

PASTORAL LETTER ON *SABHADINAM*

GEORGE CARDINAL ALENCHERRY, the Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church, to the Archbishops, Bishops, Priests, Men and Women Religious and Lay Faithful of the Syro-Malabar Church, May the Grace of the Lord be with you all!

Dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ,

As you are well aware, we celebrate 3 July the feast of *Dukhrana* of St. Thomas as *Sabhadinam*. This year too, we shall gather together in our eparchies and parishes with our usual programmes and celebrations. The purpose of celebrating *Sabhadinam* is to strengthen our witness to Christ more responsibly in the modern living conditions. The celebration of the Silver Jubilee of the elevation of the Syro-Malabar Church to the Major Archiepiscopal status enhances the joy of the celebration of *Sabhadinam* this year.

On this occasion, I would like to share with you some of my reflections pertaining to our times. The corner stone of the Church is Jesus Christ. This Church is the body of Christ which is the communion of the people of God united to it as members of the body. This community of the People of God exists and functions in the world through different apostolic traditions. In the Indian Catholic Church, three apostolic traditions work together. The Indian Church is a communion of Latin, Syro-Malankara and Syro-Malabar Churches. Each of these individual Churches has a universal dimension. The Syro-Malabar Church exists today as a communion of its 29 eparchies in India, three eparchies and an exarchate abroad, and the migrant faithful in and outside India. At the same time, along with other *sui iuris* Churches, we remain and grow as one Church of Christ in the communion of the Universal Catholic Church. As in the case of the Universal Church, Syro-Malabar Church also has ecumenical relations with other Christian Churches and closeness with other religions in its functioning.

The circumstances in the Church are more complex today. There are counter-witnesses and scandals among us. Under the lure of worldliness and comforts, the people of God have drifted away from the basic spirit of simplicity and mercy. Added to this are the growing fundamentalism in some religions, the terrorist outfits emerging from it and the cruel tortures unleashed on the faithful. Christians are mercilessly killed or exiled from their countries, especially in West Asian Countries. Some are held in captivity. In this context, let us remember and pray for the release of Fr. Tom Uzhunalil. Even in India,

certain powers are emerging which vandalize churches and obstruct the ministry of the Church.

Persecutions are not new to the Church. When we have to suffer persecutions, we need not fear or be perplexed. “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12:32). “You will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them and the Gentiles” (Mt. 10:18).

Every Christian and every minister of Church should carry out with greater commitment his responsibilities given by Christ. Sufferings and persecutions are an inevitable factor of Christian life. To bear Christian witness with utmost vigilance is our duty. Our life in eternity has already begun its process of realization right here on earth. The price that we pay to live as the Disciples of Christ here on earth will be the cause of our joy on earth and in heaven. A disciple is not greater than his master. Our Christian lives should be the mirror image of the witness given by Christ.

It is a characteristic of our time that our faith and evangelization are being misunderstood. On *Sabhadinam*, we shall make this too a point of our reflection. There are people who believe that we work persistently for the conversion of the people of other religions. They see the Church as a threat to their faith. In this regard, the Church acts in tune with the Gospel teaching, holding great regard for the good in other religions. The Church wishes to have a dialogue of religions. The special characteristic of the Christian vision is that it wants the safeguarding of peace and unity of the human society through the integration of the good in every religion. The good in any religion should not be disregarded. All religions may grow and let them allow other religions also to grow, preserving their own unique vision and at the same time encouraging and cooperating with other religions.

No one is compelled by the Church to be converted. Neither does the Church force, lure or tempt them to be converted. The standpoint of the Church is that the religious beliefs should be subjected to one’s conscience. “In the matters of religion, no one should be forced to act against his conscience” says the document of Vatican II on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae* 2). It is God who makes our conscience operative. The voice of conscience is the voice of God. Everyone has the right to submit oneself to the conscience. That is a fundamental freedom of every human being. This fundamental freedom is explained in the constitution of the country in Part III, from Articles 25 to 28, where it speaks about the right for religious freedom. In this way, every citizen has the right to practice, teach and propagate one’s faith. Christians lead their life of faith recognizing the religious freedom given by the Constitution of India and the Christian vision of respecting the freedom of conscience.

The personal freedom affirmed by Catholic Church and the Constitution of India is understood by the Church as something that should not be realized by putting pressure on anyone by someone. In short, it is the strong conviction of the Church that every person in his life of faith has the freedom to decide and to act by choosing personally what to accept and what to reject. It is God who gives the inspiration, inner light and strength to each person to make use of his personal freedom.

The celebration of *Sabhadinam* should help us to revitalize the fervor of faith of St. Thomas in the sons and daughters of the Church. It will be good to organize programmes on this occasion which will be helpful to develop the ministry of the lay faithful, Christian witness of youth, life of faith of families etc. The Holy Father has decided to hold a synod for the youth in 2018 based on the theme “Youth, faith and vocation discernment”. The preparatory proceedings for this synod have already begun in our Church. All should try to participate in these programmes fruitfully. Everyone should give great care for the catechetical formation of the children. Catechetical programmes will strengthen them to recognize their vocation.

This is an era in which the lay faithful are working in the Church with great zeal. The contribution given by the lay faithful in the works of mercy, social welfare activities etc. are manifold. Movements initiated by the youth like Jesus Youth, Fiat Mission etc, could be helpful in the mission work and for renewal of the Church. All those who are involved in these movements should work recognizing the guidance of the bishops and the spirit of the various Churches *sui iuris*.

+George Cardinal Alencherry
Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church

Given from the Major Archiepiscopal Curia of the Syro-Malabar Church at Mount St Thomas, Kakkanad, on the 01st of June 2017.

NB: This pastoral letter is to be read out during the Holy Mass on the 25th of June 2017, in all churches and chapels of the Syro-Malabar Church where there is Sunday Mass for the public.