

## The National Synod

*By Fr. Tissa Balasuritya O. M. I.*

The National Hierarchy has decided at its Easter Conference this year to hold a National Synod for the whole of Ceylon -in June 1965 in order to follow up the work of the Second Vatican Council within Ceylon. This is a bold decision that can make the next two years a real turning point in the history of the Christian community in the country. It may even be a pace setter for many other Asian countries which are looking for the direction ahead.

The National Synod is most opportune not only because the universal Church has come to clear conclusions about the Church's function in the modern world and on the lines of renewal and reform that must be now undertaken, but also because our country has been rapidly changing during the past 40 to 50 years and it is essential that the Church here takes stock of these changes.

The Church in Ceylon cannot continue to exist merely according to the form she took a century and a half ago when she emerged from the period of the Dutch persecutions. Some traditional bases of her activity and influence have been either removed or rendered obsolete. The school, social service and the Sunday Mass and functions were the pivots around which Catholic life revolved in the past. The school has been nationalized, social services are largely state-controlled and secularized and Sunday is now a working day.

Great changes have taken place owing to national independence: e.g. the change in the language medium, the pace of economic development leading to urbanization and the disintegration of the traditional pattern of life and culture in the rural areas, the secularization of life and the emergence of the socialist pattern of life.

The developments within the world of religion too call for a radical reorientation of our mentalities and methods. Within the Church, the Ceylonese clergy has been entrusted with the administration of the churches—yet everything seems to continue -as in the earlier days without much rethinking of our outlook and "ways of life. The growth of the laity in education and influence has taken place without there being as yet a substantial change in the structures and in the relationships within the Church.

The Liturgy needs to be adapted; the seminary formation calls for urgent reform; the religious are becoming impatient of their irrelevance to the modern world; and the entire apostolate of Christian education needs to be rethought and reconstituted.

The Christians have grown in their appreciation of one another; the Churches in Ceylon have undertaken a plan for forming a United Church but the Roman Catholics are out of it; and so far pretty little has been positively achieved by us in the direction of inter-Christian Ecumenism. The other religions are being revived; they have regained their

positions of power and influence. We have accepted this but not much has been done concerning the positive dialogue with other religions.

All these indicate that a great task awaits the National Synod if we would seriously get down to the work of up-dating the Catholic Church in Ceylon in an attitude of sincere openness to the Spirit of God speaking to us through the Vatican Council and the signs of the times in our country.

### ***The Synod and frank Dialogue***

In order to be effective as an agency of rethinking at a national level, the Synod must provide opportunities of frank dialogue at all levels within the Church. We must frankly admit that at present such a dialogue does not take place—there are neither the structures nor the attitudes and atmosphere for such a dialogue. The only occasion when we came close to a dialogue at a national level was during the Lombardi Seminar in January 1965. Then it was too haphazard, not fully representative and was not followed up by action.

We must begin now itself to create the atmosphere for dialogue within the Church—in the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is almost unimaginable to what an extent the rank and file within the Church are reluctant to speak frankly and openly in the presence of their spiritual leaders or elders. The leadership in the Church must make a very special effort if they wish to render the rank and file truly articulate. This is not to blame anyone but to accept facts as they are. Quite a number of persons express their views in private on the need for the up-dating of the Church- but very few express them in public. There should be a healthy diminution of the reverential awe within the Church that renders priests silent in front of the bishops, and laymen in the presence of priests, youth in the company of elders and religious before their superiors. This can be achieved by encouragement from the superiors and a deep, prolonged, collective meditation on the presence of the Holy Spirit in the whole Church, specially in the Church-in-Council.

### ***Preparedness for Action***

It is not enough that the National Synod encourage dialogue within the Church. Dialogue without consequential action can lead to a sense of frustration specially among the rank and file within the Church. In fact the experience of seminars during the past few months and years may have even given cause for some to doubt whether the Church is really capable of undertaking a determined new line of action.

*When a frank dialogue takes place, we must believe that both human agencies and the spirit of God are at work. We must push forward towards relevant decisions and take steps to implement them. It would be good for our leaders to have clearly in their minds that the calling of a Synod means the invoking of the Holy Spirit to lead us as a pilgrim people to new perspectives and new solutions. The ecclesiastical leadership should have a*

*suppleness of mind and preparedness for acceptance and action — for otherwise the Spirit might be stifled and the position might be worse than before.*

Before the Vatican Council II began very few would have anticipated such far reaching changes. Yet the Spirit of God blew over the Council and through the thrust and parry of open debate the Church has become more relevant to the modern world. This was greatly aided by the genial openness of the good Pope John and the steady, calculated advances accepted and undertaken by Pope Paul. Even though Pope John had a clear premonition of his impending death he courageously moved the Church forward in the direction of the modern world and of history and thereby put aside the fears of those whom he called, in his opening address to the Council, "the prophets of doom ". It is such an apocalyptic vision that our Church leadership must possess if it is not to belie the hopes that the Church in Lanka places in it and in the national Synod.

### ***Clear Knowledge***

If the Synod is to spearhead a radical rethinking within the Church it must be armed with a very clear picture of the Church and her role in contemporary Ceylon. It is therefore necessary that preliminary surveys of a socio-religious nature should be made by competent personnel. Studies should be made of the present resources of personnel, funds and good will; thereafter, we must plan the use of our resources in terms of the needs and priorities that the Synod decides on.

*We need also to know well our country, its aspirations and desires, its urges for growth and development, as well as its attitudes and approaches towards the Christian communities. The Church is essentially a service to the country and we cannot serve well those whom we do not know well.*

Knowing the country should imply a preparedness to learn from the others. The Vatican Council gained immensely by being open to the judgment of the entire world. It was an operation in the broad light of day; and the whole of humanity was truly interested in it. There is hardly any doubt that the views of the world had a beneficent impact on the deliberations of the Council and of the Commissions. We believe that the Holy Spirit is given to the whole world; we must therefore give a chance to the Spirit in the world to speak to us.

In our country we are at present too much of a closed community. We must devise ways and means of being in open, sincere and serious dialogue with all men of good will — including those whom we might think are less well disposed towards us. These can perhaps contribute the most to making us relevant to our times. In fact, though some may oppose us, no one really wants us to be anything but faithful to Jesus Christ and His wonderful Gospel. Therefore we must invite the contribution of all towards this great rethinking of the Church in Ceylon in our day. At all costs we must see to it that the Synod does not end up as a mere closed meeting of a few ecclesiastics and a handful of very faithful laity. The

broader the base of the discussions the greater the chance for the operation of the Spirit and for the creation of an atmosphere favourable for a follow-up action.

### ***A Two - Year Programme of Preparation***

While we should leave as much room as possible for the Spirit to blow where it wills, there should be a clear programme of preparation for the Synod of 1968. Two years may seem a long distance away; yet if work is begun at the different levels it is not too far off a date. We should determine the lines of procedure for preparation and specify certain targets. For instance each diocese may undertake a programme of revitalizing its own structures during the first year. The parishes may be the centres for a dialogue and survey during half a year or so. Simultaneously the deaneries may be organized and the dioceses reconstituted as real centres of ecclesial renewal. A programme of action may also be worked out for the adaptation of the lay apostolate movements and of the religious life. Inter-diocesan co-operation might also be begun as the work at the base grows. Consultation with other Asian countries should also not be excluded.

It is therefore time that the preparatory commissions be set to work. Naturally these commissions must have sufficient funds and competent personnel to carry out this work. Bold decisions must be made by the hierarchy in the near future to engage a competent team of priests, religious and laymen, from the very beginning in order to carry out the work of the Synod. In fact the work of the Synod really begins from now onward. 1968 should be the culmination of a long term preparation. If suitable persons are not set apart for these preliminary tasks along with the means and the instruments for work, it is unlikely that the National Synod would be a real success.

We must see to it that the Synod does not turn out to be a mere juridical formality instead of being a real turning point in the life of the Church in modern Lanka. Synods have been great successes and great failures too. The Roman Synod of Pope John XXIII is regarded as a failure — due to lack of preparation. Our National Synod of 1968 must be a deep and genuine stocktaking of the Church in Ceylon and a step forward towards rendering the Church more Ceylonese and more Christian in the service of all. Everything depends on a serious preparation coupled with a clear determination to respond to the exigencies of the Spirit of God speaking to us today.

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