

A SYNODAL CHURCH IN MISSION – ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS: PERSPECTIVES FROM TAMILNADU

Sahayaraj Stanley, SJ♦

Arul Kadal, Chennai

Abstract

The synodal Church is marching towards the mission of fulfilling the dreams of the Kingdom of God. As we trace the history, one can chalk out three distinct models of this missionary Church. The first model is of a 'conquering' Church. In the past, the Church had conquered foreign lands and cultures and planted itself in those unfamiliar territories. Next came the 'intellectual' model in which the Church wanted to enter into a highbrow, cognitive dialogue with the local cultures, in the hope of eventually winning people's minds and hearts. The third model is of the 'prophetic' Church. Roughly, basing its tenets on liberation theology, the focus of this third model is a commitment to an all-inclusive liberation. The synodal Church's three 'inner' ethical implications, and three 'outer' ethical ramifications are further elaborated. For a fruitful 'inner' ethical orientation, it is argued that this synodal Church needs conversion and needs to believe in the 'good news' of the Lord and help people grow in mature faith. Other ethical 'outer' challenges include tackling the menace of clericalism and removing the curse of casteism. Ultimately, the synodal Church needs to herald a prophetic approach with a total societal transformation. These ethical approaches may further sharpen and crystallize if the

♦ **Sahayaraj Stanley, SJ** is a Jesuit, from the Jesuit Madurai Province. He holds a licentiate in Moral Theology from Academia Alfonsiana, Rome, and a doctorate from Leopold Franzens University, Innsbruck, Austria. He worked for two years as a Coordinator in a special project on Globalization in *Werkstatt Weltweit* at the Jesuiten Mission, Nuremberg, Germany. His areas of interest are Ignatian Spirituality, Leadership Studies, Globalization, and Business Ethics. He serves as Professor and the Director of Arul Kadal, the Jesuit Formation Centre for Theology, Chennai, Tamilnadu. Email: sahaysj@gmail.com

Church and its faithful carefully read the signs of the times and act accordingly.

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1. Introduction

Mission, as we understand it today in the Catholic Church, has a very long and chequered history from the early days of Pentecost up to the present preparations for the Synod in 2023.¹ Stephen B. Bevans points out the seven stages of mission in the Acts of the Apostles. It begins with missionary activities before Pentecost and ends with the mission to the gentiles from the 12th to the 28th chapters of the Acts of the Apostles.² This mission is intrinsically connected with Synodality today.

By synodality, we mean a Church that journeys together with all its people. One can ask a very fundamental question “Why should we journey together?” Michael Amaladoss asks this basic question and writes,

We belong to the Church which is a communion of people constituting the Body of Christ who is called and sent—missioned—to proclaim the Good News of Jesus by word and example in the process of building up the Kingdom of God, as a community of freedom, fellowship, and justice, in the world.³

Quoting George Soares Prabhu, Amaladoss points out that the synodal process does not consist only of meeting and talking together, but must lead to collaborative action in building communities of the Kingdom.⁴ So, we all march together in synodality towards building God’s kingdom on earth, reflecting the values of Christ. The synodal thrust is not completely new. The early Church has always been attractively and actively synodal. In modern times, since that particular thrust of ‘synodality’ was

¹I am taking many of my points from a very insightful book by Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder. See Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context – A Theology of Mission for Today*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2004.

²Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in Context*. Stage one was before Pentecost, Stage two was Pentecost itself, Stage three points out to the life of martyr Stephen, Stage four talks about Samar and the Ethiopian Eunuch, Stage five is about Cornelius, and Stage six focuses on the life of the Church in Antioch and this last stage zeroes in on the mission to the Gentiles.

³Michael Amaladoss, “Journeying Together in the Spirit,” in *No Synodality without...*, ed P.R. John, Delhi: ISPCK & Vidyajyoti College of Theology, 2022, 18.

⁴Amaladoss, “Journeying Together in the Spirit,” 18-19.

missing, the Holy Father has again reiterated the need for it. So, before venturing into the topic proper, it is imperative to understand “Mission” today. I would like to highlight three models of Mission to have more clarity and understanding. Then this paper will discuss three ‘inner’ ethical implications and three ‘outer’ ethical implications and challenges.

2. Three Models of the Church

2.1. The ‘Conquering’ Church – Saint Francis Xavier

Perhaps the first model that the Catholic Church employed to spread the good news of the Lord was the conquering method. In this model, the Church was the sole agent and protector of faith in Christ.⁵ The Church went out in full force to convert pagans and pagan lands so that they be ‘evangelized’ and become true disciples of Jesus Christ. The dictum that could be attributed to this type would be the Cyprian adage, “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*” (outside the Church there is no salvation).

The authors point out that the present Latin or Western Catholic Church in India has its origin in the missionary works of the Portuguese.⁶ Though Saint Thomas brought Christianity to the Tamils in the first century, later the Franciscans came in 1518 and started to work in Goa and its neighborhood. It is also pointed out that St Francis Xavier arrived in Goa in 1542 and he was known as the Apostle of Latin Christianity in India.⁷ It is also a fact that a huge number of the coastal Tamils were converted to Christianity because of protection from unfavorable local kings and chieftains.

While discussing about the Christian missionary understanding of presenting Jesus to the local people, it is important to bring in the Kannada theologian Stanley J. Samartha. S.J. Samartha, the noted Indian theologian, distinguished between ‘Helicopter’ Christology and ‘Bullock-cart’ Christology. The helicopter Christology, as the name suggests, was something foreign that comes and lands with much fanfare and sound, making its presence felt by imposing its power.

The bullock cart, where the wheels are constantly in touch with the earth, represents a people-centered Christology. The helicopter Christology also signifies Christology from above and the bullock

⁵Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 40.

⁶A detailed narration can be read in Kuncheria Pathil & Dominic Veliath’s *An Introduction to Theology*, Bangalore: TPI Publications, 2003, 194.

⁷Pathil & Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology*, 194.

cart signifies Christology from below.⁸ In my opinion, the missionary history can also be seen from this ‘power’ discourse!

2.2. The ‘Intellectual’ Church—Robert de Nobili

In this second model, the mission of the Church was a bit intellectual. It was a well-established fact, that many of the Western missionaries had negative attitudes and perceptions about local customs and local traditions.⁹ De Nobili tried new methods of evangelizing the local people. He behaved like a brahmin sanyasi with *kudumi* (tuft of hair) and saffron clothes. He entered into scholarly debates and discussions with the brahmin scholars.¹⁰ He thought that this method would win considerable conversions. Authors also note that De Nobili wanted to point out that by becoming Christians, they would not lose their culture, language, and customs, including belongingness to their caste.¹¹

This intellectual Church was interested in the illumination of mind and heart through dialogue with other religions. One can also see this as the continuation of what Robert de Nobili started with the scholarly brahmins. I would like to connect this model with that of the Christian Ashram movement.

Authors point out that Protestant Christians were the pioneers in this field, but later, Catholics too joined in this movement and made very valuable contributions.¹² There were ashrams of Protestants like S. Jesudason, E. Forrester Paton, P. Chenchaiyah, and of Catholics like Monchanin, Abhishiktananda, Bede Griffiths, Francis Acharya, Vandana Sara Grant, and Amalorpavadass.¹³ It is observed that ashrams were centers to develop a spiritual-contemplative approach to theology and also served as meeting points for Hinduism and Christianity.¹⁴ As I write this, in my opinion, the Christian Ashram movement is losing its sheen, at least in Tamilnadu.¹⁵

⁸See Sunil Koshy, “Theology of Stanley J. Samartha: A Missiological Appraisal,” in https://www.academia.edu/41920856/Theology_of_St Stanley_J_Samartha_A_Missiological_Appraisal.

⁹One cannot say that all the local cultural practices were emancipatory and revolutionary. Cultures can sin and when the Gospel encounters the culture, the sinful nuances of that particular culture get pruned.

¹⁰Pathil & Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology*, 205.

¹¹Pathil & Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology*, 205. This model of inculturation is questioned and might have been one of the major reasons for the present-day caste-related problems in the Tamilnadu Catholic Church.

¹²Pathil & Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology*, 209.

¹³Pathil & Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology*, 209.

¹⁴Pathil & Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology*, 209.

¹⁵A brief note about Saccidananda Ashram, Shantivanam, Kulithalai, Trichy District. This ashram was founded in 1950 by two French Benedictine monks, Jules

2.3. The “Prophetic” Church – Stan Swamy

The third model, or the third development, can be categorized as the “Prophetic” Church. Here, mission is seen as a commitment to liberation and transformation.¹⁶ This view of the mission is not very new. Even in the nineteen seventies and eighties, people like Amalorpavadass, one of the pioneers of inculturation in India, propagated this vision.¹⁷ In the past, Amalorpavadass stressed that preaching the Gospel in India needs to include the triple experience: (1) A lived experience of the human condition (the world) in society today, in this period of history, (2) A personal, inner experience of the Gospel, and (3) An experience of being a Church, a community of sharing.¹⁸ While stressing the need for a proper theological understanding of the religious traditions of mankind and thus paving way for new relationships for inter-religious dialogue, he also kept on emphasizing the call for liberation and the creation of a just society.

According to Bevans and Schroeder, this model too is very old and has its beginnings in Antioch, and the key figure there was Irenaeus. In the later trajectory, we have people like Francis of Assisi, Martin

Monchanin, who took the name of Parama Arubi Ananda (the bliss of the Supreme Spirit) and Henri Le Saux, who took the name of Abhishiktananda (the bliss of Christ). By taking these names and giving the ashram the name “Saccidananda” (“Being, Consciousness, and Bliss”), a Hindu term for the Godhead used as a symbol of the three persons of the Christian Trinity, they intended to anticipate the Second Vatican Council and the All-India Seminar, to show that they sought to identify themselves with the Hindu “search for God,” the quest for the Absolute, which has inspired monastic life in India from the earliest times. Father Monchanin died in 1957 and Swami Abhishiktananda died in 1973. In 1968, the ashram was taken over by Fr. Bede Griffiths. Fr Bede Griffiths passed away in 1993.

Another Ashram experience was begun in Chennai by the Jesuit Fr. Ignatius Hirudayam. The founding father of *Aikiya Alayam* in Chennai worked tirelessly for the promotion of inter-religious dialogue for many years. He died in 1995. After his death, the research work of *Aikiya Alayam* got shifted to Loyola College, Chennai, and was rebaptized as IDCRC (Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religion). For more information about Fr. Ignatius Hirudayam, please see: Sahayaraj Stanley SJ, “The Contribution of Ignatius Hirudayam SJ towards Inter-Religious Dialogue,” in *Dialogue, Conversion and Beyond* ed. Anandam Lourdu, Trichy: Iniaivai Publications, 2019, 119 -133.

¹⁶I am taking this idea from Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in Context – A Theology of Mission for Today*.

¹⁷This vision and view can be seen in almost all the writings of Amalorpavadass. See D.S. Amalalorpavadass, *Vision, Thrust and Policy for Evangelization (Concrete Proposals for the Function of the CBCI Commission)*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1985.

¹⁸Amalorpavadass, *Vision, Thrust and Policy for Evangelization*, 7.

Luther in his early days, Wesley, Karl Barth, Teilhard de Chardin and Gustavo Gutiérrez who advocated this model of liberation.¹⁹

This model does not focus more on the fall, but it rather emphasizes that the human person is created in the image and likeness of God and is called to perfection. It is this conviction that made Irenaeus say, the glory of God is the human person fully alive, and to be alive consists of beholding God.

In this model, Jesus is presented not only as a great prophet, but also as a liberator. God plans his incarnation, not because of our sins but because He wanted to share with the human community His fullness of life. Jesus was, in his time, a great champion of the poorest of the poor and he gave this poor faceless person a new face and identity. Since he touched the structures of power, he was brutally murdered, teaching people a lesson, and pointing out the cost of rebellion and disobedience to the political powers. It is pointed out that in Jesus' life and death, God has spoken the final word of life and liberation, and this is a direct legacy of Irenaeus.²⁰ As an example of this model, one can boldly cite the recently martyred Stan Swamy.²¹ The octogenarian died on 5th July 2021, while serving a prison sentence in Taloja Central Jail, Maharashtra. His crime was his conscientization work among the tribal people!

Aloysius Pieris writes, "The prophetic communities that have arisen as a result of being baptized in Asia are now on the trajectory of poverty linking Jordan to Calvary...for they have been baptized in the Jordan of Asian religions and on the Calvary of Asian poverty."²²

So far, we have discussed the three progressions of the mission history in this land. Now, we go into some specific ethical implications of the Synodal Church.

3. Synodal Church—Some Specific Ethical Implications

This synodal Church which is galvanized toward fulfilling God's dream on earth has two dimensions. One is the inner journey that takes place within the body of the Church, in the minds and hearts of the faithful. The other is the outward journey where the Church as the visible body of the Church catapults itself in meeting the

¹⁹Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 37.

²⁰Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 64-65.

²¹I deliberately use the word 'martyred' for in the eyes of many, Fr. Stan Swamy was a social prophet and his death was an institutional murder orchestrated by the State. Prakash Louis powerfully presents his arguments in his book. See Prakash Louis, *Fr. Stan Swamy: A Maoist or A Martyr?* Delhi: Media House, 2021.

²²Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, New York: Orbis Books, 1988, 50.

demands of establishing the Kingdom of God. So, for me, one is an inward journey, purifying the individual soul of the believer and the collective communities of believers! The outward journey is the one that interacts with the world in a frontal manner—in dialoguing, prophesying, and building communities of hope!

So, in another sense, this journeying together, with an ongoing evaluation, itself is a ‘prophetic’ mission, understanding the inner churnings of the faith community with all its lights and shadows and at the same time, journeying together ‘for’ a mission. This mission is charged with the notion of ‘synodality’ today.

What is the purpose of this synod? The Vatican is very clear. The preparatory document says,

The purpose of this Synod is not to produce more documents. Rather, it is intended to inspire people to dream about the Church we are called to be, to make people’s hopes flourish, to stimulate trust, bind up wounds, weave new and deeper relationships, learn from one another, build bridges, enlighten minds, warm hearts, and restore strength to our hands for our common mission. Thus, the objective of this Synodal Process is not only a series of exercises that start and stop but rather a journey of growing authentically towards the communion and mission that God calls the Church to live out in the third millennium.²³

One can decipher the concerns of the Church in this three-dimensional way. First, one has to read the signs of the times. Second, one has to build bridges across cultures and communities and the third dimension would be by doing all these, getting ready to live out a challenging life, bearing witness to the Good News in the third millennium.

3.1. The Synodal Church needs Conversion

The first ethical implication is the Church readying itself for a radical conversion. Conceivably, one of the fundamental themes of Holy Scripture is conversion. God creates the human person in His image and likeness, but she/he goes away from Him in disobedience. It is not only from God and His covenantal relationship and commandments, but from himself too that the human person gets alienated. All the ruptured and damaged relationships with God, with nature, and with his fellow human persons, all need to be

²³ Vatican, Summary of Bulletin, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission. Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality,” 07.09.2021. See <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/09/07/210907b.html>. Accessed on 4th September 2022.

mended and repaired—all these can happen only if there is genuine conversion.

The synodal preparatory documents talk about ‘synodal conversion’ and the need to zero in on this focal point in many ways. The preparatory document reads, “Together let us ask the Lord for the grace of conversion and the interior anointing needed to express before these crimes of abuse our compunction and our resolve courageously to combat them.”²⁴ The document further says,

To ‘journey together’ we need to let ourselves be educated by the Spirit to a truly synodal mentality, entering with courage and freedom of heart into a conversion process that is indispensable for the continual reformation of which [the Church] always has a need, in so far as she is a human institution.²⁵

The preparatory document also talks about the double dynamic of conversion between Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10). Both Saint Peter and Cornelius undergo a dramatic conversion, paving way for the opening of new vistas and ground-breaking novel avenues. The root Hebrew word *shub* denotes a radical change of mind. So, clearly, one of the important ethical implications is the much-needed conversion! This conversion needs to begin from inside the Church not only for its elite members but also for the ordinary faithful. One can always mend one’s ways to renovate and rejuvenate oneself and thus energize the local faith community!

3.2. The Synodal Church Needs to ‘Believe’ in the ‘Good News’

The second ‘inner’ ethical implication is believing in the ‘good news’ of God. In a crystal-clear way, the synodal documents ask all of us, Christ’s faithful, to dream about the future Church and its trajectories. The synodal documents call us all to be dreamers of a new Church that is ‘mission-oriented.’ The documents also call for building new bridges across broken borders, witnessing Christ in creative, new ways possible. The preparatory documents show more light to be rooted in the past to spread wings in the future saying,

This journey together will call on us to renew our mentalities and our ecclesial structures to live out God’s call for the Church amid the present signs of the times. Listening to the entire People of God will help the Church to make pastoral decisions that correspond as closely as possible to God’s will. The ultimate perspective to orient this synodal path of the Church is to serve the dialogue of God with humanity (DV, 2) and to

²⁴ “Synod 2023—Preparatory Document from the Vatican,” No 6. See <https://www.usccb.org/resources/Documento-Preparatorio-EN-21.pdf>. Accessed on 4th September 2022.

²⁵ “Synod 2023 - Preparatory Document from the Vatican,” No 9.

journey together in the kingdom of God (cf. LG, 9; RM, 20). In the end, this Synodal Process seeks to move towards a Church that is more fruitfully at the service of the coming of the kingdom of heaven.²⁶

This new vision is possible only when we 'believe' in the 'good news' of the Lord. Believing is a faith act, and only when one believes wholeheartedly, something as good, beneficial, useful, and graceful, will she/he will become a witness to the 'good news.'

A major question for the synodal Church would be, "Am I a believer of this 'Good News'?" The answer to this personal question would show the interiority of the person and how much she/he is convinced of the good news. Authors point out that the New Testament terms *evangelion* (good news) and *euangelizomai* (to proclaim good news) have both religious and secular backgrounds.²⁷ In Roman secular history, this term was associated with the victory of the Caesars or the birth of an heir of Caesar, but in the Gospels the use of this term is different.²⁸ The evangelist Mark used this term as the advent of the Kingdom of God, and for Paul, the good news is Jesus who is both the son of David and the Son of God.²⁹ One of the authors portrays the Centurion at the foot of the cross as a prototype evangelizer for he believed and uttered these amazing words "Truly this man was the Son of God!"³⁰ This also shows the pivotal point that Jesus is the good news, and a believer of Jesus, *ipso facto*, becomes a 'goodnewsed' person.

Today we are inundated with all sorts of messages. The question is how strong my belief is, and how I understand this as 'good news' for my emancipation and society. This is a question for the believing individual and for the community.

3.3. The Synodal Church Needs People of Mature Faith

The third inner ethical implication is connected with 'mature' faith. During the time of the Coronavirus pandemic and its subsequent lockdown period, the Church and its faithful turned towards the digital media in an unprecedented way. Online para-liturgical services and Eucharistic celebrations were accepted, and to a great

²⁶"For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission," 1.3.

²⁷Kurian Kunnumpuram, *Towards a New Humanity*, Bombay: St Paul's, 2005, 227–228.

²⁸Kunnumpuram, *Towards a New Humanity*, 228. Here, Kunnumpuram quotes John L. McKenzie.

²⁹Kunnumpuram, *Towards a New Humanity*, 228.

³⁰See Victor Antonyraj, "The Centurion at the Foot of the Cross: A Prototype Evangelizer," *Communicating the Good News – A Renewed Focus on Evangelization*, ed. Cassius Correya, Chennai: Don Bosco Publications, 2020, 41.

extent they became very widespread. Many of the United States Catholic dioceses urged people to come back to the Church for services during the post-pandemic period. All these ongoing realities call for the maturation of faith.

James Fowler in the nineties offered a theory about the growth of faith.³¹ Basing his findings on those of psychologists like Lawrence Kohlberg's moral development and Piaget's cognitive development, Fowler offered six stages in the development of faith. Stage one begins with the intuitive-projective state. Here, faith is formed by stories. In stage two, we have a mythic-literal state. Here, faith is formed by more logical, concrete thought. Stage three begins with the synthetic-conventional state. Here, conformity and commitment set in. The fourth stage begins with an individual-reflective faith state. Here, the individual begins to take responsible faith decisions. Stage five begins with conjunctive faith. Here, one begins to develop one's perspectives about issues like paradoxes and transcendence.

Stage six opens to the universalizing faith state. Here, the real transforming process begins and the individual resolves paradoxes. It is pointed out that persons of stage six are exceedingly rare and for these people, the human community is universally inclusive.³² They experience the Kingdom of God as a reality and their enlarged visions of universal community and leadership initiatives often involve strategies of nonviolent suffering.³³ Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Mother Teresa, Dag Hammarskjold, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer come into this fold.

Is there any growth in the faith life of our people? Is the Church interested in developing the people's faith, helping them to have a flourishing, mature faith, towards embracing a grand vision, bordering on global ethical standards, or is the Church interested in nurturing an infantile, naïve growth of their faith? These are hard questions to deliberate.

So far, this paper discussed the three internal ethical implications. Before the Church ventures out in missiological activities, if these three internal matters are addressed, then the reach of the evangelization work would be substantial. Now, we turn toward some factors that sap the energy of the synodal Church in its outward manifestation.

³¹James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith, The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, New York: HarperCollins, 1995, 117–199.

³²Joseph Valiamangalam, *Community in Mission*, Delhi: GVD/ISPCK, 2008, 138–173.

³³ Valiamangalam, *Community in Mission*, 146–147. Suffering needs to be understood here, not as a necessary component, but may come as an unwelcoming guest, when one is involved in uplifting people!

3.4. Synodal Church – Confronting Clericalism

A synodal Church is called to serve. It is called to serve, especially the neglected people who are living on the periphery. But instead of serving the people of God, the Catholic clerics are often accused of serving themselves. The Holy Father warns that the clergy is interested in developing personal comfort zones and it pains him to see the clergy driving around in flashy cars; he warned that young clerics can turn into “little monsters” if they are not trained and that priests are too focussed on what they wear, and are “rigid and worldly.”³⁴ While talking about clericalism the Holy Father continues,

Clericalism arises from an elitist and exclusivist vision of vocation, that interprets the ministry received as a *power* to be exercised rather than as a free and generous *service* to be given. This leads us to believe that we belong to a group that has all the answers and no longer needs to listen or learn anything, or that pretends to listen. *Clericalism is a perversion and is the root of many evils in the Church: we must humbly ask forgiveness for this and above all create the conditions so that it is not repeated.*³⁵

While talking about the clergy sexual abuse, the preparatory document says, “The whole Church is called to deal with the weight of a culture imbued with clericalism that she inherits from her history, and with those forms of exercising authority on which the different types of abuse (power, economic, conscience, sexual) are grafted.”³⁶ This is true in the case of many of the local parishes that are economically rich and independent. In many of the rich parishes in Tamilnadu, oftentimes the parish priest is the uncrowned king, having vast financial power. To date, there are many Tamil parishes where there are no independent finance committees! There is no financial transparency and accountability!

3.5. Synodal Church – Confronting Casteism

Nepotism and discrimination are happening, particularly in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry, where only non-Dalit bishops and

³⁴Christopher Lamb, “Pope to Priests: Clericalism Takes Root when you Seek Comfort Instead of the People,” in *The Tablet*. See <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/11607/pope-to-priests-clericalism-takes-root-when-you-seek-comfort-instead-of-the-people>, 18 April 2019. Accessed on 5th September 2022.

³⁵Pope Francis, “Address By His Holiness Pope Francis at The Opening Of The Synod Of Bishops On Young People, The Faith And Vocational Discernment, Synod Hall,” Wednesday, 3 October 2018. See https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa-francesco_20181003_apertura-sinodo.html. Accessed on 5th September 2022.

³⁶“Synod 2023 - Preparatory Document from the Vatican,” # 6. The clerical abuse comes in many forms, colours and shades!

archbishops have been appointed during the past 15 years. There is only one Dalit bishop in the 18 Catholic dioceses in the region even though Dalits comprise about 75 percent of the Catholics here, making their representation negligible. This situation has continued for decades.³⁷

This is an anguished and tormented voice of an activist, protesting for the rights of Dalit Christians under the banner of the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement. The whole Catholic Church is geared towards the synod and in a very special way, dioceses and the faithful are getting ready, but still old problems that are not addressed remain as embers of charcoal. One of the major, unresolved, and continuing issues is the problem of casteism in the Tamil Catholic Church.

Felix Wilfred asks a very poignant question, *‘What is wrong with Rice- Christians?’*³⁸ He points out that this label shows the two classes of Christians—those who became Christians because of ‘spiritual’ motives, and those (the poor) who became Christians because of material help received from the Church. Felix Wilfred writes that the ‘wrong’ is in the perspective of those who viewed the aspirations of the oppressed people for food with suspicion and disdain; the ‘wrong’ is with people who saw it in opposition to salvation and spiritual ends. He continues, “In their search for material goods, security, dignity in the Church, our Dalit sisters and brothers were seeking life, which they continue to affirm with the power of the Spirit, against those, who deny it through their individual and collective selfishness.”³⁹

Untouchability is a Sin – Untouchability is a Crime – Untouchability is Inhuman—these are captions written in bold in all the textbooks by the Tamilnadu Government. Officially, there is no untouchability, but still, in many of the villages, people practice untouchability, which is a core sin and denial of human dignity. Till this day, many Catholics, including priests and religious, are happy to proclaim their caste names! Casteism—a mammoth ethical challenge for the synodal way of living!

³⁷“Tamil Nadu: Dalit Christians protest caste discrimination in Catholic Church,” in Maktoob, <https://maktoobmedia.com/2021/07/27/tamil-nadu-dalit-christians-protest-caste-discrimination-in-catholic-church/>, Tuesday, August 16, 2022. Accessed on 5th September 2022.

³⁸Felix Wilfred, *The Sling of Utopia*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2005, 307 - 325.

³⁹Wilfred, *The Sling of Utopia*, 324.

4. Synodal Church—Propagating a Prophetic Dialogue for Transformation

The synodal Church needs to be prophetic. The Church, in many parts of the world, is prophetic and because of its prophetic stand has suffered considerably. It is the history that we have inherited from our forefathers! If the Church is not bold enough to be a prophet and compromises itself for worldly gains for its safety and security, we might fail to become the contrast community that Jesus envisaged us to be and to become.

One of the major reasons for our failure to be a prophetic Church would be the material wealth and prosperity of the Catholic Church. For the simple reason that if the Church raises its voice against the societal and institutional atrocities, then its account books would come into the sharp scrutiny of the government agencies.

Poverty is one more core issue that plagues the synodal Church, so removing abysmal poverty, freeing people from the clutches of dearth and scarcity, and journeying with them towards transformation is the need of the hour. The prophetic dialogue is to undo the inhuman situation and to usher in the promising transformation that Jesus promised.

I have a strange fascination with Mondragon.⁴⁰ This is a fascination that I have developed through reading the social teachings of the Church and its involvement in the progressive role of uplifting people through economic cooperatives. This is just one model of economic development. The pilgrim Church is on a mission toward fulfilling the dreams of Jesus and building the Kingdom of God. To realize this dream, our strategies need to change. As we perceive the changing contours of history, evangelization and missiology have undergone sea changes. In a country like India, I would like to see the mission as a prophetic dialogue aiming for transformation.⁴¹

Conclusion

Though I have discussed only three models in this paper, down the ages people have experimented with different moulds, warps and woofs of the Mission. The synodal Church carries forward its

⁴⁰ The Mondragon Corporation is a corporation and federation of worker cooperatives based in the Basque region of Spain. It was founded in the town of Mondragon in 1956 by José María Arizmendiarieta, a Catholic priest, who was profoundly influenced by Catholic Social Teaching! The world needs to witness many more Mondragons!

⁴¹I am thinking along the lines of Bevans and Schroeder!

pilgrimage as a mission and in the progress and advancement of this work, it relies heavily on the power of the Spirit. All the inner and outer ethical implications outlined in this paper are subject to the power and prowess of the Holy Spirit. *The Spirit blows where it wills* (Jn 3:8). Lucian Legrand points out, “All is grace, in the development of mission and it is the continuous presence of Jesus Christ, or to invoke theology of the Spirit, with Luke and John, it is the power of the Spirit, that sustains and bolsters mission.”⁴² Legrand writes aptly “It is not the evangelizer who carries the gospel, it is the gospel, the power of God, that carries the evangelizer.”⁴³

Gaudium et Spes says,

To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often-dramatic characteristics.⁴⁴

In many contexts, the signs of the times are loud and clear. One is also very familiar with the biblical expression from the book of Daniel, “Writing on the wall” (Daniel 5:5-31). In biblical literature, the prophet Daniel deciphers and decodes the mysterious disembodied hand that scribbles on the wall of King Belshazzar, the son of king Nebuchadnezzar. We read in the Bible that Daniel came to the King’s court, interpreted the text’s dangerous warning message, and that very night the King was murdered.

Today the world abounds with doomsday soothsayers and false prophets. We believe that God has his plans for building up His kingdom and he uses various women and men to carry out this task. A synodal Church is to be an instrument in the hands of the Lord in building up this project. If the ethical implications are addressed properly, perhaps we can add more vigour and vitality to this building process!

⁴²Lucian Legrand, *Mission in the Bible*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2016, 86-87.

⁴³Legrand, *Mission in the Bible*, 87.

⁴⁴Pastoral Constitution on The Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 4.