

CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF INDIA

XXXIV PLENARY ASSEMBLY, ST. JOHN'S NATIONAL ACADEMY OF HEALTH SCIENCES,
BENGALURU, 13-19 FEBRUARY 2020

Final Statement

Dialogue: The Path to Truth and Charity

INTRODUCTION

We, the 192 member Bishops of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, assembled for our XXXIV Plenary Assembly at St. John's National Academy of Health Sciences, Bengaluru from 13-19 February 2020. Prompted by our fidelity to Jesus Christ and unflinching loyalty to our beloved motherland we reflected, meditated and deliberated on the ever relevant theme, "Dialogue: The Path to Truth and Charity." We also sought to sincerely evaluate the quality of our apostolic ministry and be renewed in the Spirit to be servant leaders of our people after the heart of Christ who came "to serve and not to be served" (Mark 10, 48).

The Church, the community of faith in Jesus Christ, has integral and all-inclusive dialogue at her heart. Indeed dialogue belongs to the very essence of the Christian faith. All through her history the Church has made earnest efforts to engage in dialogue at different levels. As a community of human beings the Church lives in civil society and body politic, continuously inspiring us to be loyal citizens of India. The noteworthy contribution of the Church in the field of education, health care and social transformation has been consistently acknowledged by the people of India.

INDIA: UNITY IN DIVERSITY

The hallmark of Indian society is its pluralism. From ancient times, India has been a mosaic of many religions, cultures and languages with a strong Indian identity. What unites us is stronger and deeper than what divides us. We are proud of our Constitution that envisions a Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic which resolved to secure for all its citizens Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity as enshrined in the Preamble. Justice is spelt out as social, economic and political; Liberty is explained as liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; and Equality is understood as equality of status and opportunity. These Constitutional values form the ethos of Indian identity that promotes Fraternity which leads to the dignity of the individual and unity and integrity of the nation. Every citizen must be ever vigilant against any attempt to undermine the ennobling human vision of the Constitution so that our beloved country ever remains united.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Various streams of thoughts running through the biblical texts enrich our understanding of the necessity of dialogue among peoples and cultures. Dialogue with other religions is integral to the Biblical Revelation. The different aspects of dialogue in the Bible

are rooted in our faith in God as Trinity: God as the Creator of all, the universal presence of God's Spirit, and Jesus as the Saviour of all mankind.

In the Gospels, Jesus' encounters with people reveal that God is the Father of all. The Kingdom of God that Jesus preached embodies the love of God, irrespective of race, sex, colour, class, language and creed. The Good News of Jesus calls upon humanity to establish a society of justice, equality, love, forgiveness and peace. Dialogue begins and grows when we open ourselves to the Lord, and by committing ourselves to his words and deeds, live the mystery of his death and resurrection which paves the path to truth and charity. For example, in the dialogue with the Samaritan woman, Jesus unveils the true horizons of relating with God in truth and spirit. He starts with the dialogue of life and moves to the dialogue of action which is followed by the dialogue of sharing the religious experience, and eventually the dialogue leads to the witnessing of truth.

CHURCH TEACHINGS

The Church encourages believers to respect each other and one another's religious tradition, thus cooperating with one another to promote peace and harmony and work for the common good of all. Pope Francis has urged all people of good will to make every effort to establish peace in society by "inviting all persons who believe in God to unite and work together, so that it may serve as a guide for future generations to advance a culture of mutual respect in the awareness of the great divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters...called to express this human fraternity by safeguarding creation and the entire universe, and supporting all persons, especially the poorest and those most in need..." (*Document on Human Fraternity*, 4th February 2019, Abu Dhabi).

Dialogue is rooted in the very vocation of the Church. Being open to dialogue, calls for being absolutely consistent with one's own religious tradition. Believers enter into each other's depth of life through dialogue.

DIALOGUE WITH CULTURES AND RELIGIONS

Every community that lives in India possesses its own cultural identity with its richness, which must be respected at any cost. Attempts to homogenize and impose a mono-cultural pattern pose serious threats to the cultural patrimony of our country. As our Constitution envisions, there cannot be any meaningful dialogue of culture without acknowledging the primacy of human person. People of every culture and religion and those who profess no religion must be esteemed with mutual respect which eventually leads to human fraternity. No culture or religion shall dominate over other cultures and religions. Subduing certain cultures by the dominant culture will destroy the peace and harmony existing in the country. "The enemy of fraternity is an individualism which translates into the desire to affirm oneself and one's own group above others. Religious behaviour, therefore, needs continually to be purified from the recurrent temptation to judge others as enemies and adversaries." (*Document on Human Fraternity*, 4th February 2019, Abu Dhabi).

DIALOGUE WITH THE POOR, THE DALITS AND TRIBAL PEOPLE

Dialogue with the poor, the Dalits and Tribal people is an urgent priority in the context of India. The Dalits and Tribal people are continually denied their human rights socially. Every step taken in favour of their liberation by eradicating poverty, exploitation, discrimination, and every other form of sinful structures of society is an effective means of dialogue. However, dialogue with the poor shall not be limited only to the works of mercy. The term ‘the Church of the poor’ reflects the constant self-understanding of Christians that the poor stand in the place of Christ, and therefore charity and justice must be an essential and central dimension of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

In this context, we urge the State authorities to take adequate steps to ensure justice to the Dalit Christians and the Tribal people.

DIALOGUE WITH NATURE

Dialogue with nature is another important aspect. The earth, our common home, which was created to support life and give praise to God, is crying out with pain because human activity is destroying it. All who believe in God and all people of good will have an obligation to protect the ecological equilibrium of the earth, intended by the Creator. Therefore dialogue with nature includes serious steps to mitigate climate change, clean the land and the seas, and start treating all of creation with respect and concern.

DIALOGUE WITH THE UNBORN

Dialogue should not be limited to those who are born; rather the right to life of the unborn must also be taken seriously into account. We believe that the human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception, that each and every human life has inherent dignity, and thus must be treated with the respect due to a human person from womb to tomb. The steps to legalise abortion even to the extent of six months must be condemned as a gross injustice which undermines the right to life of the unborn. We appeal to the State authorities that it immediately withdraw the Bill in the Parliament.

DIALOGUE OF PEACE

Interreligious dialogue is one of the most pressing needs of our times. There will be no peace among nations without peace among religions. There will be no peace among religions without dialogue among religions. We are alarmed by continuous persecution on a global level endured by innocent people at the hands of fundamentalist and terrorist groups.

Dialogue in India should aim at collaboration in areas such as peace-building, protection of the environment, eradication of poverty and ensuring the human dignity of all, especially of women and children. Besides, it means that we condemn all wars, violence and terrorism that create insurmountable blocks to dialogue. We pledge ourselves to engage in a process of dialogue for a reconciled society.

A FERVENT APPEAL

We believe that patriotism is different from narrow and divisive cultural nationalism, which is radically different from Constitutional nationalism. No one has the right to question the patriotism of any Indian citizen on subjective grounds. Authentic patriotism unites us amidst divergences. Patriotism is defined as directing the attention of the citizens to the good of the whole human family, united by the different ties which bind together races, people and nations. “All Christians must be aware of their sense of responsibility and their service of the common good. They must recognize the legitimacy of different opinions with regard to temporal solutions, and respect citizens, who, even as a group, defend their points of view by honest methods” (*Church in the Modern World*, no. 75).

False nationalistic ideologies that instigate contempt for cultures other than the majoritarian dominant culture are capable of perpetrating atrocities. It is necessary to clarify the essential difference between patriotism and pseudo nationalism. Patriotism builds up the nation while pseudo nationalism destroys the integrity, unity and harmony of the nation. Nationalism, particularly in its most radical and extreme forms, is thus the antithesis of true patriotism.

We appeal to the State authorities to ensure that pseudo nationalism does not continue to give rise to new forms of totalitarianism. Together with the framers of the Constitution, we, the Catholic Bishops of India, affirm that religion shall not be a criterion for determining Indian citizenship. The authorities should come forward with sincere and effective means to erase the sense of fear, anxiety and uncertainty spreading in the country, especially among the religious minorities.

Needless to say that dissent should not be misconstrued as un-patriotism. Democracy cannot be built on monologue. We call upon the State authorities that it is right time to sit around the common table, a place of conversation and of shared hopes. Against the attempts at creating cultural isolation in our beloved country, dialogue will make the elements that are seemingly a barrier or a wall, a bridge of relationship. “Identity and dialogue are not enemies. Our own cultural identity is strengthened and enriched as a result of dialogue with those unlike ourselves. Nor is our authentic identity preserved by an impoverished isolation.” (Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, n. 37).

CONCLUSION

Dialogue is indeed the path to truth and charity. Let us pray that dialogue grows in every family, at all levels of the Church, among the Christians, among religions and cultures, and among the nations so that God’s Kingdom of reconciliation, justice, peace and love may be established.

Though deeply concerned and anguished with what is happening in our country, we are filled with hope inspired by faith and the innate goodness of all our fellow citizens. We appreciate the majority who uphold the secular values of our nation. We are determined to continue to collaborate in the work of building our great nation, Mother India.

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, who manifested the exemplary spirit of dialogue through her maternal intercession, guide each one of us on the path of truth and charity!