

Dear Bishops....!

To
Most Rev. Andrews Thazhath, President;
and to ALL Office-Bearers and ALL Members
The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI)

Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, Your Lordships,
Greetings to each one of you!

This letter is **being personally addressed to each one of you**; my apologies for doing so through one common email!

A little over three years ago, on 12 February 2020, I wrote a letter (by email) to all the Bishops of India (THANKS once again to all those who replied to me). Given what is happening in the country today, I quote verbatim extracts from that letter:

“Dear Bishops, in the context of the reality of today, I have taken a look at the statements which emerged from some of your recent biennial plenary meetings:

“In 2018, based on the theme ‘United in Diversity for a Mission of Mercy and Witness: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28: 20)’, your statement included, *“Any attempt to promote nationalism based on any one particular culture or religion is a dangerous position. It may lead to uniformity but never to genuine unity. Such misconceived efforts can only lead our nation on the path of self-annihilation. Mono-culturalism has never been and can never be the right answer to the quest for peace, progress and development, especially in a country like ours that has a rich diversity of culture, language, region, race and religion. Violence always recoils upon the violent sooner or later, “For all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Mt 26: 52). We deplore the rising incidence of atrocities against women, killings, caste rivalries and communal violence which includes attacks on Christian institutions and communities. Therefore, let us follow the path of true nationalism that can lead our motherland to true peace, harmony, progress and prosperity. Authentic nationalism respects the human dignity of every citizen, regardless of one’s economic status, culture, religion, region or language”*.

“Based on the theme, ‘Response of the Church in India to the present-day challenges’, your statement in 2016, said precious little. It was a brainstorming exercise with many generalised proposals (which few would take seriously) though your conclusion said, *“As authentic citizens of the country, we repose our confidence in the democratic values and the Constitution of India. Trusting in God’s grace, love and mercy, we march ahead to carry out our God-given mission, confident of the goodwill and support of our people everywhere. We appeal to all people of goodwill in India to join hands with us in solidarity to work for a better Church and a better society”*.

“Very interestingly, a couple of years earlier (in February 2014 and just before the General Elections that year) when you met in Palai Kerala on the theme, ‘Renewed Church for a Renewed Society – Responding to the Call of Vatican II’, your words were even more emphatic, *“When we look at our country, we see corruption plaguing every sphere of society. In such a scenario, Church institutions must be an example of transparency and probity. Another phenomenon is that of internal migration which, while opening opportunities to people, has torn the cultural and religious moorings that sustained them. Globalization too has brought in its wake problems like prolonged working hours which have disrupted family life. We witness the trend to fundamentalism which seeks to dilute the secular character of our nation. Against this trend, we stand by the values upheld by the Indian Constitution and appeal to governments to respect these values”*.

“The experience of God will lead us to involvement in and solidarity with the marginalized and the exploited, those suffering from disabilities, those living in the peripheries of economic, cultural and social spheres. We will speak out against all forms of injustice meted out to them and we will defend their rights. We listened to the call of Pope Francis urging us to “work to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor.” (Evangelii Gaudium, no. 188). We want the Church to be truly a Church of the Poor.”

*“In 2012, at your 30th Meet in February 2012 at Bangalore on the theme ‘The Church’s Role for a Better India’, your meaningful message was addressed “to all people of goodwill”, and included, “We sensed in our hearts our country’s yearning for a Better India. Our country has been noted for its deep spirituality, its saints and sages, its rich diversity of cultures and religions. People yearn for the ideal enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution of India of a Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, Democratic Republic which will secure for its citizens **Justice**, social, economic and political; **Liberty** of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; **Equality** of status and of opportunity; **Fraternity** assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation. But this yearning has remained largely unfulfilled. Economic development has brought about increasing inequities, an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor with consequent tensions spilling over into violence. We see around us a betrayal of the poor and marginalized, the tribals, dalits and other backward classes, women and other groups who live in dehumanising and oppressive poverty. We witness rampant exploitation of children. There is disappointment with those in public life for whom ethical concerns matter little. The Church does not wish to rest on her laurels. **She recommit herself to being a prophetic Church, taking a decisive stand in favour of the poor and marginalized “We envision an India with more attributes of the Kingdom of God such as justice and equity with its consequent fruits of love, peace and joy.”***

Incidentally, all the above, are extracts from your own (CBCI) statements!

Today, my dear Cardinals and Bishops: the people of India: the excluded and the exploited, the other marginalized and the minorities, particularly the Christians, cry out to you: they need your prophetic voice, they need you to be visible in taking a stand for truth and justice, in being a true and good Shepherd just like Jesus- ready and willing to lay down one’s life!

What is happening in Manipur, since more than a month now, to the tribals and particularly to the Christians there, is a crime against humanity! The systematic targeting killing of the tribals and Christians, the destruction of Churches and Christian institutions is nothing short of being barbaric; facts and figures speak for themselves. Thousands of people who lived in the hilly areas of Manipur, have fled their homes and lands and taken refuge in temporary shelters. The ethnic cleansing that is currently taking place, in complete connivance with those in power draw a striking parallel to the Gujarat Genocide (when Muslims were the victims) which began in February 2002 and which lasted for several months. The tribals and Christians of Manipur long for a sustainable peace based on their legitimate and just demands. One does not have to be a rocket- scientist to know and understand why this current violence is taking place and who is behind it!

There are several other pre-mediated attacks, the venomous hate speeches and other forms of violence on the Christians of Madhya Pradesh (especially in Sagar and Jabalpur), in Chhattisgarh (on 6 June a newly professed Catholic nun, her mother and others were falsely arrested from a thanksgiving Mass in the Jashpur Diocese, for apparently ‘offending religious sentiments’) and in several other parts of India; all these take place with a frightening regularity. Nothing happens to the perpetrators of these heinous crimes who do so with impunity. There is sufficient evidence, after painstaking research done by completely objective and professional individuals and groups, that the acts of these perpetrators are motivated, given legitimacy and immunity by the most powerful of the

land. This is certainly no ‘State Secret’! In several cases, the victims are made the ‘criminals’, have false cases foisted on them and are even incarcerated; examples are plenty. Besides there are many other instances today of how the pluralistic and democratic fabric of the country is being destroyed; of how the fundamentals of our Constitution (which are also values enshrined in the Gospel of Jesus) are being trampled upon; of anti-people policies and legislation which effectively cater to a small privileged section of society. We are all aware of how the poor and marginalized are denied their legitimate rights; of how the environment and our fragile eco-systems are being pillaged for the profiteering of a few; of how minorities are being denigrated, demonized and being discriminated against. Above all, of how corruption and crony capitalism is throttling the nation. The list is endless indeed!

We humbly have to admit, that despite the Synodal process which is underway, the Church in India is by and large still hierarchical, patriarchal and clerical. Therefore, in view of the above, I am writing this letter with great pain, to you my dear Bishops, **to ACT NOW, before it is too late!** Certainly, we all must pray and without ceasing; but Jesus also reminds us that “*not all who say Lord, Lord....*”. We are all intelligent enough to DO what we are expected to do. Unfortunately, your Collective Silence, Screams! Many wonder why! Thankfully, some Bishops, some Catholic religious leaders and also some laity, have shown prophetic courage by taking visible and vocal stands on critical issues including the violence in Manipur! There is no doubt about that: once certainly needs to salute them and particularly for risking their lives in the face of much hostility!

Here are some suggestions (even if they sound preposterous) which may help restore the confidence of the people in the hierarchy, may help in bringing back some peace to the suffering people of Manipur and hopefully, may also address some of the systemic issues which plague the nation:

- i. Call a **Media Conference** immediately: this has to be done in the National Capital Delhi and also simultaneously in every State Capital. The Media Conference in the Capital must be addressed by the CBCI Office bearers. The demands should include:
 - a) restoration of peace in Manipur immediately;
 - b) safe return of all tribals/Christians ousted from their land and homes;
 - c) adequate monetary compensation for rebuilding homes, Churches, institutions destroyed;
 - d) book and punish all responsible for the violence (even if they have powerful connections)
- ii. As many as possible of you (even 100!) Cardinals/Archbishops/Bishops **go to Manipur** – for at least two days before 25 June. Invite Christian Leaders of other denominations to join you. Stay in the midst of those who are internally displaced; as Pope Francis constantly reminds us “*smell of the sheep*”; after all, Jesus was born in a stable and died on the cross. Your presence in the midst of the suffering people will send a strong message to all
- iii. Organise a **National Protest Day** in this month of June– to highlight what is happening to the minorities, the Adivasis, the Dalits and the other vulnerable groups of the country. Have a huge gathering in a public maidan in New Delhi – with as many Bishops as possible and people coming from all over the country. Request other civil society groups. /Movements to join in; On this National Protest Day – let there also be public protests in all Dioceses of the country.
- iv. Demand the immediate **removal of Priyank Kanoongo**, the President of the National Commission for the Rights of the Child, for targeting Christian institutions and making fabricated and unsubstantiated allegations against Christian personnel

Dear Bishops, it is important that you act now with decisiveness and with cohesiveness; it will go a long way in addressing some of the critical issues of today! Hobnobbing with those who rule us today, may bring ‘some token and temporary promises’; but in the long-run however there will be serious repercussions and irretrievable damage done both to the Church and to the secular, democratic character of our country! Please do not be fooled! In ‘**Evangelii Gaudium**’, Pope Francis reminds us

saying, “An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the **“smell of the sheep”** and the sheep are willing to hear their voice. An evangelizing community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be.” He bluntly adds, **“I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures.”** Ultimately saying, **“Peace in society cannot be understood as pacification or the mere absence of violence resulting from the domination of one part of society over others. Nor does true peace act as a pretext for justifying a social structure, which silences or appeases the poor; so that the more affluent can placidly support their lifestyle, which others have to make do as they can. Demands involving the distribution of wealth, concern for the poor and human rights cannot be suppressed under the guise of creating a consensus on paper or a transient peace for a contented minority. The dignity of the human person and the common good rank higher than the comfort of those who refuse to renounce their privileges. When these values are threatened, a prophetic voice must be raised.”**

In his path-breaking Encyclical **‘Fratelli Tutti’**, Pope Francis unequivocally states, **“For these reasons, the Church, while respecting the autonomy of political life, does not restrict her mission to the private sphere. On the contrary, **“she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines”** in the building of a better world, or fail to **“reawaken the spiritual energy”** that can contribute to the betterment of society. It is true that religious ministers must not engage in the party politics that are the proper domain of the laity, but neither can they renounce the political dimension of life itself, which involves a constant attention to the common good and a concern for integral human development. **The Church “has a public role over and above her charitable and educational activities”**. She works for **“the advancement of humanity and of universal fraternity”**. She does not claim to compete with earthly powers, but to offer herself as **“a family among families, this is the Church, open to bearing witness in today’s world, open to faith hope and love for the Lord and for those whom he loves with a preferential love. A home with open doors. The Church is a home with open doors, because she is a mother”**. And in imitation of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, **“we want to be a Church that serves, that leaves home and goes forth from its places of worship, goes forth from its sacristies, in order to accompany life, to sustain hope, to be the sign of unity... to build bridges, to break down walls, to sow seeds of reconciliation”**. (#276)**

The directions from the Holy Father are clear... why do we fight shy of ensuring their implementation? There is much more to be written but I will stop here, once again making that plea which I made at the beginning: dear Bishops, please be Shepherds responding to the cries of the suffering people now. We all need to be reminded of those immortal words of German Pastor Martin Niemoller, **“Then they came for me, and there was no one left, to speak out for me!”** Speak out now collectively and individually; speak out strongly for our suffering sisters and brothers!

Assuring you of my prayers for you, dear Bishops, I crave your blessings and prayers. I also look forward to your response to this letter. Thanks, in anticipation!

Yours in Him

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