illegal acts condoned, and brutalities overlooked in order to curb, crush and kill the movement of the people. This is a challenge to the people. It is a challenge to us, to religions and churches, to spiritualities and theologies.

We are challenged in the fourth place by leftist movements. Two factors here claim our attention. The first is the keen social awareness and the deep social concern these movements have shown. They have proved to be remarkably sensitive to the presence of established injustice. They have gone further and analyzed its systemic roots and structural causes.

They have a history of struggles against these institutionalized forces of oppression and a history of hard work to awaken and organize the people to become active subjects of their own future and their destiny. The second challenging factor is the leftist affirmation that the world can and must be changed and the revolution brought about by men and women themselves with no dependence upon or control by any divine overload. That calls our very roots in question. We are challenged then to a serious study of the Marxian project for the world, and to a searching criticism of our religious traditions, positions, and suppositions as well as practices.

The fifth and last challenge comes from the cultural context of Asia. Are we going to follow some Marxian (Russian, Chinese, Cuban) way of people's liberation and adopt some Latin American models of theology? Or are we prepared to search and work for an authentically Asian path? Concretely, this is presented as a challenge posed by the phenomenon of Gandhiji. Gandhiji is unique and Indian in bringing together into an organic unity religion, moral and spiritual values, political action and prolonged struggle for liberation from foreign domination. He introduced into this unitive vision the principle of *satyagraha*, with its three main components, namely, non-violence, non-cooperation and civil disobedience. His saintliness won the support of the masses for the freedom struggle. It is therefore often said that it is Gandhiji with his *satyagraha* that forced the British out of India and made the nation independent and free by making use of means which are specifically Indian and spiritual but which were employed in a new way, for the first time and with success, in the arena of politics. This, however, is less than half the truth. We must get behind the myth and ask who has been really pointing to an Indian path to liberation: Gandhiji or the mass of the people?

The Church's Response

The Church in India by its own historical development, by reason of its alignment, life-style and structures, has played no effective role, but there are some sincere and committed Christians — priests and religious are among them — who disenchanted with the institutional Church leave it to work for the poor, as well as a few committed individual Christians who stay with the Church and join or form non-political party grassroot groups to conscientize the marginalized.

These moves are usually looked upon by Church leadership and by traditional mission agents and social agents of the Church with a measure of apprehension and uneasiness. For the new approach (i) contradicts many traditional perceptions, interpretations and loyalties of the Church; (ii) it is potentially and sometimes actually conflictual and confrontational, while the Church with its minority status, its institutional burdens and its financial dependence on foreign sources is anxious to avoid con-

frontation with the ruling classes; (iii) further, the new approach does not fit into the legal, feudal, middle-class and upper-class, paternalistic and “judaizing” traditions of institutional Christianity with its concentration of concern on individual, interior, otherworldly salvation available only or mainly in the Church.

The Church is a microcosm of society and is, therefore, stratified like the society. Therefore, the dominant class in society inevitably assumes leadership within the Church. This leadership makes sure that the Church accommodates itself to the present society which they themselves profit from. They privatize Christian faith, delinking it from economic, social and political activities of human life.

The tendency of the institutional Church to accommodate itself to the status quo is reinforced by its condition as a religious minority. In the Northern States of India Catholics are thinly spread and the Church is a numerically negligible factor. Moreover, barring Kerala, Catholic communities remain by and large backward socially, educationally and financially. The Church in these circumstances tends to assert itself by demonstrating its presence to the larger society around. Hence, it runs huge and prestigious institutions, like schools, colleges and hospitals which serve mostly the rich. It seeks security in these institutions and this craving for security keeps it away from the problems of the masses. Such a Church cannot be sensitive to the urgent needs of the country. The “elite institutions” of the Church are like “beautiful prisons built at great cost.”

An institutionalized Church will only try to maintain itself and support the status quo in the society. Such a Church will not be able to make an option for the poor. It goes without saying that it will become increasingly irrelevant to the people. Hence the vision of the Church as a visible structure needs corrections. The Church must be viewed as a communion of people firmly bound by the values of the Kingdom. Sharing in the same commitment to Jesus and his Gospel, they move towards the Kingdom. The Church is a people’s movement immersed in the human history and it tries to bring about universal brotherhood. It does not associate itself with any unjust social order, but by offering prophetic criticism tries to change it. In this process the Church loses itself. In fact, the Church finds its fulfillment only in offering itself completely for the service of humanity. As the leaven, it gets dissolved in the lump of humanity, transforming it from within. It dissolves itself and is gradually consumed by the Kingdom which it engenders. The Church must be the great “love force” moving through the inner recesses of humanity and shaping mankind into a universal brotherhood.

PART III

Before taking up the issues for discussion, let us reflect on the following sets of statements:

- I. Liberation from sin and from the Evil One includes liberation from the consequences of sin, the work of the Evil One in the world to disrupt and destroy the harmony amongst men, whose consequences include injustice, poverty, oppression, violation of rights.
- II. The very command "Love one another as I have loved you" underlies the social nature of all that Christianity involves. Someone once suggested that this simple commandment would demand a revolution in every nation in the world — for the first demand of any true love was the duty of acting justly. Love implies an absolute demand for justice.
- III. Acting on behalf of justice is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel — the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.
- IV. In today's environment should our responses be moral vs. immoral (i.e., according to the laws of nature as against the laws of nature) or is it a choice between being responsible versus being irresponsible?
- V. The call of a Christian is to be fully human. Obviously, it means the fulfillment of one's civic duties and a concern for government. It also means the call no longer to play it safe but to get involved.
- VI. Historically, the Church, which after the fall of the Roman Empire took over the "administration" of the Western world, has become a parallel institution to the state with its own government and its own laws which are strictly enforced.
- VII. The Holy Father on his visit to India was described, very rightly, as a man who had the courage of his convictions. Do we need to have the courage of the convictions of the Pope or the courage of our own convictions? This being so, must Asians find Asian (contextual) responses to our situations?

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is Politics Dirty?

Quotations from a Catholic magazine: "If the antics of our elected representatives to State Assembly and Parliament are any criterion of the hygienic condition of our politics, then without a shred of doubt, politics is dirty. It is not merely dirty, it stinks; it stinks from stem to stem. If we desire to discover the very personification of corruption, injustice, inefficiency, imbecility and what-have-you in that odious list, then (exceptions severely apart and few) look at the political faces and you will see them writ large."

"Politics is a noble activity of the human spirit and a powerful influence on the lives of individuals and institutions."

Politics is the art of the possible — Therefore, variable, compromising, expedient.

2. Is Political Activity a Choice or an Obligation for a Christian?

Is it out of line with Christian ethics, as we are often told from the pulpit?

Can we find Christian reasons for non-participation? What might be the problems and consequences of non-participation?

3. Do the Laity Act in Politics as Members of the Church but Not in the Name of the Church?

Is it an autonomous activity? Can it be so when those participating are involved in an apostolate of a lay nature which participates in the *mission* of the Church in its *service* to the world.

4. Should Political Activity be a Community Response?

a. Are there common issues that we need to react to as a community of God's people — injustice, for example? Is it necessary to do it through a political party? As a parish group? Or can we do it as individuals through non-political, non-denominational social groups?

b. Should we establish, promote Catholic parties?

c. A survey on the religious affiliations of senators in the U.S.A. revealed that the biggest group were Catholics. The senators themselves did not know it, nor did the government. Is it advantageous to be anonymous?

5. Joining a Party Essential?

Is it safer to be an independent? Membership in a party brings clout. Does it also involve compromise or faith?

6. What Parties can a Catholic Join? Are there any Ideologies that are Taboo?

In a variety of situations do we have a variety of options? Is any ideology acceptable as long as it is dictated by Gospel values? Is a manifesto the guideline of what the party does? What latitude do we have?

“One faith,” says *Octogesima Adveniens*, “can lead to difficult commitments.” Is this the guideline for plurality of options?

What about options in the context of culture, concrete situation? Sometimes options are justifiable but not in terms of faith. Is faith too demanding, exacting?

What different approaches are needed in Asia?

When radicalism becomes inevitable (in dictatorships, for example) will it lead to division in the community?

7. What Kind of Responses are Expected of Christians in Politics?

Critical — Decry, but what about responsibility to provide solutions?

Prophetic — Give witness with courage but there are dangers — be prudent.
Denunciatory

Problem-solving — Bearing the burden of work to better the
Direct intervention situation.

In a party one cannot act apart from the fellow members. What is the answer to the dilemma between prophetic roles and operative commitment to a party which seeks to be an instrument of government and to participate as such in the wielding of power?

8. Role for Small Minorities like Some Asian Countries

The temptation to ally myself with those in power. How long? To what extent? At what cost to the Church's mission?

9. Is There an Asian Response — Rooted in our Context and Culture?

- (a) Western — Control society through laity in politics. Asian — Serve society through laity in politics.
- (b) Can we separate Church and State?
- (c) Can the clergy roles be any different from those of laity in a country where anti-clericalism is absent?
- (d) In India, there is an inclination towards: (i) public-interest litigation, (ii) *satyagraha*. Are there other possibilities in preference to violent revolution?

10. The Use of Violence

In certain conditions, is it an acceptable choice? Is faith an impediment to revolutionary praxis?

11. Formation for Political Life

What models are available? Which are relevant to Asia?

12. To What Extent can the Church be Involved?

Is it not a fact that the Church has always participated in politics? It participates through the Holy See, diplomatic channels, e.g., the Helsinki Conference.

Should its Political Participation be General and Indirect?

- (a) — through intervention at the level of values and ethical judgments
 - orientation of choices for Christians
 - education on Church teachings
 - analysis of issues for social and moral dimensions
 - measuring public policy against Gospel values
 - participating with others in debate over public policy
 - speaking out with courage, skill and concern on public issues involving human rights, social justice and life of Church in society
- (b) — through the autonomous and responsible involvement of laity whose specific function is to give Christian animation to politics; where lay people take political office or jobs in public service to forward the reign of God
- (c) In exceptional and extraordinary circumstances, will not the Church have to intervene directly?

How can the Church be in politics for the common good, but leave partisan politics to the laity?

- Can Church property be denied use for party meetings?
- Can the Church as an institution remain free from controversy?
- Can priests, nuns refrain from direct participation in politics? Public service?

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