

CHRISTIANS IN A SOCIALISTIC CEYLON

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The people have given their verdict and the country is once again on the road towards a more socialistic type of society. The general elections of 27th May 1970 which convincingly defeated the U. N. P. and gave an overwhelming parliamentary majority to the Coalition of the S. L. F. P., the L. S. S. P. and the C. P., will probably have a greater impact on Christians and Church life than even the attainment of Independence in 1948.

After Independence the country was governed by the same class as from 1931. Their social philosophy was pro-capitalistic even though they enacted socially beneficial legislation such as free education. The Catholics too were represented by the same leadership as in the period prior to Independence. The same patterns of thought and action continued among the more influential clergy and laity.

During the period from 1956 — 1965 when the S. L. F. P. ruled us, the Catholic leadership was not close to the ideas of the ruling party. Any Catholics who belonged to the S. L. F. P. were regarded as of somewhat doubtful orthodoxy by those who claimed to be loyal Catholics. The Schools take — over issue in the early 1960s placed Catholics almost embolic against the Government of the day.

Today there is a significant difference in the relationship between the governing Coalition and the Catholic community. Even though the policies of the new government are socially more radical than those of any previous Ceylonese government they have been supported by large sections of the Catholic population. It is quite clear that several electorates with significant Catholic weightage have returned Coalition candidates. This opening to the Left is manifest mainly in the rural areas however in the towns too there is a fair Catholic sympathy for the Coalition.

The shift to the Left is not the work of one isolated group. There has been a movement at all levels among the Catholic community: rural and urban, laity and clergy. However it is the rural masses rather than the urban elite that seems to be socially radical; the youth are more socialistic than the older generation; the younger Catholic intelligentsia is closer to the aspirations of the people than the traditional Catholic lay or clerical leadership. In fact a certain polarization of attitudes seem to be taking place among Catholics in Ceylon.

The new Government, on the other hand, has expressly declared its intention to be fair to all minorities, including Catholics, without promising any special privileges for anyone. Both prior to the Elections and after its victory the United Front Government has been rather keen to give a fair place to the Catholics while respecting the rights of others specially the majority religious group.

This situation has very important consequences for the Catholic Community and the life of the Church. For the first time in its history in Ceylon, the Catholic group has an

opportunity of being in the mainstream of national life. Many of them now give priority to the national collective goals of economic development with social justice. Catholics have an opportunity of getting out of their ghetto mentality and narrow sectarian preoccupations. Another aspect of the changed situation after the Elections is that this new position of the Catholics was not spearheaded by the officially recognized leadership of the Church.. While the Hierarchy was tolerant of divergent views within the Catholic group, those who used to speak for the Catholics—specially the older leadership from among the urban elite—were not conspicuous in any enthusiasm for radical social change. A new articulate leadership has emerged among the Catholics. A new type of Catholic Member of Parliament, with a strong popular base and fairly left wing social policy, has now begun to symbolize the aspirations of the Catholics within the wider Ceylonese society.

The General Elections have revealed the gap between the traditional urban leadership and the masses in the cities and villages. At times there has been a tendency to put off or delay even necessary changes within the Church on the argument that the 'simple faithful' were not prepared for change. 'The simple faithful' who gather round the parish may not be so fond of changes in the cultural aspects of their religious practice such as the devotion to the saints; but the Catholic masses — Church going and otherwise — have proved themselves ready for social change even of a radical nature. It cannot any longer be said the 'silent majority' among Ceylonese Catholics is a backward traditionalist group that is opposed to changes. We must be careful that we do not project to them our own fear and aversion for change, nor should we equate Catholic opinion with that of the old traditional leader of the liturgical community or of Catholic organizations of devotional type.

In a sense in both the village and the city it is groups which were merely tolerated, if not suspect for their lack of orthodoxy, that have helped to give the new orientation to the Catholic Community. This presents a challenge for the official leadership of the Church which will have to integrate the new orientations and groups within its concept of orthodoxy and organization of authority; if it fails to do so, it will increasingly cease to give a meaningful leadership to the Catholics in social and public life. This however means that the authorities in the Church must make certain clear options regarding social changes and the economic policies which are fostered by the new government.

The country is set for a period of rapid social change. In such a situation Catholics can have an impact for good if they participate in the processes of change. For this we have first of all to articulate our own thinking concerning the trend towards socialism. Christianity is a revolutionary message. The principles of human brotherhood, hard work and social justice enunciated in the gospels are far reaching when applied to the conditions of life in a country like Ceylon.

But in order to espouse the type of social policies which the gospel demands we must renounce the desire to be a group with a privileged position in society; nor should we permit a group of privileged Christians to speak in the name of the Church while they are defending only their self interest. The Church as a body is called to be a movement for human betterment, for the emancipation of the many who are poor and" underprivileged. In

order to do so, the Church must opt to be poor as an institution, and to struggle alongside the poor. This means the Catholic Community must become much less an organization or an institution and much more a movement of persons dedicated to the goals that are intelligible to the men of our time.

Fortunately for us we do not lack the ideas for such a transformation in the life of Catholics and the entire Community. The Vatican Council, the Lombardi Seminar, our own pastoral Convention and Synod, the Diocesan Synods or Conventions, the Reflections of Religious bodies, the Houtart Socio - religious survey give us a wealth of information and perspectives all in the same direction. What we have lacked in the past few years — specially among those who had the power of decision — is the determination to act according to the needs of the situation.

The five years of U.N.P. rule from March 1965—70 had a lulling effect on our social sensitivity. Even Vatican II and the decisions of our Pastoral Convention were put into cold storage in the country at large. In certain areas they were almost totally cold shouldered. The policies of the U.N.P. gave the impression that it was not necessary for us to concern ourselves seriously with a radical social transformation of society. For sometime there was falling away of the interest in the renewal of the Church.

Liberation

The new Government is committed to human liberation at both national and international levels- It is a good thing that Ceylon will now make her contribution towards the process of national liberation in countries like Vietnam, Rhodesia, South Africa, Mozambique and Angola. We Christians have to take our stand on these issues, specially because the oppressing powers call themselves Christians. We cannot merely overlook these issues, for our country is involved in them.

Economic liberation of our country from foreign control specially of the British is another preoccupation of the government. The forces involved are so powerful that the government seems to want as a first stage to try to control these foreign enterprises instead of attempting to take them over. The thinking of Catholics is still inarticulate on these issues. One would like to see newspapers like the Catholic Messenger and Gnanaraiya focus attention on them. It is also to be hoped that the pastorals of the Hierarchy would treat such issues. The Catholic Church as an institution was hardly committed to the struggle for political freedom; At least now can we expect the Catholic Community led by the Hierarchy to take its due share in this struggle. Many National Conferences of Bishops _ have published pastorals on Development; the Pope himself has written with a great sense of urgency on the 'Development of the Peoples'. Our Ceylon Catholics can be the interpreters of the views and grievances of the underdeveloped peoples who have been exploited economically for so long by the more developed countries. What a difference it would make to the witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ if the Catholics as a whole would champion the cause of the poor at the international level!

Equality of Opportunity

Within the nation too the Catholic Community also has to take a more clear and enlightened stand on questions such as the demand for equality of opportunity for all groups and regions. Wt Catholics do not often realize that many among us are in effect part of the privileged section of the nation. Even though many Catholics are poor farmers, workers and fishermen still the areas in which Catholics live in large numbers, i. e. Western Province, North Western Province, and Northern Province and the Cities are much better provided with social amenities like schools, universities, communications and employment opportunities. A child born in the N. C. P. Uva, Sabaragamuwa Provinces has very much less opportunity of developing than one in the W.P. N.W.P., or Northern Province. Government policy must therefore bring about a shift of expenditure from the more developed to the backward areas. They should be provided with more opportunities so that there may be a greater equality of opportunity for all in Ceylon. We should foster this even though it means a certain reduction in the privileges of the persons, including Catholics in the less underdeveloped areas. Educational Policy is of paramount importance in this regard. We should likewise think out our policies for reducing inequalities in income, wealth, land holding, housing, health services, employment opportunities, economic and financial power. Such policies are a matter of social justice, they are not necessarily linked to Socialism as such and much less to Marxism. Pope John XXIII in his encyclical 'Mater et Magistra' brought out some of the aspects of such a balanced and fair development as between the different regions of a country.

One of the specific contributions we could make would be to safeguard personal values within such pattern of a more socialistic development. We have to work for the reduction of inequalities in the Capitalistic Sector and for the fostering of freedom within the socialistic area of our mixed economy. We must exercise a critical and constructive function towards both.

Openners to Dialogue

A policy of cooperation with the socialistic forces within our country requires a greater openness to dialogue with many groups. First of all the youth must have a more significant place within the Catholic Community. In almost all the layers of its organization the Catholic Church gives the impression of being a much greater respecter of the wisdom of the aged than of the dynamism of the young. The old had a very important role in the society of the past when continuance of a tradition was the main responsibility of the community and of authority. Today when we must meet rapid change and even foster change consciously and collectively, the aged are not necessarily the best or only guides. The more dynamic youth must be brought into the Councils of the Church at all levels — both of the laity and the clergy. We must be careful that the fears of the aged does not become too much of a dragon the Catholics in meeting change. The Commissions set up after Vatican II for dialogue with other groups need to be revitalized in Ceylon. Our Commissions for dialogue with other Christians, with other Believers, and with those who do not believe in a religion have so far achieved little. Even their existence is hardly known. Dialogue with Marxism is of fundamental importance today. It must be a deep concern of a much wider group among Catholics than at present. Our Synod did not pay adequate

attention to it. In fact it felt unprepared for it at the time— in 1968. Now the problems have come on us with a much greater relevance and urgency. Here too if the leadership in the Church does not provide the inspiration for it by an active participation in such a dialogue, it is likely that different Catholic groups will go their own way. Perhaps this may not necessarily be a bad thing for the Catholic Community which need not be a monolithic structure or present such an image.

Pastoral functions such as Catechesis and the liturgy need to be rethought to meet the exigencies of the socializing trends. Catechesis must emphasize much more the social commitment of Christians as an aspect of fidelity to the gospel. It must do so realistically within the context of our country and in the actual situations and problems that face us as we go through this process of change. Our Catechesis must concentrate on the adults and the youth who have left the schools including University students. We pay far too little attention to the adult proportionately to our effort. Perhaps this is an unconscious escape from the difficulty of facing the real issues that face the adult world. Unless drastic and rapid changes are brought about in the mentality of our teachers of religion and in the use of their time and talent we risk being irrelevant to the issues at stake.

In like manner the liturgy must be made more meaningful to the daily life of our people. The Communion at the Eucharistic table must lead to an enthusiasm for real effective sharings of the goods of this world among all. The listening to the Word of God and the commentary on it has to be related to the Word of God spoken to us through the events of our time. The liturgical services must become more communicative of Christian values concerning topical issues. To realize these objectives further changes and new initiatives are required, for the present Sunday Parish Mass hardly leads to any relevant social commitment. The National Liturgical Commission and the Diocesan ones will have to be brought to life from the apparent slumber into which many of them have fallen. In the socialistic countries the Sunday liturgy is the main occasion for the catechesis and formation of the Christian Communities; it is one of the few forms of collective Christian gathering that remain in the Eastern European socialistic countries.

The Catholics have a Centre for Social and Economic Development. (SEDEC.). In the new conditions of our society this centre can have a vital impact as processing house of Christian social thought, and an active agent of necessary social changes. In order to do so it should change its emphasis from a project orientation to one of training persons for social leadership. In a socialistic society, where institutional forms do not remain very much in the hands of private bodies, it is persons With creative ideas and effective leadership that can have a beneficial impact for the course of social evolution. The SEDEC too should reconsider its role or at least adopt and implement these new objectives also (Quest 29 & 30)

The socialistic revolution which this country is going through in stages is a "call to the clergy and the religious to a more simple form of life that will be a better witness to the gospel and a greater liberation for disinterested service. The training of the clergy and religious, the use of their personnel and resources, their style of life as individuals and communities must be seriously, radically and rapidly rethought if the priesthood and the

religious life are not to remain irrelevant relics of a sacral age in a secure society, Naturally it is the Hierarchy that is best placed to give an effective leadership in this necessary reorientation which can do immense good to the Church and the country.

In a socialistic set up the laity are of paramount importance. Socialism also means the secularization of society and the laity are more at home than the clergy in a secular society. Our lay apostolate organizations have not, by and large, yet gone through the renewal recommended by the Vatican Council. They have to alter their fundamental goals from being more concerned with the internal life of the community, often in its devotional aspects, they have to concern themselves primarily with the responsibilities of Christians in the general life of the country. Some of them, specially in their higher echelons had been conceived of as defence mechanisms to safeguard Catholic interests - and that in a rather negative manner. They should now be transformed to become agencies through which the Catholic Community could express its positive commitment to the desirable goals of our nation. They should learn to act on their responsibility in secular matters and be a means of fruitful dialogue and decision making within the Church in order that Catholics may make a meaningful contribution to the contemporary struggles of our people. They should provide opportunities for the new socially oriented elite among the Catholics to make their impact on the ideas, life and structure of the Church. An important question is: how far will the traditional leadership of the lay apostolate organization welcome such changes?

For the implementation of these and similar changes there should be adequate structures for effective participation within the Church. Inspire of Vatican II there has been an almost universal slowness to welcome genuine participation in the Church. This is tragic. It results in the more liberal elements within the Church not finding meaningful opportunities to make their necessary contribution for the common good. We should also re-consider the role of such structures as the parish and diocese. Certain problems are not respecters of diocesan boundaries: e.g. unemployment, control of imports, neo colonialism, constitutional changes, youth unrest. These must be faced at the national level. Yet in the Church there are hardly any effective agencies at that level, The dioceses still enjoy an absolute sovereignty derived from a Cannon Law (now being reformed) whereas the country has long since passed the stage when such divisions where so watertight.

A most important national structure that can have a valuable impact on the contribution of the Church to Ceylonese society today - would be National Conference of the Clergy. The priests are now as a body, the most forward looking group in the Church. This is indicated by their contribution to the National Pastoral Convention, the rethinking in the Church, and in the sociological surveys so far conducted. They are the dedicated full timers of the Church They are ordained as priests of the universal Church (Vatican II). Yet they alone of the groups in the Church have no national organization for pooling their ideas and helping in the common renewal of all the dioceses. If a way could be 'found, inspite of the apparent reluctance of some, to bring the priests of the country together in a systematic manner, it will probably prove to be the most powerful catalyst of change in the Catholic Church today.

An area where modern Christian thinking can make a very valuable contribution to the life of the country is in the Northern Province. Today there is a vacuum in leadership of ideas as well of persons in the Jaffna region. The Tamil people are looking for their identity and role in the national life of our socialistic country. It is a pity that the Catholic intellectual life in Jaffna has not been characterized in recent decades by many overtly liberal ideas. The Catholics of Jaffna — so dedicated to the Church and with such a high level of education deserve a better treatment in the things which concern the openness of the mind to the winds of change in the Church and the country. If such an orientation is to sluggardly and halfhearted in its impact, -it is to be feared that there will be an erosion not only of confidence in the leadership but also of loyalty to the Church.

The Catholic Community has a wonderful and God given opportunity today - inspire of the many dangers — to make a valuable contribution to the ongoing process of human growth, liberation and national integration in our country. This is the time when the Catholic community can make its finest contribution to necessary social change and economic development with justice and fairplay to all.

Religion is on trial today. We have a chance of building up an authentic Christianity reborn in the womb of Mother Lanka and chastened by the processes of courageous involvement in social change. We can be a church incarnate in our culture and country, forward looking in our options, youthful in our dynamism, and dedicated in our commitment. All this requires a dying to our outmoded forms, in order to be resurrected to a new life. We must be a Church that is internally liberated by the word of God heard in our day, in order to be a liberating force in our society. The call of the Spirit through Vatican II and the social forces operating in our country unite us to take up our bags and go forward as a pilgrim Church to renew the Christian Community in a loyal and disinterested service to Mother Lanka.

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