

## **Does Jesus Christ Free and Unite? Meditations on the Fifth Assembly Theme**

- (Fr. Paul Verghese) Paulos Mar Gregorios Retrieved from Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios, The Star of the East website on July 9, 2016

<http://paulosmargregorios.in/?p=2212>

[As the Chairman of the Consultative Committee for the Fifth Assembly of WCC, appointed by the Central Committee, Fr. Paul Verghese prepared this article after discussion in that group in February 1974.]

**Jesus Christ frees and unites** – what do you put after that sentence – a full stop or a question mark? Even if we put a full stop, the question mark will linger in most people’s minds a long time.

**Jesus Christ – who is He?** Did He not live and die many centuries ago? How then can He free us or unite us today? If you say Karl Marx liberates and unite, you can be understood to mean that even though Marx is long dead his ideas are still a powerful liberating and uniting force for the oppressed. Is it in the same sense that Christians are going to hold a big world Assembly in Indonesia and make the claim that Jesus of Nazareth is able to liberate and unite us? If we mean something else, we have a lot of explaining to do.

**Who is Jesus Christ? Where is He today?** What is His relation to those who do not call themselves Christians? We will make very little headway with our main theme if we hedge those questions. They are awkward ones, for the discussion will clearly show that Christians are not united in their understanding of Christ’s relation to the world and His effectiveness for all humanity, let alone all nature.

Frees? In what sense? From what? How? For what? Again we come across a sensitive spot, for not all among us are equally convinced that the salvation wrought by Jesus Christ has much to do with political and economic liberation. Many among us would like to limit the ‘freedom’ He offers to freedom from sin and death in a personal sense. So when someone takes the line that sin and death are structures of fallen existence and have both corporate and personal dimensions, the response of others is not always enthusiastic.

Unites? That is good, many people think. For unity means lack of disunity and struggle and discord. Many Christians seem to have a stake in avoiding struggle and strife. They are all for unity provided there is no need for them to change or sacrifice or suffer. But is that the kind of unity that Jesus Christ brings – unity in comfort, peace without the cross, sanctioning situations of oppression and injustice? If it is not, in what sense then does He unite? Would it not be truer to say that He disunites?

The theme thus looks eminently unreal. The problem is of course much more complicated by the two facts which provide the context within which Jesus Christ has to free and unite: a) the world as it now is; b) the Church as it now is. The task before the Church is not a simple question of envisaging the nature of the free and united humanity which Jesus Christ creates, and then seeking the means to achieve such a humanity. We have to start where we are.

The churches of the world cannot go to Jakarta and proclaim 'Jesus Christ frees and unites' in any spirit of triumph or superiority. The Church's failures would make a long catalogue. Throughout its long history the Church has more often been a creator of bonds and divisions than of freedom and unity. Almost every bursting forth of the human spirit has met with more resistance from the Church than from the 'secular' world.

Christians, or at least those among them who are committed to radical righteousness, find themselves in a dilemma between caughtness and commitment – caught in the structures of a Church resistant to radical justice, yet committed to seek that very justice in the name of Christ, the head of the Church.

But that is not the only dilemma that Christians find themselves in today. One could list at least the following as major tensions:

a) The tension between the need to confess the failures of Christians, personally and institutionally, and the duty to proclaim triumphant victory in Jesus Christ. How can we go to a Muslim-majority country as a white-majority Christian Church and proclaim the Gospel in a non-triumphant way?

b) The tension between the awareness of man's radical sinfulness and the prophetic call of Jesus to perfect righteousness; or the tension between Christian realism and Christian prophetism. Christians know that mankind will not achieve paradise on earth. Yet we cannot be idle; we must act courageously to promote the kingdom of God.

c) The tension between history and the transcendent. While it is true that God has acted in history to redeem it, history is never the whole story. History can be a prison in which man is shut up without hope; in fact this fundamental captivity in which humanity becomes so drawn to things and matter and time and bodily experience that it becomes their slave and not their redeeming lord seems to be the main problem of much of mankind today, not only in the West but also in all countries where capitalism has unleashed the forces of sensuous greed and unbridled desire. Man is not freed from history, but he has to become free in order to redeem history; this he does only by a transcendent commitment and a transcendent faith that is not geared to any particular historical fulfillment of the freedom and unity of humanity. History is reality, but reality which needs to be redeemed and transcended. Freedom from death means freedom from history also. Hope must go beyond death.

d) The tension between forgiveness and fighting. The Gospel asks us to forgive our enemies. The same Gospel also asks us to join the fight against the powers and principalities, the world-rule of injustice and darkness. At what point does one stop fighting and start forgiving? Does one begin the fight, knowing that somewhere along the way one has to lay down arms and forgive? Can we ever forgive the principalities and powers of darkness? How does one take into account the fact that some of those who are instruments or agents of the powers of darkness are also like us members of the same Body of Christ? On what basis can I arrogate to myself the privileged claim of being completely free from the sway of those powers? Do I not need both to forgive and be forgiven? Do not all these questions together blunt the edge of my fight and make my struggle against injustice half-hearted? The tension may be partly expressed in catch-

words such as 'Partisanship versus Reconciliation' or 'Class Struggle versus Convergence'. Yet in its true dimensions this problem reaches much deeper, into the very heart of the Gospel.

e) The tension between the macro and the micro. Today when we are increasingly thrown into a one-world context, there are still all too few Christians who can communicate a totality of vision such as needed, to face the problems of humanity as a whole. Even where such vision is possible, the possibilities of the action available to most Christians are largely local and particular. Speaking recently to a group of very intelligent medical students on world problems, the present writer was taken aback by the response. They said, in effect: 'Tell us what we can do as individuals or as medical doctors in the place where we will be working. World problems are interesting to hear about, but we can't do anything about them.'

This fundamental tension between the macro-level, of the world structures and of long-term policy, and the micro-level, of the local situation and the immediate present, has to be kept in mind when we take up the theme 'Jesus Christ frees and unites.' How do we relate our short-term local commitments to a long-term world vision? How can the Christian community maintain a mutuality of limited commitments, without losing sight of the immediate local issues?

Along with these five fundamental tensions, which relate to all Christian reflection, the theme 'Jesus Christ frees and unites' throws up at least the following prominent issues.

### *1. The personal and the structural*

It seems to be a tragedy of our modern mind that we think of the individual and the particular as more real than the social and the universal. The Christian Gospel has thus undergone a double transformation in our time: first, into a purely personal/spiritual Gospel of salvation for the individual sinner, and second, a Gospel suited and adapted to the particular needs of the hour as felt by us, without placing our own limited situation in its universal context.

This results in reducing the Gospel on the one hand to its purely personal elements, i.e. to the offer of forgiveness of sins and eternal life for the individual Christian, to be fully realized in the world to come; or on the other to its purely social aspects, as when some claim that the only Gospel is that of political and economic liberation.

Where, for example, do we locate the powers of darkness from which we seek liberation? If the primary positive element is personal belief in God and Christ, then the primary evidence for locating the enemy is the non-profession or the denial of Christian faith. Thus, communists, atheists, adherents of other religions, liberal Christians, secular humanists, and all others who refuse to confess Jesus Christ as personal saviour constitute the army against which the fight is to be carried on.

On the other hand, for those who regard socio-economic liberation as the primary positive element in the Gospel, the major enemy would be the oppressive and the exploitative establishment at the world and national levels: the military-industrial complex, the multinational corporations, the capitalist system, the white racist domination of the world, along with those institutional churches which are linked and identified with that establishment.

Who then, is the enemy? The unbeliever or the oppressor? Clearly there are differences between the two. The unbeliever is not an enemy from whom others need to be liberated. It is he himself who needs liberation from the unbelief which holds him prisoner, whereas in the case of the oppressor both he and the others need liberation from the oppressive system. His action keeps both himself and others in bondage. It would not be right to think of unbelief and oppression as the same kind of enemy. The true enemies are the classical ones which Jesus Christ fought and conquered – sin and death, both to be seen as at once personal and institutional.

Sin, the enemy, is deeply entrenched in the structures of society, not merely in the depths of the individual. It is a false priority to suppose that if we can first remove evil from the individuals then the structures of personal existence will automatically become good. Many of us are agreed in rejecting any such priority to the personal over the structural.

But our real, and remaining, disagreement is in the analysis of the very structures of evil. Is evil to be seen only in political and economic oppression or in cultural and social domination? The Christian tradition must certainly insist on an analysis much more profound than that.

## *2. Fundamental captivity and socio-economic injustice.*

The term 'fundamental captivity' is coming into increasing use in the over-developed western capitalist world, as it faces meaninglessness and loss of transcendence. Once the possibility of a transcendent hope is denied, the world closes in on mankind; the universe becomes a prison in which people without hope, condemned to absurdity and despair, become lonely prisoners with acute claustrophobia. This fundamental captivity of a closed, secular world, deprived of any valid symbols of hope or transcendence, lies at the root of the return to astrology, magic and eastern mysticism, as of erotic decadence in western society. Fundamental captivity is a meta-medical disease of the developed world.

On the other hand, two-thirds of mankind still continues to love under grinding poverty and economic oppression. To them bread is the form in which God has to appear. More goods, more power, more comfort: these – the pursuit of which led the developed, one-third world into its fundamental captivity – are the very things for which the two-thirds world now yearns with a mixture of longing and despair. One development decade has given place to a second; the only achievement is that the gap between the one-third and the two-thirds is greater than when we started. Of the hundred largest economic units in the world, only half are nations; the other fifty are multi-national corporations. These corporations are the new form in which neocolonialism can exploit the two-thirds world. Governments, however politically free, are unable to emancipate their people from their blood-sucking grip. Robert W. Sarnoff writing in the American propaganda magazine *Span* (December 1973), puts it this way:

'The swift flowering of multi-nationalism represents a change in both quantity and quality from anything that has gone before. Corporation, both American and European, have long maintained foreign subsidiaries. But only within the past 20 years have they gained the ability to manage a common corporate strategy from a central headquarters linked by constant and instantaneous communication with these subsidiaries, in any number and over any distance.'

Sarnoff, chairman of the RCA corporation which has branches in more than 20 countries, sees only the positive aspect of these corporations as the spearhead of an irreversible drive toward a

true world economy. Just as white colonialism had a positive, though largely unintentional, role in promoting the reality of the single world history in which we all live today, so the corporations undoubtedly play a vital role in uniting the world market. The former 'white man's burden' of 'civilizing' the peoples of the world through an oppressive political colonialism now takes the new form of 'developing' the under-developed in order to exploit them the more systematically.

Here are two captivities – the fundamental captivity of man shut up in a 'secular world' of meaninglessness, absurdity and despair, and the economic cultural captivity of the two-thirds world caught in the mesh of exploitative neo-colonialism. Discussion of these will hardly lead to unanimity. Does Jesus Christ unite – or polarize? At least we must say that the Gospel of liberation in Jesus Christ has to be proclaimed in ways relevant to both captivities.

### *3. Free discussion in Jakarta?*

Is Jakarta the place to face these issues? Does a military regime with large numbers of political prisoners in jail provide the right setting for discussion of these issues? And yet why not, if nobody interferes with that discussion? The military rulers claim that the armed forces are playing a double role in Indonesia – the defense of the nation and the nation-building. This concept fits all too well into the views of those who see the alliance between the armed forces and the industrial capitalism as the major oppressive force in today's world. A new kind of warlordism, with the usually attendant forms of oppression and large-scale corruption, has been reported to be growing in Indonesia. Can the World Council's discussions touch this as well? We have found it expedient in the past to refrain from full discussion of the suppression of liberty in various parts of Eastern Europe. Shall we observe the same restraint in relation to our host nation? Courtesy seems to demand it.

The Indonesian military leadership is developing a philosophy which has some affinity with the emotions of the two-thirds world. They are assiduously cultivating a theory of the stages of development. The first stage emphasizes freedom from poverty. During the first stage, other human rights such as freedom of expression, assembly or dissent may have to be curtailed. Freedom from religious factors that keep the country in conservative stagnancy (which means breaking the power of influential Muslim or Christian groups) and freedom from tribalism (which could mean severely repressive measures against dominant economic groups such as the Chinese) also belong to Indonesia's priorities in the earlier stages of development. Another priority is liberation from international interference. By this the military government seems to mean not so much the multinational corporations as influence from communist or Arab nations.

Can we honestly and openly study and discuss these problems of Indonesia in an international Assembly meeting at Jakarta? It will be a striking measure of the unfreedom of the world in which we live if we have to leave out from the agenda some central aspects of liberation. There is of course no use pretending that there would be more freedom of expression in Eastern European countries, or in China or Greece or Brazil or Chile or Korea. It is not any criticism of Indonesian political structures that is important for the Assembly, but rather to have the reassurance that fully free discussion would be possible. We are confident that the Government of Indonesia will in fact be assuring to the Assembly the same freedom as is normally available to international conferences.

#### *4. The questions of China*

Can we return to an Asian context so soon after New Delhi 1961 and totally ignore the prodigious experiment in self-liberation and unity undertaken by more than 750 million Asians in the People's Republic of China? In fact many Western Christians are quite keen to start such a discussion. There is to be a major consultation on China this year in Belgium which may raise some questions for the Jakarta Assembly.

But would the Indonesian government permit free discussion? Would not Christians from Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Indonesia take an anti-Chinese stand? That by itself would be all to the good, if that stand were taken on the basis of adequate objective information, and not on the basis of political expediency or uninformed selfish interest.

What about the Chinese Christians themselves? Would their own government let them attend? Would the Indonesian government grant them visas? If they come, would they be given an opportunity in the Assembly to share the experience of 750 million people with us? If they do not come, how would the Assembly still manage to expose the participants to the Chinese experience, so decisive for the future of Asia and the future of the world?

#### *5. Meaning, justice and the cosmos - the new terrestrial trinity*

Two major polarizations can be clearly foreseen, the one political and the other theological. The political polarization is the more likely to surface. It will provide the Western press with grist for their mills. The theological polarization, if it surfaces at all, will hardly catch the headlines. Yet, in a sense, the latter will be the more decisive for the future programme and policy of the World Council of Churches.

The theological polarization is bound to arise, precisely because there is no one on the theological scene today who can be expected to be comprehensive in his or her vision. There will be no doubt be several one-sided presentations, and provided they are not all one-sided on the same side, polarization must ensue.

A comprehensive theological vision would have to interpret the Gospel in its three dimensions, all of which are equally important: meaning, justice and the cosmos.

The issue of meaning seems particularly urgent for people in the affluent societies, but its implications are clearly universal. What is the fundamental meaning of human existence? What does man live for? What are the human goals worth pursuing? What are the 'values' for which civilization should strive? What is the quality of life which we should seek to promote? What personal hopes should Christians entertain? However clamant the demand for social justice, persons without personal hope are persons in despair. Hope alone can provide meaning for human existence. A theology of hope has to have a personal as well as a social dimension.

But for many in the oppressed world, discussion of personal hope and personal salvation seems to be a way of avoiding the more urgent issue of economic and social justice, within each country as well as in international relations. Justice means first of all power for socio-economic liberation. It is in context of this struggle for free and non-exploitative socio-economic relations

that personal fulfillment and meaning are to be sought. The question of meaning and the question of justice this must not be separated or compartmentalized. Will we be able in Jakarta to give an interpretation of the Christian Gospel which puts personal meaning, hope and justification in the context of social justice and the struggle for liberation and community?

In Uppsala 1968, the development theme was launched as a major emphasis for the World Council of Churches. Subsequent ecumenical discussion has shown that the question of economic development cannot be separated from the demand for social justice and the need for the oppressed to develop self-reliance in their concerted effort for liberation. Many people in the two-thirds world are convinced that 'development' is a notion rooted in the ideology of capitalism. The practice of the last few years, symbolized in the virtual collapse of the UN Conference for Trade and Development, has shown that the development ideology helps only to increase the gap between rich and the poor, to augment the rate of exploitation of the poor by the rich. The ideology of development, according to many in Asia, Africa and Latin America, is a means used by the rich to keep the poor sufficiently on the brink of poverty that they may continue to appropriate the fruits of their labours.

Even the affluent are now ready to abandon the development ideology, if for a quite different set of reasons. First of all, consumerism has gone sour for the West. More and more consumption does not necessarily mean more and more satisfaction and fulfillment. Beyond a certain point consumption is no value at all to human life. Besides, consumerism breeds greed, and greed gives birth to aggression and war. The resources of our planet are limited and cannot stand the growing pace of pillage and wastage. The environment is polluted. Urban-industrial civilization has limits, and people are talking of Zero Economic Growth. Science and technology have gone astray and have destroyed the human capacity to perceive certain aspects of reality. Civilization, as we now have it, bids fair to turn out to be more of a curse than a blessing.

It is in this context of alienation between God and man, between man and man, and between man and nature, that we have to think again of personal meaning and social justice. Person, society and cosmos are simply three aspects of human social existence, and the liberating and uniting activity of Christ has to be seen in all three contexts at once. This is the challenge before Jakarta.

What does this call for? Who among Christian thinkers today has the competence and the vision necessary to make us see the full dimension of our plight, cutting through the problems of the poor and the rich, the desperate and the cynical, those passionately concerned for social justice and those who opt out to seek private fulfillment, to make us see the energy crisis and the environment crisis, the alienating influence of science and technology, the doom of urban-industrial civilization, and issues of eugenics and 'human engineering', and to relate all this to the task of the Church, let alone to the questions about its unity, its ministry, its sacraments and its preaching and social witness?

The answer to that question is: probably no single living person. And yet we must face the problems involved. Here are notes on one or two of them.

a) A 'theology' of nature. For too long Christians have been wedded to the idea that history is a realm distinct from nature, as the sphere of God's action. Yet the crisis of science and

technology demands a re-examination and restatement of the relation between humanity and the material creation, including the organic world. Both are equally created by God, and thus integrally related to each other. The fall of man affects the rest of creation. The salvation of humanity is also the liberation of nature. What does this Christian insight have to say in relation to the environment crisis, the 'limits to growth' debate, the 'quality of life' discussion and the question of global justice? Even more difficult, if the relation between man and the rest of creation is such, what kinds of science and technology should we pursue in order to be authentically human? Upon what kind of values should our civilization be built? Can we put the crisis of energy and resources and the questions of social justice together with the concern for personal meaning into the context of such an over-all understanding of mankind and the rest of creation? If we have the right kind of mind and voice, we may be speaking at Jakarta directly to the heart of the central issue in human existence today. For man is not primarily an individual in history, but person in community, with the cosmos as his extended body through science and technology.

b) Woman and society. The WCC is still male-dominated organization, if markedly ahead of the Roman Catholic Church at this point. The churches are also mostly male-administered. Yet the majority of their members are female, a voiceless, practically powerless majority in Church as well as society. Our civilization is dying for lack of imagination and creativity. The only possible sources for new creativity can be, first, the dispossessed and oppressed people of the two-thirds world and, the second, the women of the world. What is the right strategy to engineer the transfer of controlling power in Church and society from the hands of the rich white male to those of the poor, oppressed, non-white majority, with the full possibility for the non-male majority to exercise its full potential in creating a new civilization? We shall do well to have these questions raised, let alone answered, at Jakarta.

c) A third, equally important issue is that of a new spirituality. This question is closely related to the two raised above. For any new spirituality will be the personal embodiment of the values of a new civilization. It means a new style of life, foreshadowing a new world community. It will be spirituality much more open to non-white, non-Western cultures and spiritualities, a spirituality related to the combat for justice, to the search for meaning, and to the necessary effort to create a new civilization where man is not so alienated from Divine as well as sub-human reality. It will be a spirituality of community, a spirituality that can be practiced together by children, the young, the middle-aged and the aged, living together in a single community. It will seek to develop the inner resources of each human being in relation to himself, to other human beings, to God, and to nature. It will also train him in the discipline of the struggle for social justice and human up-building. It will embody new modes of education and personality formation set in the context of the primary relations of production and distribution, not alienated from these relations again Jakarta should be able to break new ground here.

### *A few domestic questions*

Jakarta must aim to speak to the world as a whole. But it cannot escape the domestic task of speaking to the churches. Three questions should here loom large.

1. The question of church unity. The Assembly must of course receive report about the progress of church union schemes. But will anyone touch the central issues:



- a) Does the church union mean organizational merger? If not, what then is the visible manifestation of the unity of the Church? I doubt if Faith and Order's study on 'Concepts of Unity and Models of Union' has yet got to the heart of this question.
- b) Is there any real communication taking place between the traditions of the Western and Eastern Christianity? If the present pace of dialogue is slow, what are the reasons? Ultimately, how do we structure a dialogue between the three great traditions – Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant? The WCC is too protestant-dominated a forum to make the other two traditions feel at ease.
- c) What about the socio-economic polarization that cuts across all denominations? Church disunity is not just between denominations. Within each Church a radical break seems to be in the offing between conservatives and those who want instant change. Regional polarizations are also frightening. In many of my deepest aspirations, I have much more in common with non-Christians masses of China than with my Christian brethren of the West. What does that say about the unity of the Church?

2. The issue of dialogue and evangelism. No one can deny the fact that the majority in the Christian Church is white and Western, and that it is white, Western culture, theology and spirituality that have basically determined the Church of today. In society too, European civilization has sought to dominate the world. Today Europe is not half as sure of itself as it used to be; it has begun to be open to other cultures and spiritualities. But mostly in secular terms. Church leaders in Europe are still afraid of other religions and cultures. They seem to have a fixation about syncretism, and do not even realize that the Calvinism and Lutheranism they profess are themselves quite syncretistic, parochial religions.

Dialogue with adherents of other religions and of no religions seems to many to imply abandoning the evangelical task of proclaiming Christ. In proclamation, the Christian is the bearer of truth, and the other people the hearers. Europeans seem to like this role very much. The idea of going to adherents of other religions in order to learn from them seems abhorrent to many European Protestants. They think that such an attitude implies acknowledging some lack in the Revelation of Jesus Christ. As if we had full possession of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, and the 'non-Christians' not a touch of it, being immersed in total darkness!

Will Jakarta help Europeans to overcome their fear and insecurity of their faith, so that the world Christian community can open itself to the full riches of humanity? Even from the purely secular perspective of the survival of European civilization, there seems to be no other way. It was an oriental religion called Christianity that made the Europeans (as distinct from the Mediterranean peoples) capable of civilization. That impact seems now to be dying out. European civilization cannot survive in its dominant form. If it survives at all, it will be in a more modest and humbly open form. Will the churches show the way? This question is equally important for the Asian Christians who have also shut themselves up in a ghetto, fearing to open themselves to the experience and insights of their fellow human beings. Unless Europeans open up, Asian Christians will hardly have the courage to do so since the latter are still too often under the spell of European theology and spirituality.

Can Jakarta Assembly, not only in its discussions of the theory but also by its practice, show that Christians can engage in dialogue with others without either compromising their evangelistic vocation or using that dialogue as a mere tool for evangelism? We must never

forget that there are at least as many hesitations about dialogue felt by non-Christians who have had plenty of occasion to fear new Christian tactics!

3. Does the death and resurrection of Christ benefit even those human beings who fail to believe and be baptized?

This question will also have to be faced, with its corollary; why then be a Christian at all? There has been so close a link between 'being saved' and 'being a Christian' that the two have been virtually identified, with the converse 'not to be a Christian means not to be saved'. The Bangkok Conference of last year failed to come out with an adequate theological interpretation of salvation. Will Jakarta be able to fill the gap?

4. Roman Catholic relations. It is hardly to be expected that Jakarta will mark a new stage in WCC-RCC relations. It is some years now since the brakes were applied at the central level. The Roman Catholic Church, at least its central authority, still seems to believe that it has to set its own house in order before it can proceed very much further with ecumenical relations. But the central authority is becoming less and less influential in the Roman Catholic constituency, and the ecumenical innovation is still happening in many places. Whether the reality of what is happening in the constituency will find some recognition and approval at the central level remains to be seen. For the moment, ecumenism is taking on many new forms, often ignoring the constituted authorities of the churches. Will the Jakarta Assembly be able to offer a sane evaluation of these new forms?

The over-arching educational job of the Assembly will be to make the Trinitarian-Incarnational mystery of the Gospel throw light on the plight of man as person in community, living in bondage and striving to be free. Big programmes to solve the problems of the world can only bore people. We are disillusioned with efforts to save the world through the charity of aid and declarations of goodwill. There is not much use confessing even our failures, unless that confession liberates us to fresh hope and to renewed struggle.

Meaning-Justice-Cosmos, Identity-Freedom-Community - do these two terrestrial trinities bear any relation to the Three-in-One who is and from whom all else is? Jakarta has a big job cut out for it.