

O LORD, MAKE US INSTRUMENTS OF YOUR PEACE

MISSION WITHOUT CONVERSION

An Open Letter to the Christians

Dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ,

May the peace of Christ be with us all and may we all become the instruments of peace.

With much anguish and pain in my heart, I write this open letter to you. I am neither a religious leader nor a scholar nor do I have any authority. But I do have deep concern and love for my Christian brothers and sisters, the people of India and the world. As I read of the violence committed against Christians in various parts of India - innocent people killed, churches burnt and destroyed, a nun raped, and people made homeless and driven into the forest - my heart bleeds for them. I pray for all those people affected, and their families, and ask God to grant them consolation and peace. My heart also bleeds for the people who indulged in this violence. No one who indulges in violence can have peace of mind. Violence breeds violence. I also pray to God to grant peace to those who perpetuated this violence. Let us ask God to forgive them with the heart of Jesus Christ, who asked God to forgive those who did violence to him. Jesus felt that they were doing so out of ignorance. Let us also ask God to forgive us if we have offended other's religious sentiments, consciously or unconsciously, because we also might have done this out of ignorance. Ultimately ignorance - not knowing our essential unity - is the source of violence.

These incidents also should make us reflect on the will of God - the will of Christ - for our times. Recently I took part in a conference in Italy on the theme "Becoming the good news of Christ". I had an opportunity to share my thoughts on this subject. As I remembered the violence directed against Indian Christians, who are accused of performing marvelous and heroic humanitarian service only in order to convert the recipients to Christianity, I wondered what it means to become the good news of Christ today. It is very painful to see people carrying out violent acts in the name of religion as the essence of every religion is non-violence and peace. As a follower of the path of Christ to God, I asked myself how preaching the message of Christ can invite violence, as Jesus Christ is peace, his message is peace and he proclaimed peace. Of course Jesus met a violent death, not for trying to convert people but for breaking down the barriers, for including everyone in his vision, for actively trying to liberate people from oppression, particularly religious oppression, and for inviting his tradition to grow in divine human relationship according to the plan of God. His religious authorities refused to grow and interpreted his claims as blasphemous. That refusal resulted in violence. Jesus died for growth, unity and liberation. How then can we preach a message of Christ that is divisive and exclusive? I began to reflect whether we can proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in a way that promotes growth, unity and liberation without having the mission to convert. This leads to the fundamental question of whether Jesus intended 'conversion' to mean the way Christian tradition has interpreted it.

I have been a student of inter-religious dialogue, particularly Hindu-Christian dialogue, and I realized how similar are the essences of the teachings of the sages of the Upanishads and the teachings of Christ, though there are some basic differences like karma and reincarnation, which need to be discussed and understood in their deepest levels. The sages of the Upanishads were universal spirits beyond any particular labels, just as Jesus Christ was. I have to acknowledge the fact that studying Hindu scriptures and Hindu philosophy helped me to understand Christ better. Many Christians are ignorant of Hindu Wisdom and they tend to misinterpret the symbolism of Hindu tradition. Unfortunately we cannot blame them as they are conditioned in that way. I began to realize that our interpretation of Christ is very narrow and exclusive and this does not do justice to the all inclusive and universal message of Christ. I began to realize that Jesus Christ is not identical to Christianity, and different Christian churches have different interpretations of Jesus Christ and his message. Though all Christian denominations claim to be Christians, there are many different interpretations among them. Christianity is not one religion (even though all Christians accept Jesus Christ and the Bible) but a congregation of many religions, as there are many divisions within the label of Christianity. It is the same with Hinduism. Hinduism is not one religion but a congregation of many belief structures even though all call themselves Hindus and accept the same scriptures. This can be said of all major religions. My study of Hindu scriptures and the scriptures of other religions has made me realize that sharing the good news of Christ today is not about converting people from other religions but about having a genuine and sincere dialogue with them. It means recognizing the plan of God in every religion and learning together. Even though inter-religious dialogue does not have the ultimate answer, it is a stepping stone as it reveals the positive contribution of each religion and also the limitations of each religion since religions belong to the historical manifestations of truth, which is conditioned. Dialogue prepares the ground for all religions to open to the eternal truth that heals the divisions created by the historical truth and invites them to grow into unity. The eternal truth at the same time preserves each religion's cultural richness. Real growth takes place only when each religion realizes its limitations.

Christians need to have an inclusive and liberating interpretation of the two most important statements of Jesus: "I am the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through me." (Jn.14.6) and "Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation." (Mk.16.5). These two statements have been interpreted in an exclusive way in the sense that Jesus Christ is the only way to God and the Christians have the obligation to preach this good news and convert people to Christ or Christianity. Surely that interpretation has served to bring Christianity so far even though tainted with violence (Christians received violence and Christians also used violence), but today Christianity needs to outgrow this interpretation. I personally came to the conclusion that this way of interpreting these two statements of Jesus did not do justice to the all inclusive and universal message of Christ. These two statements as told by Jesus have much more universal and inclusive message than the interpretations given by the Christian tradition. Of course it would be very difficult for many Christians even to think of it and this suggestion itself may provoke strong reactions as it has been the tradition of two thousand years. However, there is no other way than this if we want to do justice to

Christ and if we want to become the instruments of peace for the world. The number of years or the number of believers is not the ultimate criteria for truth. People believed for many centuries that the earth was flat but someone said that it was round. People for many centuries believed that the Sun went around the earth but some one said that it was the earth that went around the Sun. The greatest need of Christianity today is to grow into Christ, to convert itself to Christ, to make a quantum jump, to inaugurate a kind of Galilean revolution. We have to be humble to say that we are in the process of knowing Christ and have not arrived at the end - and probably there is no end to this knowing of Christ or Truth.

There are six important criteria to interpret the message of Christ. The interpretation must be:

1. Universally Valid
2. Unifying
3. Liberating
4. Give possibility for growth
5. Reasonable
6. Openness to new understanding which fulfills the above five

The way we have interpreted these two statements of Jesus does not satisfy this criteria. It is not enough to believe that Jesus Christ is the only way to God because Jesus said so or it is written in the Bible. We also need to convince others with reasonable arguments how one individual can say that he is the only way to God. It is not enough to say that Jesus Christ is the prince of peace but our belief structure should be such that it should really promote peace within and without. The good news of Christ is simple and direct but it cannot be defined. It can only be described in many ways.

In the conference in Italy, I have presented the following twenty points to the question of what it means to become the good news of Christ for our times.

1. It is to become like Christ, to become the kingdom of God which is to discover the universal presence of God and the essential unity of humanity with God. Jesus proclaimed his good news saying, "The kingdom of God is at hand, repent." (Mk 1.15). It means that God is everywhere and everyone and everything is in God; the humanity and the creation are essentially one with God though functionally different. When Jesus said "I and the Father are one." he revealed his essential unity with God. When he said "I am in the Father and Father is in me.", (Jn.14:10) and "My Father is greater than I." (Jn.14:28) he revealed his functional difference. Repentance is a process of continuous inner purification or growth until we discover this truth. It has two aspects: ascending

and descending. In ascending we discover our unity and in descending we return to our functional difference.¹

2. It is to become the instruments of peace. Jesus is peace and his message is peace. To do this, we need to be free from any ambition of expanding our boundaries and increasing our number. Instead, we need to see everyone already in the kingdom of God and help them to discover this truth. We need to renounce religious conversions.² Where there is mission to convert there is violence within and this violence produces violence outside. With this inner violence we cannot become the instruments of peace.

3. It is to become spiritual liberators and not spiritual colonizers. Jesus was not a spiritual colonizer who wished to convert people to his authority and rule them. He was a spiritual liberator who came to make people free with his truth. "Truth will make you free," (Jn.8.14-15) he said. "I do not call you servants anymore, because a servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father," (Jn.15.15) Jesus declared.

4. It is to transform our religious identities or boundaries from being essential to functional. It is not to identify with the means but to focus on the destiny, which is our unity with God. Instead of saying "I am a Christian." I prefer to say "I am journeying to God through the path of Christ." Suppose if I go to London and take Air India, I do not say "I am Air India.", but "I am flying by Air India." Where there is essential identity with the means there is an essential boundary and where there is essential boundary (not functional, which is necessary) there are seeds of conflict and war.

5. It is to become the seekers of the Kingdom of God, not just to remain as the believers of the kingdom of God. This transition from being believers to seekers is very important today. Remaining as believers is the source of conflict and violence. Jesus said, "Seek you first the kingdom of God and its righteousness and all things will be given unto you." (Mt.6.33). Believing is only the starting point. We also need to have an inclusive vision of being a Christian. A Christian is not just one who believes in Christ but everyone who is searching for Truth or God or the kingdom of God.³

6. It is to become who we already are. Our spiritual journey is to discover our deepest reality and not to become something else. Jesus said, "You are the Light of the World." (Mt.5.14). He did not say, "You must become the light of the world". We need to discover this truth for ourselves and help others to discover it.

¹ In ascending we grow into love of God and in descending we return to the love of neighbour.

² It is not in an absolute sense. If a person does not have any religious affiliation and needs a spiritual home, it may be necessary to join a religious group.

³ This is not supporting the theory of anonymous Christians. This may apply to every religion. Every religion should have an inclusive vision. A Hindu is not just one who believes in Hindu belief structure but every one who is searching for Truth or God. A Buddhist is not just one who believes in Buddha but everyone who is searching for Truth. A Muslim is not just one who believes in Islam but everyone who is searching for truth or God. If we are all searching for God or Truth then we are all Christians, we all Hindus, we are all Buddhists and we are Muslims and we are all Jews etc.

7. It is to become the way, the truth and the life just as Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life. This way is not exclusive but like a trunk that holds all the branches and the leaves so includes all ways, truths and ways of life but transcends them. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father except through me." (Jn: 14.6). It means that in order to enter into God we need to transcend the conditioned truth that is present at the levels of the branches and enter into the trunk, which is the unconditioned truth. The way is to move from the conditioned truth to the unconditioned truth. This is the only way through which Jesus entered it and this is the only way for everyone.

8. It is to realize that there is only one way to God and this one way is inner conversion of purifying our ego and surrendering it to God so that it becomes an instrument of God. Every religion is trying to help people to do this in its unique way and Christianity does it in its unique way. The difficulty is that sometimes religions create a subtle religious ego rather than freeing people from the ego. Jesus said, "If you lose your 'self' (conditioned self or ego) you gain your 'self' (unconditioned self or true self); if you hold or gain your 'self' (conditioned self or ego) you will lose your 'self' (unconditioned self or true self)." (Lk.9.23-24). Jesus used different words to describe this one way of conversion: repentance, rebirth, becoming like little children, interior death, and growing into the kingdom of God.

9. It is to recognize that every religion is a gift from God to humanity and every scripture reveals the will of God - but conditioned by the era in which it was revealed. So we always need to be open to understand the will of God for our times. The will of God is not static but dynamic.

10. It is to embrace within us the radical love of God and the radical love of neighbour just as Jesus Christ is the archetype of this radical love. "I and the Father are one." (Jn.10.30) reveals his radical love of God and "Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters that you do unto me." (Mt. 25.40) reveals his radical love of neighbour. The Eucharist is the essence of this radical love.

11. It is to affirm the dignity of human beings and the equality of men and women in all areas of life. All social, political, cultural, moral and spiritual values have to be evaluated according to this human dignity and equality of sexes.

12. It is to build harmony between our creation (cosmos) humanity (anthropos) and God (Theos).⁴

13. It is to proclaim the good news of Christ to the whole creation and not just to human beings. Jesus said, "Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation." (Mk.16.15). We need to proclaim to every human being that he/she is the

⁴ We have to see creation as the manifestation of God and human being as the manifestation of God. When a human being is in harmony with God creation is also in harmony with God. If a human being is not in harmony with God then creation is misused. After the fall of Adam and Eve God says 'cursed is the ground (creation) because of you'.

manifestation of God and to every creature that it is also the manifestation of God. First we need to believe in this truth and then, through repentance or conversion, we realize this essential truth for ourselves and invite others to do so.

14. It is to abolish the spiritual apartheid between Jesus and other humans and make it possible for everyone to realize what Jesus realized in his life. Jesus opened this possibility to everyone but Christianity closed it. Jesus not only said, "I am the light of the world." (Jn.8.12) but also "You are the light of the world." (Mt.5.14). These two statements are the two wheels of Jesus' good news.

15. It is to identify with the poor and the suffering humanity and give them the message of hope and liberation. Jesus identified with the message: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim the good news to the poor; he has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set liberty those who are oppressed." (Lk.4.18). We have to do **this** without the motive for conversion.

16. It is to become humble, which comes from the realization that we are all interconnected and what we are now is the gift of others. We need to serve others in love and compassion. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, an effective symbol of humility and service (Jn.13.14).

17. It is to affirm that God or Truth is greater than belief structures (religions), human beings in their deepest level are greater than belief structures, and belief structures are meant to be at the service of human beings and not human beings at the service of belief structures. "The Sabbath is made for humanity and not humanity for the sake of the Sabbath. The Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath," (Mt.12.8) said Jesus. When Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." he was affirming this basic truth. Violence comes when people serve religions or belief structures.

18. It is to transform our religion (belief structure) into a nest where human beings are born, protected, nourished and given security until the wings are grown and then helped to move into the freedom of the Kingdom of God. This is what it means to fulfill religion or the Law. Jesus said, "I have not come to abolish the Law (religion) but to fulfill the Law (religion)." (Lk.5.17).

19. It is to live in the eternal present, which fulfills the past, manifests in the present and opens to the future. The time does not move towards eternity but manifests eternity. It becomes the instrument of eternity. "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit," (Jn.3.8) said Jesus to Nicodemus.

20. It is to see God in the family, in the community since God *is* the family, God *is* the community. God is the relationship, the Trinity. God is the unity of life and peace (Jn.17.21). It is to experience Jesus in the breaking of the bread (Lk.24.13-35). It is in

loving relationships with our brothers and sisters that we purify ourselves and grow into love, unity, and peace.

I strongly feel that today proclaiming the good news of Christ does not imply the mission to convert. (Thanks to all the missionaries who spread the good news of Christ even at the cost of their lives. It is because of them I am a Christian and I feel it has been a grace to be one.) It is simply to proclaim that everyone is already in God and invite them to discover this truth for themselves. The conversion to which Jesus invited us is not from one belief to another belief, not from one religion to another religion but to inner transformation. It is growing into radical love of God and radical love of neighbour. Conversion is a process of continuous inner purification or growth through which we discover the indwelling and the universal presence of God and this realization manifests itself spontaneously in the love of neighbour. In this process one may go through different levels of understanding of truth or belief structures. One may be attracted to other spiritual personalities or beliefs which do not belong to one's own tradition. People should have the freedom to do so. No one has the right to take away this freedom. This process still belongs to the level of purification. It belongs to the evolutionary process of the human consciousness. It is not the ultimate. The goal is to go beyond beliefs and personalities and become the way, the truth and the life. This is our mission or the purpose of our life and conversion is the way for it. The real conversion is internal and it is for everyone, including Christians. Christianity needs to have an inclusive interpretation of its notion of conversion. Internally conversion could mean a continuous growth in divine human relationship until one realizes one's unity with God. Externally converting others could mean helping people to grow in divine human relationship until they realize their unity with God. Conversion, ultimately, is to God and not to any belief, religion or any person.

When Jesus sent his disciples on their mission he just told them to proclaim to everyone that the kingdom of God is at hand (God is everywhere and everyone is in God) (Lk.10.8-9). This is the 'mission without conversion'. This mission may be explicit but not specific to Christianity. Every religion has this mission. Every holy person gives the same mission to his or her disciples. The mission of every religion and every holy person is to invite people to discover the indwelling and the universal presence of God. It is to bring people to God not to a religion or a holy person. They are only 'means' and 'means' should not become ends. The difficulty arises when people settle down in the means and forget the end. If all religions and all holy persons are united in this single mission then there will be harmony and peace in the world. As long as we think that we have the mission to convert people then we become exclusive and sow the seeds of violence within and we cannot become the instruments of peace. If we really want to become the instruments of peace then our vision must be an inclusive one in which there is no mission to convert but only inner conversion or transformation. Only then do we become "real missionaries" the bearers of the good news of peace. Prophet Isaiah says: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation (freedom or liberation) who says to Zion (to the world), 'Your God reigns' (The Kingdom of God is at hand)(Is 52.7).

United with St. Francis of Assisi, I pray: “O Lord, make us instruments of your peace.”

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