

5. DIALOGUE AND SOLIDARITY WITH THE WORLD

Chapter 5¹ deals with the Church's dialogue with the world and society, the dialogue within the Church being considered in Chapter 7 as part of the Church's Renewal. (The practical proposals regarding dialogue within and outside the Church are studied in chapter 10.) The 2002 CBCI Meeting at Jalandhar reflected on **The Church in Dialogue**. Though the Bishops did not speak of ideologies in this Statement, we will single out **four areas of dialogue with society**: cultures (1), religions (2), ideologies (3), and the poor and the marginalised (4). We will conclude by describing *the Church's new approach to the world, an approach of solidarity and identification (5), which all human beings should in fact make their own.*

Let me now introduce the second facet of the title, **solidarity with the world**. A well-known passage of Vatican II seems to have greatly inspired the Bishops of India: *"The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, specially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts"* (GS, #1).

(Note the special concern for the poor and the afflicted!) This passage is referred to or quoted at least 4 times in the CBCI statements, often at key junctures (cf. 41, 117, 152 & 171). **Deep down, it speaks of solidarity and identification with the people, especially the poor!** In 1998, the Bishops explicitated the same by saying that **the Church has "to be in solidarity with the world in need of liberation from all that is inhuman and unjust"** (154, cf. below, 106).

In 2002, the Bishops thus emphasised **the crucial importance of dialogue with the world**: "It is only through dialogue that the fast-spreading evils of terrorism, violence, oppression, poverty, materialism and religious fundamentalism can be effectively dealt with

Box 5.1

The Meaning of Genuine Solidarity!

In the words of John Paul II, solidarity "is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a **firm and persevering determination** to commit oneself to the **common good**; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are **all** really responsible **for all**" (SRS, #38; author's emphasis). M. Amaladoss rightly shows that *"everyone is called to be in solidarity with the poor in their struggle for liberation"*.²

by the Church and society." *"We have great challenges, problems and needs to address. We can do it well... to the extent to which we become a Church in Dialogue."* As John Paul II said, *"dialogue is the characteristic mode of the Church's life in Asia"* (EA #3). **We therefore**, the Bishops concluded, **"commit ourselves to a life of dialogue**. In the complex realities of the present-day life in our country and in the world at large, 'we launch into the deep' (Lk. 5:4)" (174-5 & 183). This chapter shows that, **in fact, the Bishops even commit themselves to a life of solidarity, which should also be "the characteristic mode of the Church's life"**.

1. Dialogue with Cultures

In their 2002 Statement, the Bishops reflected on **Dialogue with Cultures**: "Through the course of her history, the Church has been in dialogue with the cultures of people among whom she carries out her mission. *In this process, the Gospel gets rooted in the cultures, taking on their specific features. The Gospel in its turn challenges cultures to transformation. Thus the Gospel-Culture encounter leads to the enrichment of cultures and of the Christian community*" (179).

The dialogue with cultures therefore involves both the inculturation of the Church and the transformation/evangelisation of cultures. *The Church must appreciate the "lively and vibrant, ennobling and enriching cultures" of India, like those of the numerous indigenous Tribal and Dalit communities and of other ethnic and regional groups in different parts of our country.*

In all honesty, we must admit that we have not done it enough in the past (179). In 1979, the Bishops had however praised certain cultural features of the family in India, especially among the Tribals (62 & 58).

The Bishops thus highlight some nefarious trends in the country: “It is disturbing to note that systematic attempts are made by the forces of *Hindutva* and fundamentalism to impose a monolithic upper-caste Sanskrit culture... Another disturbing factor is the deliberate efforts of some fundamentalist organisations to Hinduise the Tribals and thus alienate them from their own indigenous cultures. *Such an approach would lead to an impoverishment of the rich multi-cultural and multi-religious heritage of the nation as a whole.*” The Church must oppose the harmful divisive forces among Tribals and Dalits, and promote cohesion and unity among them (179).

The Bishops had earlier expressed their enriching understanding of inculturation and Indianisation. To evangelise the country, *the Church in India* “*must become daily more incarnate among our peoples in their rich cultural heritage, socio-economic conditions and vital concerns for truth, justice and liberation from all the bonds of ignorance, fear, hunger, disease, superstition and sinfulness*” (1976, 40-1). The Word of God must be interpreted and appropriated through the Christian response to concrete situations, challenges and problems. **The Church thus becomes truly “incarnate, inculturated and local”** (1986, 99). *According to me, this understanding of inculturation is much broader and relevant than the purely ‘cultural’ one that too often prevails in certain sectors of the Church in India.*

The 1986 Communication has a section on *Cultural Transformation*. In the present context of the interaction of traditional India with modernity, **the laity must promote a dynamic culture.** They “are required to assist at the birth of an emerging culture which, while drawing from the traditional heritage and resources, will absorb and integrate within itself the new elements offered by science and technology. *The laity are called to evangelise the new emerging culture and let the Gospel values permeate every layer of society.*” *They must become deeply inserted into the cultural context of India, as Jesus was in the culture and history of the Palestine of*

his time. “The dialogue of life with the culture of the country, region and locality should be an ongoing process”, which will lead to a **genuine and deeper inculturation of the Christian Community** (103-4).

In the above passages, the Bishops describe the basic elements of the Church’s dialogue with culture. A few reflections from Francis-Vincent Anthony may complement these perspectives. Inculturation “requires that we dialogue not only with the local indigenous cultures and their religious core, but also with the secular modern/post-modern culture with its ideological core”. Today’s globalising culture is secular and consumerist. **Religions must therefore dialogue with both the secular and the indigenous.** “*Inter-religious dialogue then becomes, for Christianity and for other religions, an opportunity for mutual purification from narrowness and compromises with injustice, and for working towards a liberative ecumenism of religions.*” The credibility of religions must be tested, among other things, by their impact on society.

The dialogue process involves a creative tension between identity and change, continuity and discontinuity. “A holistic inculturation in a globalising world, then, has to be **indigenising** (i.e., take into account the indigenous culture), **transculturising** (i.e., deal with the global secular... culture), **dialogic** (i.e., dialogue with the... above mentioned elements) and **liberative** (i.e., challenge the ideological core of local culture and modern/post-modern consumerist culture).”³ **The Church in India has to dialogue more with today’s culture, including the various questions related to marriage, sexuality and alternative lifestyles.** She has to realise more deeply that people have an increasingly more positive attitude towards human sexuality.

2. Dialogue with Religions

The Bishops sometimes spoke of **the spiritual importance and fruits of inter-religious dialogue** (e.g., 21). In 1974 for instance, they reflected at length on *Dialogue and Contemplation*: “In view of the fact that India has nurtured several of the world’s great religions, **the Church in India is called upon to be an earnest pioneer of inter-religious dialogue.** Done in a spirit of fraternal love, dialogue is a mutual communication and sharing of religious experience, of spiritual and moral values, enriching both the partners in a communion

that seeks to foster unity among all people and promote the good things found among them” (36, cf. 36-8).

In 1979, the Bishops asked the Christian family **to open itself to people of other faiths** (74-5, cf. below, 142). The *CBCI Commission for Proclamation, Ecumenism and Dialogue* seeks to help in this regard (82); hence, it published the *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue* (123). To effectively fulfill their mission, Christians must discern “the presence of the spirit in other religions” and “become a **community in dialogue** with the people of the country” (153). *Their dialogues with them should start with human rather than religious issues* (165) and lead to a common commitment to the “struggle for the transformation of society” (172). In India today, religions often play negative roles (e.g., 91-2, 100 & 114-5); instead, **they must dialogue and collaborate, and be a decisive “power-house for transformation in every sphere of life”** (103, cf. below, 92; cf. 57 & 100-1, and 15, cf. above, 55).

In 1986, the Bishops thus highlighted **the social dimensions and implications of inter-religious dialogue**: “The laity, living in the midst of believers of different faiths, are called upon to enter into a process of dialogue with them through a sharing of life and vision at various levels, which will lead them to a growing mutual understanding and enrichment, and a common commitment to the defence and promotion of human and spiritual values, as they journey together towards the Kingdom of God to which God calls all peoples. Such a dialogue on the part of the laity is a demand of Christian faith.” “This dialogue of the laity with other religions is not a dialogue between systems of belief. It is a dialogue between believers, a dialogue of life in the context of common experiences and tasks” (102).

In 2002, the **Bishops praised the fruits of religious dialogue in India**. The dialogue “initiatives have provided opportunities for sharing about one’s Scriptures and religious beliefs, for promoting good will (and) friendly relationships, for eliciting mutual cooperation in resolving local issues and problems, and in coming to pray together for peace and harmony. Narrowing down of prejudices and misconceptions, better understanding, mutual appreciation and admiration, joint programmes for the benefit of the society at large

are among the fruits of inter-religious dialogue!” The Bishops remarked: “We have to develop a positive attitude of respect towards other religious traditions as a pre-condition for dialogue. Any form of superiority complex and suspicions or doubts about the motives of one another on the part of the dialoguing partners would hinder genuine dialogue” (180). **Chapter 13 will show how people of different religious and secular backgrounds must and can work together to build a new society in India.**

3. Dialogue with Ideologies

The CBCI was founded in 1944. “At least till 1966, the *CBCI Section on Catholic Social Action* – under Bishop J. Attipetty of Verapoly – mainly dealt with the twin menaces of *Communism and Family Planning*”, with an emphasis on an all-out fight “against the virus of the Communist ideology”. “With the creation of the *Commission on Social Action and the Family in 1966* (under the chairmanship of Archbishop Athaide), the tone became more positive.”⁴

In fact, the CBCI 1974 Communication includes an extraordinary (in the above context!) assertion: “Through dialogue with the followers of other religions, she (the Church) can find a common approach to face the challenge of the irreligious forces of our times. However, the Church should also enter into fraternal dialogue with all spiritual movements as well as with atheist or humanist ideologies, especially with Marxists, Maoists, Naxalites, etc.” (37). *This shows how much the Social Teaching of the Church sometimes ‘evolves’!*

The Bishops very briefly spoke of ideologies in three other passages, to express the people’s need for “guidance in their choice of political ideologies” (20), to recognise the ideological influences on family patterns (61), and to affirm the Church’s duty to proclaim the Good News to people of other faiths and ideologies (166). **A fourth passage is more elaborate**: “The political and social involvement of the laity will bring them face to face with varied and conflicting secular and humanistic ideologies. Apart from the global ideologies of capitalism, communalism and socialism, other indigenous ideologies like Sarvodaya are also operative in our society. The laity in their

relation with these and other ideologies should be guided by a true Christian vision and prayerful discernment, and *hold aloft at all costs the dignity and rights of the human person as the greatest values in political and social life*" (101).

Compared to the Papal and Puebla Documents,⁵ **the CBCI paid very little attention to ideologies** – though the Bishops offered some important reflections, for example on growing nationalism (e.g., above, 40-1) and globalisation (cf. above, 38-9), without using the word ‘ideology’.

4. Dialogue with the Poor and the Marginalised⁶

We now come to an issue that is probably (if such a thing is possible!) still more crucial and complex. I may be wrong, but I feel it is often less difficult to dialogue with people of different cultures, faiths and even ideologies than with people of very different socio-economic backgrounds. The dialogue with the poor may also be more vital for the world’s future. *The Bishops’ reflections on the Church’s dialogue with the poor and the marginalised are extremely challenging. They present a marvellous and inspiring ideal which is however very difficult to live.* Before making any further comments, let us carefully listen – with all our concern for the poor and our resolve to transform their life-conditions and our oppressive society.

“The Church is called upon to identify herself with the poor in imitation of her Lord, Jesus Christ. He manifested special love and compassion for the poor, the distressed and the oppressed, living in total solidarity with them. Therefore, we need to empower the poor and the marginalised for their human dignity and well-being and thus enable them to realise their destiny as God’s children... We have to work with them to help them to regain their true humanity and thus bring a complete change in the existing unjust situation.”

“We are called to liberate the poor from the oppressions of various types, like Moses who liberated the Israelites from Pharaoh and led them to the promised land (Ex. 1, 8-14; 2, 23-25).” The Bishops add that, as John XXIII said, **the Church has to become the Church of the Poor** (181, cf. above, 23). The above

quotation calls to mind the Bishops’ meaningful description of Jesus’ ministry (cf. above, 62-3). And *the reference to Moses cannot but remind us of an economic and especially political liberation!* I was also struck that the Bishops referred to Mt 25, 40 (“Anything you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you also did for me.”) to explain that *Jesus identified Himself with the poor and the voiceless in a special way* (171, quoting EA, #34, cf. below, 150). The thought-association is filled with meaning!

Since the **Dalits** and **Tribals** are particularly exploited, *“the Church should be in solidarity with them and make a preferential option for them.* In the situation of appalling poverty of the vast majority of the people in India, the Church has to become not just a Church for the poor but **the Church of the Poor**. *This would mean, being with the poor in their daily experience of poverty, injustice and oppression and being with them in their efforts to liberate themselves from poverty and oppression for a fuller human life.* To realise this objective, the Church should *join other people of goodwill and work towards the transformation of the structures like caste and class that cause and perpetuate poverty, injustice and oppression.* Such a constructive dialogue, needless to say, will also include **women** who generally suffer from gender discrimination in the Indian society” (181-2).

Note the emphasis on **the Church of the Poor**, repeated in two consecutive paragraphs. The Bishops movingly call themselves and all Christians *to be in solidarity* (and even to identify themselves!) *with the poor (especially the Dalits and Tribals!) in both their experiences of oppression and their struggles for liberation.* *The Bishops also speak of identification/solidarity with the poor in some other passages* (97, 152, 154, 164 & 171). One of them explains **solidarity** as *“being emphatically aware of and resolutely committed to change the life of our people living in poverty, inequality, injustice and oppression”* (154, cf. below, 105). This is consonant with John Paul II who spoke of solidarity as **a firm and persevering determination and commitment** (Box 5.1).

A careful study of all these passages and of the Bishops’ reflections on Jesus’ life and of their proposals regarding poverty and untouchability (cf. below, 145-7) indicates that **the Bishops primarily**

think of empowering and liberating the poor through social recognition and respect, education, employment, sharing of wealth and funds with them, enabling their participation in decision-making bodies, etc. This “priority of service” (also from EA, 34) *is the undeniable (and realistic) emphasis*. But the Bishops also speak of being available to the poor and having close contacts with them (esp. 164) and even of being with them “in their daily experiences of poverty, injustice and oppression” (181), as we just read. And they admire Jesus who mixed with the marginalised and “associated preferentially with the downtrodden” (88)! **Does this not imply some regular relationships, bonds of friendship, table fellowship, and even a certain experiential sharing of hardships, exploitative conditions and powerlessness?**

But how much do we live this ideal, and in fact, how can we truly do it? How can the Church in India really become the Church of the Dalits and the Tribals, the Church of women? There is an abyss between the proposed ideal (undoubtedly seen as God’s will and demand) and our humbling failures and even incapacities. This is not however the problem of only the Christians or the priests and religious in the Church. There is an almost universal difficulty and even inability of the educated, rich, powerful and urban dwellers to bridge the tremendous gap that separates them from the illiterate, poor, powerless and villagers. Most privileged people do not even see this as a problem! Something can of course be done, but it remains so inadequate! It may also be slightly easier to adopt/implement some pro-poor measures and policies than to experientially share the life-conditions of the exploited and the oppressed. **That this situation seems almost intractable in our wounded civilisation does not however remove the crying need and invalidate the proposed ideal of solidarity and identification.**

The Bishops rather lamely conclude: “We have to recognise the fact that **the poor too contribute much in dialogue**. We can learn much from their faith, hope and patience. They challenge us to live the Gospel in its radicality, relying more on God and freeing ourselves from undue dependence on material things” (182). *This superficial acknowledgment of the contribution of the poor is out of context. It seems an afterthought and mentions only the ‘spiritual’ dimension.* Though recognising (in other texts) and welcoming the

Box 5.2

What Would the Poor and the Marginalised Say?

I greatly appreciate the Bishops’ reflections on *Dialogue with the Poor and the Marginalised*. They put forward a much needed and inspiring vision and challenge those who are privileged, like me. **Yes, I wonder what the poor themselves would have said about such a dialogue...** Would it not have been strikingly different in content and tone? This is what I guess! Anyhow, **why don’t you contact 3 or 4 ‘poor people’, meet them personally and find out their views!** It will probably be a very challenging experience...

role of the poor in their own liberation, *the Bishops do not emphasise it enough in their teaching*. (The Latin American Bishops did it much more at Medellin and Puebla.)

Like almost all of us, the Bishops also fail to highlight the contribution of the poor to people’s lives and national development, for example through their work. We should be much more grateful for the contribution and presence of the poor in our lives and society. This passage can also be misleading. It risks to legitimise the too widespread passivity of the poor by praising their ‘patience’ and ‘detachment’. **The Bishops should have highlighted here the longings of the poor for change, justice and peace, and the need to overcome passivity and fatalism.** In fact, they did it quite well elsewhere (cf, above, 25 & 36).

5. A New Approach of Solidarity with the World

Many theologians highlight the Church’s new approach to the world around the early 1960s – the time of Vatican II.⁷ This significant change can be well understood by reflecting on **the signs of the times**. A few passages of the CBCI are particularly helpful here. Christians should “read the signs of the times”, that is “*discern in the events, the needs and the longings*” of today’s people, the “*genuine signs of God’s presence and purpose in the world*” (GS, #11). They can thus make their own the people’s problems and commit themselves to a specific contribution (154 & 176). In other

words, *Christians must understand their role “against the background of the problems and challenges of the present situation and in terms of the response called for”*. The Word of God has to be properly assimilated and interpreted so as to find the true response to today’s concrete questions (99). **Reading the signs of the times therefore means understanding the existing situation with all its complexity and dynamism and finding the appropriate response (God’s designs or will) in the light of our faith and conscience.**

This is why the Bishops so often speak of *understanding the needs and problems of the people/society/world* – their ‘reality’, situation, conditions, questions and issues, joys and hopes, sufferings and anxieties, as well as their longings, aspirations, expectations, inner resources, strengths and potential. *In short, we must understand today’s challenges*. Then, in the light of the Scriptures (the teachings of Christ and his Good News if we are Christians), of our principles and values, **we must identify what concrete response has to be given** – how God is present/active in the specific situation, what is his purpose, will and “call” for us here and now. In short, **we must find out “what has to be done”!** *We have to grasp the Bad News of today’s situation and the Good News to be lived* (154-5, cf. below, 106). The biblical scholars thus speak of a “**contextual** reading and understanding of the Bible” and the theologians of “a **contextual** theology”.

This approach fills us with dynamism, for we constantly try to understand both the given situation and the voice of God and our conscience. It is also “**prophetic**” – *denouncing* the evil forces or trends at work and *announcing* the vision and path (the aims, objectives and strategies!) to be followed. **This approach is thus realistic and yet full of hope.** Because the situation is often complex and evolving, it is an ongoing process, which has to be pursued with others, **in dialogue**. We have to go from light to light and commitment to commitment! *This process involves an analysis of today’s society and leads to the building of a new society, a new ‘creation’, a better future corresponding to God’s designs and our deepest aspirations and longings.*

The Bishops obviously speak in Christian terms, but **reading the signs of the times is very meaningful and relevant for all human beings**, whatever may be their faiths and worldviews. This approach demands dialogue, *learning and giving*. *It is also action-oriented and challenges us to become involved*. It thus delivers us from mere theories and arid intellectualism. How much one wishes that most philosophers and theologians, economists and political scientists, sociologists and activists, and ordinary people would adopt this new approach to the world! Reading the signs of the times is what the Bishops try to do in their reflections. *It is the inspiration and the methodology of the Social Teaching of the Church* (read for example the Bishops’ description of evangelisation, above, 53) *and of people who search and work for a new society*.

Let us illustrate our explanations. The 1978 Statement is entitled “The Church’s Response to the Urgent Needs of the Country”, and that of 1984, “The Church’s Response to the Challenges of Contemporary Society”. The latter observed: “Having prayerfully reflected on our common mission in the face of the challenges posed by the situation in our country”, we concluded (among other things) that the promotion of justice is “a privileged expression of mission and an apostolic priority” (87-8). In 1986, the Bishops tried to address the contemporary issues, problems and challenges (99-106). In 1994, they spoke of “facing the new challenges of the Asian continent”, “responding to the inspirations of the Spirit and reading the signs of the times”, and they recommitted themselves to the mission of Jesus Christ in India (143). In 1998, they studied the challenges to the evangelising mission of the Church (particularly the problems of poverty and caste), and made an action programme to answer them (158-66).

The Bishops repeatedly expressed such perspectives. Today’s scenario invites the Church to proclaim the Good News for the building of a new society in India (167). Evangelisation is a “manifestation or epiphany of God’s will and the fulfillment of that will” in world history (38-9, quoting AG, #9). *The Bishops also often expressed their hopes* (e.g., 6, 9, 17-8, 16, 132 & 155). In 1984 for instance, they called upon all people of goodwill “to prepare a future of hope, of human dignity and equality and of freedom, justice and lasting peace”

(97). The CCBI also asserted in 1999: “In the midst of various challenges and problems of our times, the bishops are to be above all witnesses and servants of the Gospel to instill hope in the minds of the people.” All Christians must collaborate to bring hope to the world of today (#2 & 7).

Reading the signs of the times is a great need in today’s complex and fast-changing world. (Making a pun, we can say that reading the signs of the times enables us to discover the relevance of reading the signs of the times!) Though different words may be used to describe it (like “see-judge-act” or “analysis-reflection-action), **this approach is particularly suited to the rapid evolution of today’s world and the explosion of knowledge and information. It should be adopted by human beings everywhere.**

Because of our focus on social issues, we have presented it here as a method to transform society. *But this approach should also be used to discern God’s will in all the circumstances of our personal and family lives and in the events of our neighbourhood and workplace. This approach now belongs to the core of every relevant spirituality.* It makes us more and more socially conscious and committed. **It gradually transforms us and leads us to become more and more identified and in solidarity with today’s world and its people, especially the poor and the marginalised.**

Conclusion

A 2000 CCBI passage may serve as summary and conclusion: **“The important and challenging mission of evangelisation calls the Church... for a triple dialogue** with the poor and the marginalised, with the people of different cultures and with the followers of other faiths. *Dialogue with the poor* calls for solidarity with the poor” and the promotion of human dignity and justice (cf. EA, #34). *“Dialogue with culture* means inculturation, which is not just confined to the adoption of the signs and symbols of a given culture in the liturgy. It calls for deeper immersion, insertion and participation in the totality of the life of a people... (cf. EA, #21). Inter-religious dialogue is carried out as an integral aspect of evangelisation and promotes cooperative action for peace and harmony (cf. EA, #31)” (2000, #2.4).

Box 5.3

What do You Think of this Chapter’s Title?

Did you notice that I did not mention the Church in the title of Chapter 5, but simply spoke of **Dialogue and Solidarity with the World?** *Is this most appropriate to indicate that this is a universal vocation and mission?* Should I have omitted the word *Dialogue* and put only **Solidarity with the World? What do you think? And, according to you, how can this solidarity be developed among all people to build a new society?**

Let me finally share a few ‘linguistic impressions’. **Dialogue** usually refers to a mutual exchange and ‘gifting’ of ideas, attitudes, values, behaviour patterns, etc. It is thus appropriate to speak of dialogue with cultures, religions and ideologies, and even with *people* of other cultures and faiths. While often involving dialogue, **solidarity** evokes a deeper meaning, which is preferable when speaking of relationships with people. Though using the title *Dialogue with the Poor and the Marginalised*, the Bishops actually reflect more on *Solidarity with the Poor* in the text itself.

We can also be in solidarity with people, even when we disagree with them. For me, a dialogue which does not lead to greater solidarity has failed. I therefore prefer to speak of **solidarity** with *people* of different cultures, faiths and ideologies, **solidarity with the world in need of liberation**, and especially **solidarity with the poor and the marginalised**. While dialogue may be a first step, **to develop and deepen solidarity with people of all backgrounds, especially the poor and the oppressed, is a significant though difficult responsibility for all human beings and communities, including Christians and the Church. It is also an absolutely necessary step to live the Social Gospel and build a new society.**