

ASIAN
HORIZONS

Vol. 5, No. 3, September 2011

Pages: 590-594

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**PASTORAL MINISTRY IN THE
SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH AND NEW
CHALLENGES FOR
RE-EVANGELIZATION**

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Year: 2011

1. Relevance

The Syro-Malabar Church, a Christian community founded by St. Thomas, the Apostle, has a unique status in the whole Catholic Church. The ancestors kept up their faith in spite of many odds and knots during the centuries. One conspicuous advantage of this Church was that she was planted in a soil which was thoroughly saturated with religious heritage. Hence this Church had a solid

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foundation and steady growth. The zeal and active participation in the celebrations held in churches, high-profile Christian family set up and solidarity, dazzling institutions, structures and organizations and the flourishing number of vocations to priesthood and religious life are the factors that contributed to the present image of a flourishing Church.

All the factors that favoured the unique position of the Kerala Church, as mentioned above, are seriously challenged by some recent developments in the Christian community in Kerala. The present century is characterized by large scale emigration of Catholic Youths and adults to foreign countries in search of jobs and marriage partners. This leads to an unscrupulous introduction of western life-style in Kerala seriously disturbing the age-old Christian heritage and family values. This has been accentuated by globalization, post-modern trends, consumerist attitude and secularist tendencies in Kerala society especially among the children and the youth.

Except for the external grandeur of the institutional set-up of the Kerala Church, the true Christian life and community fellowship seem to be eroding much faster than what happened in western countries. Incoming of foreign money in large sum along with the blind imitation of western life-style seem to upset the social equilibrium, widen the gap between the rich and the poor and render the liturgical and devotional practices mere symbols of status and jubilation. High-profile and greatly esteemed Christian family traditions are also seriously threatened. There is a serious drain of genuine vocations to priestly and religious life due to dangerous reduction of number of children and depletion of family values.

From a universal perspective everyone is aware of certain global threats and disorder emerging from globalism and post-modernism. World leaders of all fields seriously discuss certain 'emergencies' like educational, religious, moral, social and environmental. More serious challenge to the world powers as well as to the Church is the growing 'hopelessness' and restlessness of men and women of the present society. Religious fundamentalism, terrorism, economic depression, ecological crisis, fear of war and addiction to drugs and alcohol render the present generation sceptical of the future of humankind. There is a colossal decline in the number of practising Christians in the so-called Christian countries in the west and this crisis is a global one and the Christians in Kerala seem to be moving in the same line. There is a general apprehension about the future of the Church, of religions and even of the present generation of humanity.

Such global situation is certainly a challenge for the Church at all levels since she is the sign and sacrament of salvation and the prime agent for world transformation. This dissertation is an attempt to realize the seriousness of the problem and to search for a solution for the present predicament and to propose some pastoral solutions.

2. Search and Findings

Genuine leaders of the society or of the Church cannot make a compromise with the present predicament in the society or in the religion. A serious study of the problem and search for solutions from a Christian perspective would lead one to the following conclusions and solutions:

1. Jesus is the Redeemer of humankind and Saviour of the world. He is the *Lumen gentium* and hope of all peoples. The Church as the "Mystical Body" of Christ is to continue his mission in the world. From the time of the foundation of the Church till the end of times it is the unmatched and unique responsibility of the Church to be the sign and instrument of unity, social transformation and eventually of the full realization of the Kingdom of God on Earth. But in the current era of the early third millennium, as we read the signs of the times and evaluate the present global scenario, we are inclined to assume that the Church community and especially the pastoral leadership could not achieve this goal during the past centuries.

2. The Church cannot but own the lion's share of the responsibility of this appalling global situation because the Church is entrusted with threefold priestly functions of teaching, shepherding and sanctifying the world and transforming it to a Kingdom of God.

3. In the present context the Church cannot but rise to the occasion and offer peace, hope and salvation to people of this globe because she is the *Lumen Gentium* and the sign and instrument of salvation and world-transformation. Realizing this responsibility the Church convened the ecumenical Council of Vatican II with an acclaimed agenda of *aggiornamento*. But the efforts for renewal were too slow to confront the threats of post-modernism and its by-products.

4. Church's renewed attempt for *aggiornamento* is the call for the 'new-evangelization' and the prime agent of this is the lay people, the prominent section of the Church. The clergy in the Church are the prime-movers of new-evangelization by empowering and coordinating the lay persons for the above.

5. The Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala has a unique role in the present context to be the leaven and catalyst of a Gospel culture in this multi-

religious society in India. She has an additional role of being a universal missionary of 'new-evangelization' as so many of her young men and women are going abroad as emigrants in other countries. This can be realized only by a 're-evangelization' of this community by building up a renewed and vibrant lay people.

6. Re-evangelization of the community is possible only through a well planned, well structured and concerted pastoral effort. Many of the pre-Vatican pastoral paradigms were defacing factors and so much counter-productive and the subsequent attempts for pastoral renewal in post-Vatican period were only partially successful. Hence the clergy of this Church should be willing to initiate a thorough shift in the pastoral style, throwing away all old defacing factors and putting on a new modality of ministry envisaged by Jesus.

7. Most important areas where the pastoral paradigm shift is required are identified as nine. They are: a shift in the pastoral attitude, pastoral methodology, Christian worship, pastoral relationships, pastoral spirituality, pastoral style, priests' life-style, pastoral leadership and modality of evangelization.

3. Methodology

As a whole, an analytical and critical method is applied for this dissertation. The Kerala society in general, the Syro-Malabar community in particular and the Catholic ordained ministers who work among them are the target groups. This research moves along the Biblical, ecclesiological and historical channels because the Christian community and the New Testament priesthood are directly involved. The Oriental and liturgical perspectives are very relevant here since the community belongs to East-Syrian tradition and liturgy is part and parcel of pastoral ministry. The present social scenario, the life of the Christians and the priestly ministry are dealt with strictly in a Christian perspective using theologically sound principles.

4. Division of the Work

Setting a platform for the whole dissertation is done in the first chapter, titled as *Syro-Malabar Church: Historical and Socio-Religious Context*," by a brief enquiry into the formation of this community in the history with special stress on the pastoral and hierarchical development, post-Vatican renewal and the present socio-religious situation in Kerala. The second chapter, "*Pastoral Ministry: Historical and Theological Exploration*," explores the origin of Christian priesthood in Jesus, the High Priest. The way it was understood and practised in the Apostolic and Patristic period, an overall perusal of

its development during the history and the dreams of the Fathers of the epoch-making Vatican II regarding a renewal of the ministerial priesthood are also explored here.

The major part of the third chapter, titled as "*A Paradigm Shift in Pastoral Style*," is set apart for earmarking certain parameters for a paradigm shift in various aspects of pastoral ministry in the Syro-Malabar Church as envisaged by the New Testament, directions of Vatican II, subsequent Church documents and the demands of the post-modern society. This is made as a guideline for further discussions.

The fourth chapter, *Community Building, the Prime Parish Apostolate*," focuses on the ministry of community-building by the *tria munera* of Christian ministerial priesthood within the 'perforated boundary' of the parish community while the fifth chapter, *Parish: Evangelization and Social Transformation*," deals with ministry beyond the above 'boundary' of the parish, namely, the apostolate of evangelization, ecumenism, inter-religious harmony and social transformation.

The dissertation comes to a fruition and culmination in the sixth chapter with the title, *Pastoral Ministry Today: Tasks, Challenges and Threats*, which is, in fact, a recapitulation of all that has been formulated in the previous chapters but remoulded to offer a hermeneutical and pastoral response to the present ecclesial and social scenario. It also envisages the global and regional tasks of the community especially of its leaders for the building up of the community and new-evangelization. Finally, the basic challenges and present threats for pastoral ministry are briefly dealt with propping pastoral suggestions for encountering these threats.

To sum up, the new-evangelization proposed by late Pope John Paul II can be realized only by a deep renewal of the pastoral ministry according to the model of Jesus Christ but adapted to the needs of today. As the circumstances and situations are favourable, the Kerala Church should take the initiative for the pastoral renewal and it is high time for the same.