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Report on the National Conference

**CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME:
TOWARDS AN INTEGRAL ECOLOGY
IN INDIA**

21st to 24th November 2023

Dharmaram Vidhya Kshetram Annex - Bengaluru

Organised jointly by:

Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI)
Conference of Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI)
Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (DVK)

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A four-day National Conference on Ecology titled *Care for our Common Home: Towards an Integral Ecology* in India was held from November 21-24, 2023 at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore. 106 persons, including three Cardinals, five Bishops, 25 Resource Persons and 62 diocesan representatives of the ecological ministry participated in this conference which was organised jointly by the CBCI Office for Environment and Climate Change, the CCBI Commission for Ecology and Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram.

The conference's sessions were designed to provide delegates with:

- a deeper understanding of the impacts of ecological crisis, with topics such as water pollution, waste management, carbon neutrality, urbanisation and biodiversity, mining, human-wildlife conflict, and air pollution;

- insights into various interventions and perspectives, covering aspects such as environmental policy, education for sustainable development, social networks for environmental activism, ecological ramifications in the North East, ecological stewardship, insights from Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism and indigenous cultures; and
- examples of success stories, with creative models for waste management, tree plantation, digital finance, overcoming action gaps etc. being shared – following which an effective response to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor at the local, regional and national levels could be shaped.

Day 1: 21st November 2023

The conference opened with a very meaningful inaugural programme at the DVK Research Centre Auditorium. This was presided over by Cardinal Oswald Gracias, Cardinal Anthony Poola, Archbishop Peter Machado and Bishop Allwyn D'Silva. The keynote speaker was Dr Vandana Shiva, Fr Joy Philip Kakkanattu CMI was the moderator.

Welcome Note

The delegates and dignitaries at the conference were welcomed by Bishop Allwyn D'Silva, the Chairperson of CBCI Office for Environment and Climate Change. In his address he emphasised the urgent need for ecological awareness within Church circles, highlighting the disconnect between traditional ministries and the crucial role of caring for creation amidst the severity of the ongoing ecological crisis. Bishop D'Silva urged participants to reflect on their mission and charisms in the face of environmental adversity, questioning how evangelisation could thrive in a world grappling with daily survival challenges. He invited delegates to engage actively in the conference, interact with professionals and experts, and engage among themselves. The event aims to deepen understanding of the ecological crisis, government and Church responses, and share success stories and challenges. The goal is to shape an effective response to address both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor at local, regional, and national levels.

While the bishop spoke, prominent figures present at the conference - Cardinal Oswald Gracias, Cardinal Anthony Poola, and Archbishop Peter Machado – were felicitated for their commitment to integral ecology and their role in the establishment and promotion of ecological ministries within the Indian Church. Special recognition was given to

Fr Joy Philip Kakkanattu, DVK President, and the DVK convenors for their instrumental support in organising the conference. The welcome note concluded with a heartfelt thanks to the keynote speaker Dr Vandana Shiva, a renowned environmental activist, and an invitation for participants to present themselves and their ecological ministry in service to God and humanity on the auspicious day of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Inaugural Address

Cardinal Michael Czerny, the Prefect of Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, Vatican delivered the inaugural address through a video message. He said that we are living in a new epoch of Earth's history which is marked by human impacts on the environment. He warned that we are facing multiple crises due to our disruption of nature. He cited Pope Francis, who said that humans and nature are interconnected and interdependent. He urged us to foster a healthy ecology based on a good relationship with nature. He also called for a conversion in our ethical and spiritual dimensions, as well as in our dialogue with other subjects. He said that these teachings remind us that we are part of ecology. Cardinal Czerny stressed that this requires a new mindset, a new bond with nature, and a change in our lifestyles. He said that we should learn from the knowledge, wisdom, religion, and culture of the people, while respecting the indigenous communities who care for the earth. He pointed out that integral ecology aims to restore the ecological balance at various levels, creating harmony within ourselves, with the earth, and with God.

Cardinal Czerny stated that each person has a duty to care for the common home that God created for all. He also criticised the unjust practices of some people who exploit the environment. He highlighted the rich Christian spirituality that can help to transform the human condition, emphasising that the Gospel teachings are not mere concepts, but have practical implications for our thoughts and actions, and motivate us to protect the world more effectively. He urged us to adopt a contemplative attitude towards the Creator who sustains and nourishes us, instead of being frantic or hyperactive. He concluded his message by saying that this is a matter of the heart, of living each moment with serene attention, and of receiving each moment as a gift from God to be fully lived.

Message of Cardinal Oswald Gracias, Archbishop of Bombay

In his address, Cardinal Oswald Gracias expressed his joy to see everyone. He appreciated us for being “good and faithful stewards of the earth” since our presence at the conference was a demonstration of our commitment to care for our common home. He said that the Holy Father reminds us that “signs are now reaching a breaking point.” But as Pope Francis tells us, and the Cardinal exhorted as well: “Hope would have us recognise that there is always a way out, that we can always redirect our steps, that we can always do something to solve our problems.”

Cardinal Gracias further said that the gravity of the ecological crisis begs that we need to be doing a lot more, hoping for us to shake off our complacency with the realisation that “there are no lasting changes without cultural changes, without a maturing of lifestyles and convictions within societies, and there are no cultural changes without personal changes.” He called for us to undergo an ecological conversion over the next few days that we would enliven in our dioceses and institutions on our return from this conference. He said that though the vineyard is vast and the labourers very few, the vocation to be ecological stewards is what God first called us to. He urged us to respond concretely, and hoped for the tribe of ecological stewards to increase. He invoked the blessings of the Triune God on our efforts and called upon Mother Mary to always accompany each and every one of us on our journey towards integral ecology.

Message of Archbishop Peter Machado, Archbishop of Bangalore

Archbishop Peter Machado reflected on the two ‘C’s of Creation and Crisis. He mentioned the prominence of creation in every religion, noting that the Bible begins with creation. He also explained that creation is both a mystery we are a part of, and a journey on which we are on. Archbishop Machado observed that the ecological crisis is part of bigger crises – the crisis of belonging, and the crisis of values – which results in us losing nature altogether. To overcome these crises, he pointed to the ‘R’ of relationship as we are all interconnected, everything is interrelated, and our societies are interreligious. Therefore, we must cultivate a relationship with God, with each other and with other religions. He stressed that we have to be connected, that the DNA of nature is in us, and urged us to take care of creation so that we do not go into crisis.

Message of Cardinal Anthony Poola, Archbishop of Hyderabad

Cardinal Anthony Poola presented an overview of the interventions of the Church in Hyderabad, which, like many religious institutions worldwide, has increasingly recognised the importance of environmental stewardship and sustainability as part of its social responsibility. Several initiatives have emerged within the Church in Hyderabad to address ecological issues. These initiatives often involve educational programmes, advocacy for sustainable practices, and community outreach efforts aimed at raising awareness about environmental conservation and climate change. Some churches have integrated eco-friendly practices into their operations, such as adopting renewable energy sources, promoting waste reduction, and encouraging responsible water usage.

Additionally, the Cardinal stated that partnerships between the Church and local environmental organisations or government bodies have been instrumental in undertaking conservation projects, tree plantation drives, and clean-up campaigns in and around Hyderabad. The emphasis on tree planting aligns with Pope Francis' message on the interconnectedness of all life and the importance of safeguarding the environment. These efforts by the Archdiocese of Hyderabad reflect a commitment to translate the Pope's teachings into tangible actions that positively impact the local environment and community.

Keynote Address

The keynote address for the conference was delivered by the eminent environmental activist Dr Vandana Shiva. She stated that not only is the earth our common home, it is actually our relationships, it is our family. Dr Shiva explained her understanding of integral ecology – everything is interconnected and everything is for all beings. Integral ecology also means seeing the various ecological crises as multiple facets of the same crisis. Ecologically, the biodiversity crisis cannot be separated from the climate crisis, just as issues of forests cannot be separated from issues of water. The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor in the encyclical *Laudato Si'* is the cry of all beings and all human beings – they are one cry because we are part of the earth; we are not separate.

Dr Shiva criticised the fallacy of patenting seeds. She pointed out that while a patent is a claim of creation and invention, seed and life is not a corporate invention, rather, seed is creation. She linked the genetic modification of seeds with the farmer suicides in our country,

and pointed out that solutions to climate change lie in biodiversity and ecology farming. Dr Shiva strongly cautioned against technological arrogance since it not only makes one play God, but in playing God, one loses the humility to assess that the tools are not really working. She opined that the confusion of equating destructive power with creation is the deepest illusion and confusion of our time. She brought out how technological solutions generate entropy and waste, whereas dynamic living systems are in equilibrium; equilibrium being the nature of nature. We have to give up our sense of mastery and deepen our sense of reverence and participation.

Calling attention to the symbiosis through which creation works, Dr Shiva called for bringing in symbiosis rather than competition and conflict into our relationships, and shared some insights into spirituality and ecology. She expressed her willingness to work with Church institutions and schools to co-create educational material. She asked that we not let communion be a mechanical act, but be the place from which reclaiming sacred food and our relationship with the sacred earth awaken everyone. She concluded by calling for the conference to turn into a longer-term project of not just equilibrium and harmony with nature, but equilibrium and harmony in society.

Day 2: 22nd November 2023

The day began with a nature meditation led by Professor Varghese CMI followed by Holy mass celebrated by Cardinal Oswald Gracias in the Latin rite. He connected the day's reading with the present scenario of the environment and the need to take care of our common home.

The session started with a message by Cardinal George Alencherry, the Major Archbishop of Ernakulam-Angamaly (Syro-Malabar). He said that we have to take inspiration from Pope's encyclical and the exhortation *Laudate Deum* to take care of our common home. We have to have more and more awareness programmes at our level, where we live, and at the diocesan and episcopal levels as well. If we are committed together, then humanity will survive. It is high time we became aware that where we live is God's property.

Ms Shawna Nemesia Rebello, Subject Matter Consultant to the CCBI Commission for Ecology, then briefed the assembly about the Safeguarding Policy and Code of Conduct adopted by the Commission, and the protocol of the same applicable for the conference. She concluded with a quote from *Laudato Si'* 118: There

can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself.

Understanding Impacts - I

This session was moderated by Bishop Thomas Tharayil, Auxiliary Bishop of Changanacherry (Syro-Malabar) and member Bishop of the CBCI Office for Environment and Climate Change. Dr Sabu Joseph, Professor and Director of the School of Environment Sciences, University of Kerala, presented on *Water Pollution: Threats and Challenges*. He highlighted the great challenge of domestic liquid waste, and spoke about how micro- and nano-plastics and antibiotic resistance are dangerous and emerging challenges of water pollution. The next speaker was Dr Jose Joseph Moonjely, the Director of Hi-Tech Bio Fertilisers India. His presentation on *Waste Management for a Greener Planet* covered how he started his work on waste management with the aim to educate, empower and employ people willing to work in this field. Biobins, plastic shredding machines, electric vehicles for door-to-door scrap collection, etc. are some of his interventions for eco-friendly handling of waste at source.

Understanding Impacts - II

Moderated by Sr Prema Chowallur SCC, this session had three speakers. Dr Shalini Dhyani, Principal Scientist at the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute presented on *Urbanisation and Its Impact on Biodiversity*, using graphics to demonstrate the loss of green cover in different Indian cities. She highlighted the benefits of urban green spaces, and the need for integrating them with urban infrastructure by making smart use of available land. Fr Bolmax Pereira, Assistant Professor of Botany at St Joseph Vaz College in Cortalim, Goa overviewed the *Environmental Effects of Mining* in the state. Though mining is banned in Goa, there are over a hundred active mines and illegal mining persists, resulting in adverse ecological impacts. The activists succeeded in getting mining suspended and in the auction of mining leases through Supreme Court verdicts in the previous decades. Dr Chacko Kalamparambil, the Principal of Alphonsa College Thiruvambady in Kerala, emphasised the human-wildlife conflict and issues associated with buffer zone legislations in Kerala in his presentation on *Diminishing Habitats*.

Understanding Impacts - III

This session was moderated by Bishop Ivan Pereira, Bishop of Jammu-Srinagar with Dr Ajith Haridas, the former Chairperson of the Kerala State Pollution Control Board, presenting on *Air Pollution: A Silent Threat to Human Health and the Environment*. While briefing on the various health impacts, he pointed out that the main source of air pollution is the open burning of waste and garbage, with the best solution for it being waste management. Technology alone is not a solution; legal and community action is also required.

Region-wise Discussion and Reporting, Poster Presentation

The participants were divided into three region-wise groups - Central, Southern and North-North East, and asked to discuss the following:

1. List out a few environment-related issues and problems in your region - You could list or look at them as locally specific or as applicable to a larger area or region.
2. What are the systems, if any, in place for addressing such issues? Mention some of the strategies they employ. Are they effective?
3. What are the initiatives of the Church (parishes), Religious Houses and Church-based institutions, schools towards addressing such issues? Are there any successful replicable models?
4. What initiatives can be taken by the CBCI, CCBI (Church Based Institutions) or the local churches to 'make things better' in terms of water, air, land, biodiversity and waste management and Carbon Neutrality?
5. List 3 concrete steps a local Christian community (Institution) can/should take towards sustaining life on the planet Earth, in continuation with the Jesus mission of 'bringing abundance of life' (Jn. 10:10).

The outcomes of the discussion were shared by representatives from each group during the reporting session, after which a group of DVK students of LTh. Moral Theology presented a poster on Living or Embracing Synodality as a Pathway to Integral Ecology in India. They touched upon Communion with God and nature, Participation in the ecological system and the social, economic and cultural dimensions of integral ecology as Mission.

Creative Responses to Environmental Crisis (Sharing of Models)

The last session of the day was moderated by Fr Jobi Thomas Thurackal. Dr Jose Joseph Moonjely presented about Biobins for waste management, while Fr Rajeev Palakkacherry overviewed the various initiatives taken in Champakulam village in Kerala as a model of a carbon neutral parish and village.

Day 3: 23rd November 2023

Dr Francesca Donà from the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development briefly addressed the delegates before the day's sessions commenced.

Understanding Perspectives and Interventions – I

This session was moderated by Fr Joseph Gonsalves.

In *Environmental Policy and Its Implementation in India*, Dr Ramesh Mysore K clarified the terms policy and law, green and brown law, and went over the difference between implementation and its interpretation. He also gave an overview of how compartmentalisation of various laws is actually detrimental to growth and causes lots of tension.

The next speaker, Br Varghese Theckanath, the Founder-Director of the Mountfort Social Institute Centre for Human Rights, presented on *Social Networks and Environmental Activism*. He stressed that in various movements that shaped the world, it was the people who fought for change, and not the government, or multi-lateral organisations, or even the Church. The environmental crisis movement of the twenty-first century is bigger than any other so far since it has to fight anthropocentrism which none of the previous movements had to do. He said that we need to have a rainbow collection of people if we want to fight the environmental crisis, and provided pointers for mobilising young people and taking online movements off-line.

Educator Fr Johnson Palakkappilly delved into *Environmental Issues from an Academic Perspective*. He highlighted the importance of creating educational awareness among students through various campus experiments such as painting the campus, plastic bans, and including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the syllabus with two SDGs being taken up for concrete implementation every year through students. He also spoke about the need to get faculty, parents, priests and religious together in order to bring about awareness in schools and colleges.

Called to Be Bridges and Bridge Builders – I

The moderator for this session was Fr Joshua D'Souza, the Executive Secretary of the CCBI Commission for Ecology.

Fr Paul Lelen Haokip brought about the socioeconomic and geopolitical situation of the people of North East India, and the impacts on forests and basic resources in his presentation on *Look East Policy and its Ecological Ramifications on North East Tribals: A Socio-Political Inquiry*.

In *Caring for Creation: Envisioned in Laudato Si'*, Sr Jyotisha Kannamkal SND spoke on the need of ecological conversion in our life, and how our connectedness with God and creation plays a very important role – if we are not affected, we will not be transformed.

Laudate Deum: Charter for Political Action towards God's Creation was presented by Fr Mathew Illathuparampil, a moral theologian. He highlighted certain aspects of the exhortation such as the call for change in ideology, transition in energy sources, the slippery slope of development, and new reforms. He said that the Indian Church must discern the specific messages *Laudate Deum* conveys to the country and use it for the nation's benefit through public advocacy, influencing government policy, and inspiring church communities to adopt greener attitudes and approaches. The Church should engage not only in theoretical discussions but also in sharing effective practices.

Called to Be Bridges and Bridge Builders – II

This session was moderated by Bishop Allwyn D'Silva.

Sr P J Alphonsa FCC explored the relevance of the Bible's teachings to modern ecological issues in *Biblical Mandate for Ecological Stewardship*. She spoke about the qualities of a steward, the biblical understanding of ecological stewardship, decrees/rules prescribed in the Bible for ecological stewardship, and the practicality of being a good ecological steward. She noted that everyone is entrusted by God to be a steward, regardless of their position or status, and concluded with a call to action, referencing the examples of individuals who have lived in harmony with nature.

Fr Joy Philip Kakkanattu CMI discussed the biblical perspective on stewardship and integral ecology in *Stewardship to a Synodal Integral Ecology*. He emphasised the need for listening to and respecting the natural world, and the responsibility of humans as stewards of creation. He concluded with practical steps to promote ecological

balance and sustainability, such as developing a prayer culture inclusive of ecology, including subjects on Ecology in Catechism and Theology courses, promoting organic farming and sustainable agriculture and implementing more scientific and proper waste management systems in institutions and parishes, etc.

Greening the Space of our Tent

The moderator for this session was Bishop Lumen Monteiro, Bishop of Agartala.

The first speaker, Fr Sebastian Alackapally CMI identified twelve key areas for practical attention in his presentation on *Practical Tips for the Care of our Common Home: Overcoming Action Gaps*. These included tree plantation, water conservation, organic food, sustainable agriculture, transport, waste management, practising the 3Rs, stopping plastic pollution, countering the throwaway culture, energy/solar management, eco-education and being closer to nature for healthy living.

In *Digital Finance Enhancing Environmental Sustainability*, Sr Flevis Katini CMC spoke about the impact that conservation and ecotourism have had on the lifestyle of the people in Khonoma village, North East India. She then overviewed some aspects of digital finance, its merits and demerits, the impact it has had in Khonoma, and its potential to promote a circular economy.

Creative Responses to Environmental Crisis (Sharing of Models)

The moderator for this last session of the day was Sr Shimi Varghese DHM, the Executive Secretary of the CBCI Office for Environment and Climate Change. Mr Vinay Balakrishnan displayed the biodegradable tableware manufactured by him from agricultural waste like wheat bran/rice bran or paddy husk under the brand Thooshan. He proposed these as an eco-friendly and biodegradable alternative to banned single-use plastics, with potential for income generation to local farmers. Mr David Selvaraj spoke about Bengaluru's transformation from a garden city to India's tech capital. This has not only changed its landscape, but has also caused concerns over the thinning green cover. His organisation E-Cure Trust is trying to bring greenery back to Bangalore by tree plantation, street transformation, plastic bag eradication, terrace farming and awareness programmes.

Day 4: 24th November 2023**Called to Be Bridges and Bridge Builders - III**

Fr Mathew Attumkal CMI moderated this session geared towards perspectives from other faiths.

Swami Nityasthananda spoke on *Dharma and Nature: Environmental Ethics in Hinduism*. He quoted from the Bhagavad Gita – one who receives from nature without giving back is a thief and likened the strands in the web of life to Indra’s net. For Hindus, God is not external but intrinsic; therefore, everything is a manifestation of God. All the universe is inseparable – when we exploit nature we do so at our own risk.

Mr Ghulam Rasool Dehlvi talked about *Islam and the Environment: Muslim Perspective*. He stated that we need faith practitioners who can save or protect this planet, not professionals who are the majority of faith leaders. Quoting from the Qur’an – only out of water have we fashioned all life – he said that all scriptures remind us to serve on planet Earth. Terming the human mind as the biggest virus, he exhorted to learn from the indigenous people who are the earth stewards.

Professor Jagannatha Venkataramaiah spoke about *Ecological Vision in Buddhism*. The foundation of Buddhism is surrendering to the most enlightened. He pointed out that in recent years, the human population has tripled, but our energy consumption has increased by thirty-two times. Stating that we are not born human beings, but have to become human beings; he urged to have one eye on scientific temperament and the other eye on social commitment.

Fr Claber Minj presented on *Environmental Insights from Indigenous Culture* taken from the five major tribes of Chota Nagpur. He pointed out how tribal ecology is a call to sustainability by bringing out aspects of ecology in tribal philosophy, religion, lifestyle, festivals, myths and songs and their trust in the providence of nature.

Mr Vikram Pratap Singh Kothari spoke about the *Jain Perspective of Environmental Care*. He explained the rationale behind the vows of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness) – refraining from unnecessary violence not required for the survival of human life, and to control one’s desires so as not to blur the line between needs and wants. He also touched upon the need for the virtue of *kshama*

(forgiveness), using the example of nuclear war in which anger between two nations can destroy ecology in unimaginable volumes.

Practical Solutions for an Integral Ecology in India

In this session moderated by Fr Varghese Koluthara, Victor Paul of Christ University used quotes from *Laudato Si'* and the seven Laudato Si' Goals to illustrate integral ecology. He briefly spoke about India's ecological situation and gave examples of ecological solutions that have been put into practice at the university.

Action Plans

This interactive session was moderated by Bishop Allwyn D'Silva, Bishop Thomas Tharayil, Bishop Sebastian Adayantrath and Fr Johnson Palakkappilly CMI. As praxis outcomes of the conference, the panel put forward the following five action plan points and invited suggestions and comments from the delegates on the same:

1. A commitment by the Catholic Church (ministerial) leadership to make earth friendliness a top priority (at least in the top five) of their ministry, activities and preaching.
2. As a follow up of this conference we elect two people (or a group of people) from each region to continue the spirit of this conference and make changes regional wise.
3. A set of minimum do's and don'ts (GREEN PROTOCOL FOR AN EVERGREEN CHURCH IN INDIA) regarding planet friendly living for parish (SUSTAINABLE/CARBON NEUTRAL PARISHES) and institutional functioning/operation.
4. A network of ministers (experts, priests, religious and laity) for planet – a directory.
5. How can the Church collaborate with other religions, NGOs, Start-up programmes to safeguard the environment and create better awareness among its own members?

The following suggestions emerged from the discussion:

- Make a common policy at the CBCI level, which could be circulated to all parishes.
- Have an office - a desk/cell in each diocese with a committee and a team which can be actively involved in promoting ecological issues.
- Make ecology as one of the ministries of the church.
- Formation of Ecology Commission at regional and parish level; this need not comprise only the parish priest, it can be of religious men-women, and lay people.
- Make a time-bound action plan and circulate it at the parish level.

- Diocese should come out with a three to five-year plan.
- Circulate the guidelines used in the Archdiocese of Bombay which can be helpful to other dioceses to draw their outlines. These guidelines could be further divided into two sets - for the church premises, and for the entire community.
- Make monthly action plans in every parish and conduct quarterly or half yearly evaluation of the plans.
- Encourage tree plantations and conduct an audit of them.
- Bring awareness of the ecological crisis to the parishioners.
- The following members have volunteered to be the contact person for each region: Agra - Fr Pius (Bareilly Diocese), Telugu region - Fr Emmanuel (Eluru Diocese), Bengal - Fr Franklin (Calcutta Archdiocese), Jharkhand - Fr Tomy (Hazaribag Diocese), Chhattisgarh - Fr Santhosh CMI, Kerala - Fr Rajeev (Changanacherry Archeparchy), Madhya Pradesh: - Fr Freejo (Sagar Diocese), North East - Fr Chacko (Kohima Diocese), Western region - Fr Rohan (Pune Diocese), and Karnataka - Fr P V Antony (Bellary Diocese).
- The organisers and the regional representatives of the conference would come together within the next couple of months to discuss and refine the praxis outcomes, as well as to collaborate with other religions to safeguard the environment and create better awareness among the Church members.

The Concluding Message was delivered by Bishop Sebastian Adayanthrath, Bishop of Mandya (Syro-Malabar) and the conference came to a close with the final Vote of Thanks proposed by Bishop Thomas Tharayil.