

THE EBB AND FLOW OF OUR NEW PENTECOST

The holding of a National Synod of the Catholic Church in Ceylon was decided by the Hierarchy of Ceylon at its Easter meeting in 1966. Within four months of the final session of the Second Vatican Council the Ceylon Bishops decided to go ahead with its implementation. Even prior to this the Diocese of Kandy had decided on its own Synod.

Two years were given for the preparation for the Synod which was convoked to meet at Pentecost (May) 1968. Nearly one and half years passed by before any serious work of preparation was done at the national level or for that matter even diocesan levels. In fact up to within three months of the Synod there was no truly national preparatory commission.

In the Archdiocese of Colombo a sort of socio-religious survey was conducted mainly parish-wise, but the replies were not studied in any scientific or systematic manner. (cf Quest 12, March 1967; Quest 23, March 1968).

The diocese of Galle held a pastoral convention and the other dioceses held seminars of a few days duration almost immediately prior to Pentecost 1968. As Pentecost 1968 was approaching there was excitement in the planning circles. The Preparatory Committee of the Archdiocese of Colombo finally produced some documents which had been hurriedly put together in about February 1968. At this stage the other dioceses had done very little even by way of preparation of documents.

A small hand picked committee was then appointed to do the "hack-work" of editing the Colombo drafts. This group met in conclave for about 10 days and produced the final drafts for the pastoral convention which was to precede the Bishops' Synodal Meeting. When these drafts were made available it was found that some of the Colombo drafts had been not only radically altered, but even completely set aside in considerable parts, perhaps because they were not found to be in agreement with the views of the redrafting committee. The draft documents were published in Quest 25 & 26. Quest 27 was a commentary on those drafts.

It was admitted even immediately prior to the meeting of the Pastoral Convention in May 1968 that the preparation was not only inadequate in depth but also could hardly claim to have been done at a national level. The Pastoral Convention which met for ten days in May was able to deal in toto with only two documents: "The Mission of the Church" and "Relationships in the Church" (published in Quest 28). The second half of the first session of the Convention was a rush job with participants allowed only four minutes for a speech whatever be the validity of their arguments. Still a good amount of work was done in the first session and the atmosphere of renewal was in the air.

As it was not possible to complete the work of the Convention in its first session, a second session of five days was fixed for the end of August 1968. Between May 1968 and August 1968 the dioceses discussed the remaining drafts and reported back to the centre before the second session.

As soon as the first session was over the central office of the Synod went dead for a full month or more due to the fatigue of the exhaustive first session days. The activity was resumed to be again interrupted by the preparations for the episcopal consecration of Colombo's two new auxiliaries. As the last week of August drew near once again, feverish activity recommenced at the centre and the remaining drafts were retouched and presented to the second session. Our symposium presents a commentary on the five-day second and final session of the pastoral convention. All are agreed that the second session was one rush to "get through" the documents. After that we have now one more long period of hibernation. The Synod office has been virtually closed. A post-Convention committee meets off and on. The Convention documents were published in the Catholic weeklies. We now hear that the final Synod of Bishops will be completing its work by Easter this year.

Some Improvements

Our Convention and Synod has helped to alter somewhat the public image of the Church and to improve the relationships within the Church. The atmosphere is now better. Our achievements on paper are of varying standards, some documents are very good for example, the one on Relationships, in the Church; and some others very scrappy or were not even dealt with, for example, on Ecumenism.

During the period of the preparation for the Synod there have been some note worthy advances towards renewal: the approach towards dialogue is better all round, the relations among Christians have improved, the inter religious tensions have considerably decreased, the relations with Socialists have been ameliorated, a more realistic attitude towards the schools' takeover has emerged, the catechetical apostolate has been intensified, the freedom of expression in the Church has grown, the "Church of service" is better understood. Most of these changes have come about more on account of the general trend in the Church and the country rather than directly due to the Synod. We might even say that the Synod is a result of these changes.

While we are happy with these improvements and are thankful to God that the Church in Ceylon has been blessed in so many ways, we would like to point out the need for the intensification of our efforts for renewal. Many countries in Asia are watching our experience as we are the first to have a national Synod in Asia. The people of our country look for genuine growth in us of openness towards them. The Christian community too looks forward to a more integrated existence within our country and a greater fidelity to the call of the Spirit in our times.

By Fits and Starts

A significant feature of our National Synod has been the pace of successive waves of activity and lethargy, depending very much on the push from the centre. The synodal organisation at the centre has been very poor by any reasonable standards. At no time were there more than two persons working

regularly at the centre. Even an office existed only for a few months. Now only a committee exists with perhaps a secretary in charge of a seemingly non-existing secretariat. One does not wish to complain, but this is not a serious way of working an overall renewal of the Church in the entire country specially after the period of severe crisis that we in Ceylon have gone through since 1959.

There is no central organized thrust towards renewing the Church according to Vatican II. We seem to present a facade of a new Pentecost without the will to effect any fundamental changes. We also have occasional renewal as at the beginning of the pastoral convention when we invited the representatives of other religions and proclaimed to all and sundry our desire to effect a new Pentecost.

A renewal of a pentecostal dimension cannot be effected by fits and starts or by mere paper revolutions. The hopes raised up by Vatican II and our Synod have not been fulfilled in adequate measure. Some even feel deceived that many have been lulled into complacency by our playing a Council.

The Will to Change

The pastoral renewal of an entire church of 800,000 persons is no easy task and it requires a determined, enlightened and persistent effort. What we lack is a coordinated and coherent collective will to change. Even the present political climate seems to be inducing us to relative self contentment. We perhaps need a crisis to wake us up to the realities of the contemporary world. We have new documents but the old order continues in very many spheres of ecclesial existence. If the will to renewal existed the changes in structures and regulations would be less necessary; on the other hand where an effective spirit of renewal is absent no structural and canonical changes can readily bring it about.

We have to carry through a large scale ideological reorientation of the Catholics, a sort of cultural revolution in order that they may be acclimatized to the mind of Vatican II and of the Synod documents. The means for such a mass apostolate must be thought out carefully so that the ideas and the conscious motivation may percolate to all the strata of church society. While new Church structures are set up according to the Synodal decisions they should embody not merely an institutional change but a structuration for change, for rapid change is necessary.

The Ebb and Flow of our New Pentecost is part of the context of modern life. If we are regularly attuned to change with new needs we could insure ourselves against the danger of being outdated even in the coming decade.

Time is passing out. It is ten years since Pope John announced the need for radical changes in January 1959 and convoked Vatican II. In Ceylon three years have gone by since our Synod was called and practical changes are still in the making. It looks as if we are prepared to play fast and slow with urgent needs. The question is how far will the Church inspire human beings in this way?

Many who desire change are asking themselves whether this is a hopeless expectation specially as far as the institutional Church is concerned. It is true some are worried about the trend of changes in mentalities specially among the youth. It should be a function of the Synod to channel the direction of change constructively so that the best minds and generous spirits of our generation may find adequate inspiration in the church even as an institution.

We hope the canonical synod will not feel itself totally limited by the documents of the pastoral convention specially in so far as these were hasty products. Further the convention did not face up adequately to many vital issues such as relations among Christian groups, dialogue with Socialists and Marxists, the demands of a just social order, adult catechesis, youth problems, unemployment, student unrest, family problems, an inspiring and relevant liturgy, the biblical renewal, the updating of religious and priestly life, the reform of seminary formation, the role of the Church in education in general etc. The Canonical Synod could take the convention texts as a point of departure to initiate a more widespread renewal.

It would be a tragedy for the Church and the country if the bishops' synod is less courageous than even the convention. The ball is now once again in the court of the hierarchy, and they have a wonderful opportunity for good. It is to be fervently hoped that they would give an inspired leadership to transform our Church from a ghetto group that exists largely for itself to an outward oriented Christian community that worships God meaningfully, and loyally serves the men of our day in their most urgent aspirations.

The way in which the Church life evolves will depend much on the nature of Synod decisions and the will to implementation. If we are frightened of the excesses among Catholics in other countries, one way to avoid them is to forestall them by meeting the legitimate aspirations which even aberrations, can indicate. We must not create a situation in which convinced Christians feel that they have to be an underground Church in order to be faithful to their conscience and to Christ as seen by them. The underground Church is a reality in many areas today because the institutional Church fails to attract and motivate them adequately.

So far the National Synod work has been affected by the tendency towards a general lethargy, with spurts of renewal activity. We pray that in the next few months the canonical Synod may have the grace to transform this endeavour into a regular flow of well thought out and consistent Christian renewal. In any case the final answer and responsibility is also with each individual Christian.

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