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Towards a Christian World-View: Theological Explorations

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Abstract: In this article the author briefly discusses some of the theological views he holds. He has been engaged in learning and teaching theology for about fifty years. During the course of these years he has gained some theological insights and acquired certain theological convictions. It is these that he tries to articulate here. What is said here is necessarily tentative and incomplete.

Then carefully and cautiously, he summarizes his theological position on the following topics: God; The Human Person; The World; Jesus Christ; The Church as a Divine–Human Reality; and The Mission of the Church. Essentially these reflections are liberative, life-affirming, future-oriented and hope-based.

His focus has been to evolve a vision of Church's understanding of mission as comprehensive, service-oriented and resonating with the Kingdom of God. It is possible that all our ministries – be they frontier mission, pastoral work, education, health services or social involvement – be directed to the fulfilment of this mission. This may, however, call for a radical reorientation of our ministries.

Keywords: Church; God; Human Person; Jesus-Christ; Mission of the Church; Theology of Kunnumpuram; World.

I have been asked to write an article on my theology. I am not sure if I have a theology. And if I have one, will it be possible for me

to articulate it adequately in an article? So I do not intend to do such a difficult thing here.

Instead, I shall briefly discuss some of the theological views I hold. I have been engaged in learning and teaching theology for about fifty years. During the course of these years I have gained some theological insights and acquired certain theological convictions. It is these that I shall try to articulate here. What is said here is necessarily tentative and incomplete.

It was Raimon Panikkar who spoke of the cosmotheandric intuition which consists in this: The divine, the human and cosmic are irreducible dimensions of reality.¹ Following this I shall first deal with God, the human person and the world. I shall then go on to discuss Jesus Christ, the Church and the Mission of the Church today.

1. God

Faith in God is the foundation of my theology. This faith is based on my personal experience of God, and not on rational arguments for the existence of God. Besides, I find faith in God quite meaningful. For only God “meets the deepest longings of the human heart which is never fully satisfied with what this world can offer” (GS 41). And only God provides a fully adequate answer to the ultimate questions of humankind about life and destiny. Moreover, the common experience of humanity leads to faith in God. As Vatican II points out, “For their part, however, believers of whatever religion has always heard His revealing voice in the discourse of creatures. But when God is forgotten the creature itself grows unintelligible” (GS 36).

1.1 Perhaps the most beautiful description of God in the Bible is this: “God is love” (1 Jn 4:16). The nature of God is love. It is remarkable that the official creeds of the Church usually speak of God as omnipotent, as all powerful. And the liturgical prayers are mostly addressed to almighty God, eternal King or supreme Lord and never to the all-loving God. And it is out of love that God created the world. Vatican I has given us a comprehensive explanation of our faith in creation:

This one and only true God, of His own goodness and almighty power, not for the increase of His own happiness, nor for the acquirement of His perfection, but in order to manifest His perfection through the benefits which He bestows on creatures, with absolute freedom of counsel, “from the beginning of time made at once (*simul*) out of nothing both orders of creatures, the spiritual and the corporeal, that is, the angelic and the earthly, and then (*deinde*) the human creature, who as it were shares in both orders, being composed of spirit and body.”²

This statement makes it quite clear that God did not create the world in order to get anything for himself. In fact, there is no need of God’s that we can supply, no luxury of His that we can provide. Actually, God created the world in order to bestow his blessings on his creatures and to give them a share in his own goodness.

It is true that Vatican I powerfully affirms that “the world was created for the glory of God” (*ND* 418). Now the glory of God is the splendour of his being. As the council explains, God created the world “in order to manifest his perfection through the benefits he bestows on creatures” (*ND* 412). As Irenaeus points out, the glory of God is a human being fully alive. It is not when we constantly sing: “Glory, glory, alleluia” that God is glorified, but when we pulsate with life divine. Just as the beauty of a painting is the glory of the painter, so too will our life glorify God if we grow and blossom fully. There is another way of understanding this. If the world had a finite reality as its goal, then it has only a limited possibility of growth. But when the world has the Infinite God as its goal, it has endless possibilities of growth and development.

1.2 Further, God’s saving work is based on love. As Vatican II has stated, God in His goodness and wisdom chose to reveal Himself and his plan of salvation. “Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to humans as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself” (*DV* 2). The Fourth Gospel affirms: “For God so loved the world that he have his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life” (*Jn* 3:16). Thus, God’s saving plan, which was revealed gradually

and which culminated in Jesus Christ, was from beginning to end based on his love for humankind and the world.

It is usually asserted that God is immanent and transcendent. It is not easy to grasp this. This is the way I understand it. Transcendence is the way God is immanent. God is present in every created reality, without being identified with it. This is the meaning of God's transcendence.

1.3 It is part of our faith that God is one and three. Obviously the Triune God is beyond the grasp of our finite minds. And human language cannot adequately express the mystery of God. This is what the Church means when it teaches that God is incomprehensible and ineffable. All the same, the doctrine of the Trinity has a great significance for the Christian community as well as the human society at large. As Vatican II points out: "Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, 'that all may be one... as we are one' (Jn 17:21-22) opened up vistas closed to human reason. For He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons and the union of God's children in truth and charity" (*GS* 24).

In the Christian scheme of things, the Trinity is the great symbol of community. For us God is not a solitary but a community of Persons – Father, Son and Spirit. This is a community of life, since the three Persons share the same life divine. It is a community of love, because they love one another. It is also a community of work as they collaborate in the work of creation and salvation. But it is a unity in diversity – the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Spirit.

All Christian communities are called to be communities of life and love as well as communities of work and prayer. They should strive for unity in diversity, respecting and cherishing the rich diversity to be found among the members of every community. Let them remember that uniformity is the death of life. Wherever there is life, there is diversity.

Leonardo Boff believes that the Trinity can be the prototype of the human community dreamed of by those who are oppressed but are longing for liberation. The oppressed eagerly seek equality, participation and the experience of communion all of which are

denied to them. They search for a just and egalitarian society which respects the differences between persons. “For those who have faith, the Trinitarian communion between the divine Three, the union between them in love and vital interpenetration, can serve as an inspiration” in their struggle for a free, just and humane society.³

In these days when people are becoming ever more sensitive to human equality and gender justice, the use of designations like God the Father and God the Son can be a bit problematic. In any case, we know that God is neither male nor female.

I have always been somewhat puzzled when I hear people praying to the Holy Trinity. I wonder why we don't pray to the Holy Unity. Would it not be better if we prayed to the Triune God?

2. The Human Person

In the Church today, there is a consensus that the human person occupies a central place in the Christian scheme of things. According to Vatican II, “all things on earth should be related to the human person as their centre and crown” (*GS 12*). The Council is here merely echoing the Scriptural testimony that the human person is the most precious being on the face of the earth.

Genesis I highlights the dignity of the human person. There is something special about the way the human person is created. God deliberates before creating humans: “Let us make humankind in our image and according to our likeness” (Gen 1:26). Only humans are made in the image and likeness of God. The Psalmist, too, is keen on stressing the greatness of humans. “Yet you have made them a little less than God and crowned them with glory and honour (Ps 8:5). Jesus has a similar view: “The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). All laws, doctrines and institutions exist for the welfare of humanity (see *GS 26*).

2.1 One of the essential dimensions of the human person is freedom. It seems to be part of God's plan that humans should shape their destiny in freedom and responsibility. As Vatican II has affirmed:

For its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man. For God has willed that man be left “in the hand of his own counsel” so

that he can seek his Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to Him (*GS* 17).⁴

While human freedom is itself a gift of God, it has been damaged by sin and stands in need of the healing touch of grace. It is human freedom created by God, damaged by sin but redeemed by Christ, that we call Christian freedom. “For freedom Christ has set us free” (*Gal* 5:1; see also *Jn* 8:31-36). Paul also points out that the Spirit of Christ is the principle of freedom. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (*2 Cor* 3:17; see also *Gal* 5: 13-26).

Christian freedom is not only a gift, but also a task. “For you were called to freedom brothers and sisters” (*Gal* 5:13). It is our Christian task to make ourselves increasingly more free. As one of the beautiful hymns has it: “It is a long road to freedom”. There is a great danger that we will give in to external force or internal compulsion, thus jeopardizing our freedom. Besides, we are always tempted to be selfish. That is why Paul sounds a warning: “Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence” (*Gal* 5:13).

It is noteworthy that we do not experience freedom when we refuse to make any commitments. It is rather in making commitments that we experience real freedom, for freedom cannot be experienced in a vacuum. As a result, freedom like time cannot be saved, it can only well spent. It is by choosing to commit ourselves to God and to a value-based life that we experience true freedom.

Finally, freedom is for love and service. Our ability to give ourselves away in love and service is the true measure of our freedom. After having declared: “For you were called to freedom”, Paul adds: “Through love become slaves to one another” (*Gal* 5:13).

2.2 Further, a human being is essentially social. “For by his/her innermost nature a human person is a social being, and unless he/she relates to others he/she can neither live nor develop his/her potential” (*GS* 12). In a true sense it can be said that I am being created a human person by other persons. I shall not have such basic human characteristics as the ability to love in a human way and speak a human language unless I am first loved and spoken to by others.

Good interpersonal relationship can greatly humanize human persons. As John Sachs has pointed out: “In addition to all the ways in which we learn to assert ourselves, control our own lives and the world around us and therefore establish our independence, we must also learn to surrender control over a great many things, to depend on others, to defer at times to their desires and needs and to establish personal relationships of mutual love and trust. Only in such relationships are we truly human. I can only grow as a person to the extent that I learn to surrender myself in trusting love to the mystery of others”.⁵

Further, society can contribute to the growth of the human person in a variety of ways. Through interaction with others in society, through fulfilling one’s social duties and through brotherly/sisterly dialogue and collaboration with others, the human person develops himself/herself. It is from the family and the political community that a person acquires knowledge, imbibes values and learns to commit oneself to noble causes. Unfortunately, society can have a negative influence on the human person. It can divert one from doing good and spur one on to evil. Hence it is necessary for humans to be critically aware of the positive and negative impact of society on their lives.

There is an interdependence of person and society. The growth of the human person and the development of society hinge on each other. Society is for the welfare of the persons who have social obligations. Each one has to obey the legitimate laws of the State, pay taxes and fulfil other civic duties so that he/she becomes a responsible member of society.

2.3 Besides, there is humans’ solidarity with all creatures in the planetary community. Humans are formed from the dust of the ground (see Gen 2:7). Out of the same ground God fashions birds, beasts and plants. The great creation Psalm (104) shows humans joining wild goats, lions and birds in looking to God for sustenance. Modern scientists, too, propose a vision of human beings as an integral part of the earth system. It is, therefore, quite easy to agree with the statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:

We stand as God’s creatures within an orderly creation, our lives woven from threads of dependence

and interdependence. We depend upon God, who gives us existence through interdependence with other human beings and with the rest of creation. We cannot be persons without other persons; we cannot be humans apart from other creatures.

In the past, there was a tendency to describe our relationship to non-human creation in terms of domination, possession, use and enjoyment. There was no awe and wonder before the mystery of the universe. It is this arrogant and irreverent attitude to creation that has landed us in a grave ecological crisis. We need now to develop a deep sense of wonder at God's beautiful world. Jesus spoke of the beauty of the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. In fact, the earth itself is so beautiful. In the words of an unknown author:

If the earth were only a few feet in diameter, floating a few feet above a field somewhere, people would come from everywhere to marvel at it... people would walk around it... people would love it, and defend it with their lives, because they would somehow know... their own roundness could be nothing without it. If the earth were only a few feet in diameter...

3. The World

Right from the beginning the Church's attitude to the world was ambiguous.⁷ On the one hand it looked upon the world as an object of God's love, since He created it and continued to care for it. On the other hand, it regarded the world as hostile to God, since it had closed itself against Him in its sinful self-sufficiency. Both John and Paul, among the New Testament writers, gave expression to this ambiguity. During the centuries of Roman persecution the Church adopted a very negative attitude to the world. It thought of itself as a community of believers surrounded by the wicked world. Baptism was the moment of decision when a person renounced the spirit of the world and embraced the spirit of Christ. The Didache has preserved a text which shows that the Eucharistic celebration concluded with the words: "Let grace come, let this world pass away".

The Church of the Middle Ages was somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand it fostered a spirituality based on a contempt for the world. As Alfons Auer has pointed out: “The basic attitude of the Middle Ages was one-sidedly that of flight from the world. The monastic ascetical idea prevailed in the world; medieval Christianity was predominantly shaped by monks”.⁸ On the other hand, the Middle Ages sought to blend “the terrestrial and heavenly kingdoms into single universal order in which the temporal realms were directly ordered to the spiritual reality of the Church”.⁹ The temporal order was directly or indirectly subjected to ecclesiastical regulation. This was a denial of the autonomy and the intrinsic value of earthly affairs.

In a way, the modern phenomenon of secularization is a reaction to this tendency on the part of the Church to absorb the world and not to respect it in its otherness. Gradually human beings, human society and its institutions, the arts and the sciences, work and professions began to assert their autonomy with respect to the Church and to affirm their intrinsic value. However, the Church reacted to this process quite negatively.

3.1 All this changed with Vatican II. One of the most inspiring documents of the Council is the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. In it the Church has articulated a new understanding of the world and a positive attitude to it. Inspired by the Council Catholics today tend to look upon and relate to the world in a new way.

The world is the world of human beings, the whole human family along with the realities in the midst of which that family lives. This world is the theatre of human activities and bears the marks of human successes and failures. This is a world created and sustained by God’s love and redeemed by Jesus Christ (see *GS* 2).

The Council readily affirms the autonomy of earthly affairs. Human persons, human institutions, the arts and the sciences enjoy their own laws and have a value in and for themselves (see *GS* 36). “For by the very circumstance of their having been created, all things are endowed with their own stability, truth, goodness, proper laws and order” (*GS* 36). Hence one ought to acknowledge the legitimate autonomy of culture and especially of the arts and sciences (see *GS* 59).

The Church is called to be a servant of the world. In this she follows the example of Jesus who came not to be served but to serve (see *GS 3*). Vatican II is quite convinced that “Christians cannot yearn for anything more ardently than to serve the men and women of the modern world ever more generously and effectively” (*GS 93*). In a variety of ways the Church can render service to the human persons, human communities and human activity in the world (see *GS 40-43*). But this is not a one way affair. The Church not only offers assistance to the world, but it also receives help from the world:

Thanks to the experience of past ages, the progress of the sciences, and the treasures hidden in the various forms of human culture, the nature of the human person is more clearly revealed and new roads to truth are opened. These benefits profit the Church, too (*GS 44*).

3.2 Renouncing all superiority the Church shows respect for “all the true, good and just elements found in a very wide variety of institutions which the human race has established for itself” (*GS 42*).

The Church’s readiness to dialogue and collaborate with the world is a sign of her love for and solidarity with it (*GS 3*). Such a dialogue and collaboration can contribute to achievement of secular goals such as peace, freedom, justice and human dignity.

All this calls for a conversion to the world. Since the world is the object of God’s love, the Church, as the servant of God, should be at the service of the world in order to liberate it from its sinful alienation and lead it to its true destiny. This does not of course mean that she can neglect her duty to work for a better world here and now, since, as the Council points out, “the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one” (*GS 39*). And our efforts to build an earthly city where all human beings can live together in freedom, equality, love, justice and peace are of vital concern to the Kingdoms of God. As the Pastoral Constitution confidently asserts:

For after we have obeyed the Lord, and in His Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity,

brotherhood and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured. This will be so when Christ hands over to the Father a kingdom eternal and universal: “a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love, and peace.” On this earth that kingdom is already present in mystery. When the Lord returns, it will be brought into full flower (GS 39).

4. Jesus Christ

It is the faith of the Catholic Church that Jesus Christ is truly God and truly man, composed of a rational soul and a body.¹⁰ But unfortunately, people have not always taken the humanity of Jesus seriously. For many Jesus is only the divine Lord. Long ago monophysitism maintained that the humanity of Jesus Christ is like a small drop of milk which gets lost in the vast ocean of the divinity.

But the New Testament pictures Jesus as a true human being. John unhesitatingly declares: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1:14). And the Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus was like us humans in all things except sin (see Heb. 4:15). In his life Jesus showed a lot of humanness. He warmly welcomed children and blessed them (see Mt 19:13). He loved the rich young man who was eager to gain eternal life (Mk 10:21). He loved John the Apostle deeply and clearly showed it to him so that John was able to describe himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved. Jesus had compassion for the multitude who followed him for three days without having anything to eat (see Mt 15:32). Besides, as Matthew reports, “when he saw the crowds he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt. 9:36). At the tomb of Lazarus, when he saw Mary and the Jews who were with her weeping, Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved and he wept (see Jn 11:33-35).

If to be human means to be kind, compassionate, friendly, available and approachable, Jesus was truly human. As Vatican II has pointed out:

For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man and woman. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin (*GS 22*).

4.1 Normally we think that it was Jesus' mission to reveal the mystery of God to us. This he certainly did. But he also revealed to us the mystery of the human person. As the Council declares: "The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of the human being take on light" (*GS 22*). First of all, Jesus pointed out the God-dimension of human person. Only God "meets the deepest longings of the human heart, which is never fully satisfied by what this world has to offer" (*GS 41*). Hence, "the recognition of God is in no way hostile to human dignity since this dignity is rooted and perfected in God" (*GS 21*). Equally important for Jesus was our relationship to one another. That is why he asked us to love one another as he had loved us (see Jn. 15:12). In a pregnant passage Vatican II has stated:

For God's Word, through whom all things were made, was Himself made flesh and dwelt on the earth of humans. Thus He entered the world's history as a perfect man, taking that history up into Himself and summarizing it. He Himself revealed to us that "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8). At the same time He taught us that the new command of love was the basic law of human perfection and hence of the world's transformation (*GS 38*).

4.2 Further, the Church also believes that Jesus Christ is truly divine. This is a mystery, and we humans cannot comprehend it. According to Paul, God was Christ Jesus reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19). In and through Jesus Christ God was present and active in this world. But we shall never be able to give an adequate answer to these questions:

How can the Infinite God become a finite human being? Or, how can a limited human being (Jesus) adequately manifest the

Infinite God? Fortunately for us we are only asked to believe in the mystery and not its mechanics.

In the history of the Church, the undue stress laid on the divinity of Jesus Christ has had negative consequences. Insistence on orthodoxy has led to the neglect of orthopraxis. In the gospels Jesus asked people to follow him and not believe in some dogmas. Many Christians in their eagerness to profess the orthodox faith have failed to be true disciples of Jesus. Often Christian love has been sacrificed while defending Christian doctrine.

I have great difficulty in accepting the traditional understanding of Jesus' redemptive death: was it part of God's plan that Jesus should endure so much suffering and die on a cross? Two different answers were given in the past: 1. Jesus suffered and died in order to placate a God who was angry with us sinners. 2. The passion and death of Jesus was necessary to satisfy the claims of God's justice. I do not think that I can agree with either of these answers. I am inclined to believe that Jesus was tortured and put to death by wicked men. Why did they do it? Because of what Jesus was and because of what he stood for. His life and teaching were a threat to the socio-religious system of the Pharisees and the scribes. Hence, they handed him over to the Roman governor and demanded that he be crucified. But God raised him up. And in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus God offered us his forgiving love (see Rom 4:25; 2 Cor 5:18-21). This is how I understand Peter's assertion: "This man (Jesus), handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law" (Acts 2:23). It was certainly not part of God's plan that the leaders of the Jews should commit the sin of murdering Jesus. Nor was it God's plan that Jesus should undergo such a painful death. But it was God's plan to offer his saving love to sinful humans through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the entire work of redemption is brought about by God's love for us sinners (Jn 3:16).

5. The Church: A Divine-Human Reality

For a casual observer the Church is just a social reality – an association of human beings who profess a common faith, who participate in a common worship and who endeavour to live by a common ethical code. But for believing Christians the Church is also a faith reality. There is a grace-filled depth to the Church. In the Apostles' Creed we profess: "I believe in the holy Catholic Church." It is this faith understanding of the Church that will be articulated here.

5.1 The Church is not a purely human enterprise. God is at work in the origin and development of the Church. That is what we Christians believe. St. Paul speaks of "the Church of God that is at Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2). This probably refers to the local Christian community there. In 1 Tim 3:15 "the Church of the living God" most likely denotes the entire world-wide assembly of the followers of Jesus Christ.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) spoke of the mystery of the Church. The Church is a mystery because it is part of God's plan of salvation. In the New Testament, particularly in the Letters of Paul, mystery refers to the divine design for the salvation of humankind. It was God's plan to offer to everyone the possibility of salvation and to assemble in the Church all those who would believe in his Son (*LG 2*). This plan was realized in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (*LG 3*). What was once achieved in Christ is now being effected in the lives of the faithful through the work of the Holy Spirit (*LG 4*). The Church is thus seen to be part and parcel of God's plan to save all humankind in Christ Jesus.

When we say that the Church is a mystery we not only mean that the Church is part of God's plan of salvation for humankind but also that God is at all times present and active in the Church. As Pope Paul VI stated: "The Church is a mystery. It is a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God".¹¹

The expression, the Church of God, also signifies a Church that is rooted in the experience of God. Just as Israel originated in the experience of the liberating God in Exodus, so too the Christian Church sprang up from the experience of the saving God in the life,

death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. One becomes a member of the Church by sharing this experience. Against this background we can see how significant it is that in *Ecclesia in Asia* Pope John Paul II exhorts the Church to be ever more deeply “rooted in the experience of God which flows from a living faith”.¹² Only then can the Church fulfil its vocation to be a meeting place of God and human beings. As the Pope declares: “The Church cannot therefore be understood merely as a social organization or an agency of human welfare. Despite having sinful men and women in her midst, the Church must be seen as the privileged place of encounter between God and human beings, in which God chooses to reveal the mystery of his inner life and carry out his plan of salvation for the world”.¹³

5.2 The Church of God becomes concrete and visible only in a community of people who have experienced the presence of God and responded to his saving activity. Vatican II has highlighted the idea of the Church as the People of God by devoting a whole chapter to it in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. In this idea there is a continuity between Israel and the Church of Jesus Christ.

Deeply embedded in the consciousness of the Israelites was the conviction that they were the people of God especially elected, called and covenanted by God (see Dt 7:6-10; Ex 19:3-6). Because of Israel’s failure to live according to the demands of the covenant, God spoke of making a new covenant which will lead to the establishment of a new people of God.

Behold the days shall come, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jer 31:31-34).

Jesus Christ instituted this new covenant in his blood (see 1 Cor 11:25) and called into existence a new people of God made up of the Jews and the Gentiles (see Eph 2:11-20).

The Second Vatican Council highlights the main characteristics of the people of God (see *LG* 9). This people has Christ as its head. Its heritage is the freedom and dignity of the children of God in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells. Its law is the new command to love one another as Christ loved us. Its goal is the kingdom of God. Hence Christian believers are the pilgrim people of God, though they sometimes give the impression of being a “wandering people”. Vatican II affirms the basic equality of all the members of the people of God, though there are functional differences. In unmistakable terms it declares: “And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, dispensers of mysteries, and shepherds on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ” (*LG* 32).

The Catholic Church is quite convinced that she is in many ways linked with the non-Catholic Christians, the people of other faiths and with the whole of humanity (*LG* 13). In the past the Church understood herself in contrast with others. Now she defines herself in relation to others. She looks upon herself as a community of people who are journeying together with the people of other faiths and ideologies. That is why she is eager to enter into dialogue with them.

5.3 As is clear from the New Testament and early Christian history, the structures of the Church took shape gradually. This is how believing Christians understand these structures now (see *LG* 18-29).

Jesus chose and appointed twelve apostles to continue his mission here on earth (Mt 3:13-19; Jn 20:21). During his life he sought to instruct them and train them through practical experiences. He also made them sharers in his triple function, that is, priest, prophet and king (Mt 28:16-20; Mk 16:15-18; Lk 24:45-48; Jn 20:21-23). The apostles were fully confirmed in their mission by the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost day. The mission entrusted to the apostles was meant to last till the end of time, since the gospel was to be

handed on to all ages (see Mt 28:20). Hence the apostles appointed successors and made provision for the orderly transmission of the ministry down the ages. The Catholic Church now believes that the bishops are successors of the apostles who participate in their triple function of teaching, sanctifying and governing the Church. A person becomes a bishop through episcopal ordination (*LG 21*).

In order that the episcopate might be one and undivided Jesus placed Peter over the other apostles and instituted in him a permanent and visible source and foundation of unity of faith and fellowship (*LG 18*). This ministry of Peter, too, was to last till the end of the ages. The Church believes that, according to God's design, the bishop of Rome, the Pope, is the successor of Peter in the leadership of the Church. By divine plan, he has supreme, full, immediate and ordinary authority over all the faithful. 'Ordinary authority' is the authority a person has by virtue of his/her office. 'Immediate authority' is that which an office-holder (here the pope) exercises directly and not through an intermediary, say a bishop. But in the possession and exercise of supreme authority the pope does not stand alone. The bishops of the world are united with him. Just as Peter and the other apostles constituted one apostolic college, so in a similar way the pope and the other bishops form one episcopal college (*LG 22*). Together with and under the pope, its official head, the college of bishops has supreme and full authority over the universal Church (*LG 22*).

Individual bishops exercise pastoral authority over a portion of the people of God entrusted to their care. Without neglecting their responsibility as members of the episcopal college to be solicitous for the whole Church, they lead and guide the faithful of their diocese. In their pastoral leadership these bishops are assisted by priests and deacons, who participate in their ministry in different degrees. Priests do not possess the highest degree of the priesthood and are dependent on the bishops in the exercise of their ministry. All the same, they are ordained to preach the gospel, to celebrate divine worship and to lead and guide the faithful entrusted to their pastoral care. At a lower level, the deacons are entrusted with "a ministry of service." "They serve the people of God in the ministry of the liturgy, of the word and of charity" (*LG 29*)

All leadership ministries in Church are for service. Jesus, the servant, is the model of all ministers (see Jn 13:12-17; Lk 22:24-27). And he has left us an inspiring example of service by washing the feet of his disciples and by laying down his life for us. He has made it clear that there is no place among his followers for the kind of 'lording it over' others that takes place in the secular world (see Mk 10:42-45). Besides, Vatican II has pointed out that the various ministries in the Church are "for the nurturing and constant growth of the people of God." The leaders are servants of their brothers and sisters. And their service consists in this that they coordinate and direct the activities of all towards a common goal, while respecting their Christian dignity and freedom (*LG* 18).

5.4 In the first centuries of Christian history, lay people were actively involved in the life and mission of the Church. Paul had many zealous lay collaborators like Aquila and Priscilla (see Acts 18:2-3). There were lay theologians too like Tertullian. Lay people also played a significant role in preserving the true faith.

Gradually the role of the laity was ignored, and they became passive, probably because of the growth of clericalism. The clergy, especially the higher clergy, was thought to be the source of all power and initiative. The laity were defined negatively, as those who were neither clerics nor religious. They were considered carnal, worldly. In this they were quite different from the clergy who were thought to be spiritual. Towards the end of the thirteenth century, Stephen of Tournai declared: "In one city and under one king there are two peoples whose difference corresponds to two sorts of life...The city is the Church; her king is Christ; the two peoples are the two orders of clergy and laity; the two sorts of life are the spiritual and the fleshly..."¹⁴

All this has changed with Vatican II. The Council has a positive understanding of the laity. "The term 'laity' is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in a religious state sanctioned by the Church. These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are established among the People of God. They are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ. They carry out their own part in the mission of the whole Christian people with respect to the

Church and the world” (LG 31). It acknowledges that they have their own vocation and mission: “But the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God” (LG 31). The laity derive their right and duty to engage in mission through their union with Christ and are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself (AA 3).

The call to holiness is addressed to the laity as well: “All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of love. By this holiness a more human manner of life is fostered even in this earthly society” (LG 40).

In spite of all this no adequate empowerment of the laity has taken place in the Church. The leaders of the Church need to invest a lot more time, energy and resources for the all round formation of lay people. And steps have to be taken to enable them to actively participate in the decision-making processes in the Church. It is good to recall here the inspiring words of Vatican II: “The Church has not been truly established, and is not yet fully alive, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ among humans, unless there exists a laity worthy of the name working along with the hierarchy. For the gospel cannot be deeply imprinted on the talents, life and work of any people without the active presence of lay people. Therefore, even in the very founding of the Church, the greatest attention is to be paid to raising up a mature Christian laity” (AG 21).

6. The Mission of the Church

From the earliest days of its existence the Church was aware that it has the same mission as Jesus: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20:21). Now the Kingdom was central to the life and mission of Jesus. It is the main theme of his preaching (Mk 1:14-15), the referent of his parables (see Mt 13) and the content of his symbolic actions (Lk 11:20; 15:1-3). Hence, the Church too has the mission to work for the establishment of God’s kingdom.

Unfortunately, in course of time some change took place in the Church’s understanding of its mission. Many Catholics tended believe that the kingdom of God is already come and it is present in the

Catholic Church. This led to a different way of looking at mission. It was held that the goal of the Church's mission was the salvation of souls to be brought about through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, especially baptism. However, it gradually dawned on the Church that God can save souls (humans) without the help of the Church. This led to a new approach to mission. The purpose of the Church's mission, it was now believed, was the planting of the Church in ever new places and among ever new peoples and cultures (see *LG* 17; *AG* 6). In course of time even this understanding of the Church's mission was found to be not fully satisfactory.

Vatican II has stated that the Church has received from Christ the mission to proclaim and establish God's kingdom here on earth (*LG* 5). In the post-Council period both Paul VI and John Paul II held such a view.¹⁵

6.1 Taking these developments into account, I wish to adopt a holistic approach to the mission of the Church. To my mind *the mission of the Church is to collaborate with God in God's work for the wholeness of the human person, the human community and the cosmos according to the pattern revealed in Jesus Christ.*¹⁶ It is an essential element of the Judaeo-Christian tradition that God is present and active in this world of ours. The purpose of God's activity is the promotion of salvation. Wholeness is the nearest English expression for the biblical idea of salvation. But salvation is to be understood in a comprehensive sense. Lots of Catholics still think of salvation as something purely spiritual (salvation of the *soul*), merely individual (*my* salvation) and totally other-worldly (salvation in *heaven*). But Vatican II has rediscovered the richness of the biblical view of salvation. According to the Council, salvation is something personal (spiritual-corporeal), communitarian, societal, and both this-worldly as well as other-worldly (see *LG* 9, 16; *AG* 2, 3; *GS* 39). It is a process that begins here and now but which will find its final fulfilment in the age to come.

In recent times, we are becoming increasingly more aware of the cosmic dimension of salvation. The destiny of humankind and that of the cosmos are inextricably intertwined. In the past, Christians

often thought of their relationship to the world in terms of domination, possession, use and enjoyment. There was little awe and wonder before the mystery of the universe. This arrogant and irreverent attitude to creation is largely responsible for the serious ecological crisis we are facing today. But there is in the Christian tradition as well as in the Indian tradition a search for harmony and a quest for communion with nature. In fact, the final destiny of humankind is thought of as life in the new heavens and on the new earth. God is at work transforming the world so that the new humanity which God is fashioning may have a fit dwelling-place.

All this is to be understood according to the pattern revealed in Jesus Christ. What is revealed in Jesus Christ is God's offer of unconditional love to sinful human beings. The God of Jesus Christ is not an angry, avenging deity, but a God of mercy and compassion, who lets His sun shine on the good and the wicked. It is also revealed in Jesus Christ that a person, who accepts God's offer of love and surrenders himself/herself to this God of love, is totally transformed. He/she becomes genuinely free and is ready to give himself/herself away in selfless love and self-sacrificing service. It is finally manifested in Christ that death leading to a fuller, richer life is the law of human existence. As Vatican II succinctly puts it:

For it is only by putting to death what is old, that we can come to a newness of life. This applies first of all to persons, but it holds also for the various goods of this world, which bear the mark both of human sin and God's blessing (AG 8).

Now if the Church's mission is to collaborate with God in his work for the wholeness of the human person, the human community and the cosmos, then this demands that it care for the earth, that it be concerned about life and that it be committed to people. The Church's task is to work along with God for the creation of a new human society which is consciously rooted in God, which is characterized by freedom, equality, love, justice and peace and which lives in harmony and communion with nature.

By way of conclusion, it may be pointed out that the understanding of mission developed here is quite comprehensive. It is possible to direct all our ministries – be they frontier mission, pastoral work,

education, health services or social involvement – to the fulfilment of this mission. This may, however, call for a radical reorientation of our ministries.

7. Conclusion

As I remarked at the beginning, this paper is an incomplete statement of my theological positions. I began by discussing my understanding of God, the human person and the world. I then went to deal with Jesus Christ, the Church and its mission. There are many important theological themes that I have not discussed here.¹⁶ It is my fond hope that what is exposed here will provoke some fruitful discussion.

Notes

1. See his *The Cosmothendric Experience*, New York: Orbis, 1993, pp.54-55. There has been some discussion about the term *cosmothendric*. This is how Panikkar explains his use of it: “In describing this intuition the expression *theanthropocosmic* might sound more accurate, because *anthropos* refers to man as a human being. i.e., as distinct from the Gods, while *aner* tends to connote the male. This has not, however, always been the case. Further, the word *theandric* has a venerable history in western thought and has always stood for the union of the human and the divine without confusion. Besides, the expression *cosmotheandric* is rather more euphonic than *theanthropocosmic*”. In a footnote he adds: “Before Homer, the term (*aner*) did not solely connote the masculine, and in compounds it stood for the human, a sense which is in accordance with its indo-european root (cf. the Sanskrit *na nar*, v.g., *narayan*) and which the consequent Latin *vir* did not conserve. So the expression could, and indeed should, be understood in its original meaning of a human being. Cf. the examples and the literature cited in P. CHATRAINE, *Dictionnaire etymologique de la langue grecque*, Paris (Klincksieck), 1968 and also J. POKONY, *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Woerterbuch*, Bern, Muenchen (Francke) 1959, *sub voce ner-(t-), aner-*, The fundamental idea of “*Lebenskraft*” later broadened to mean courage and strength as well, is important – and may also explain its monopoly by warriors and males. But we better serve the *humanum* by disentangling these positive values from their monopoly by the masculine half of the human race than by conceding defeat and inventing new terms for wo-men and fe-males.
2. J. NEUNER and J. DUPUIS, *The Christian Faith*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1981, n. 112.

3. Leonardo BOFF, *Trinity and Society*, New York: Orbis Books, 1988, p. 6.
4. The English translation of Vatican II documents does not use gender-sensitive, bias-free, language.
5. J. SACHS, *The Christian Vision of Humanity*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991, p. 80.
6. "Basis for Our Caring", A Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, as cited in R.S. GOTTLIEB, *This Sacred Earth*, New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 246.
7. See Joseph NEUNER, "The Role and Responsibility of Lay People in the Struggle for New Society" in D.S. Amalorpavadass, *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981, pp. 447-449.
8. Alfons AUER "The Changing Character of the Christian Understanding of the World", in *The Christian and the World: Readings in Theology*, compiled by Canisianum, Innsbruck, 1965, p. 6.
9. *Ibid.*, pp.8-9.
10. NEUNER-DUPUIS, *The Christian Faith*, n. 614.
11. As quoted by A. DULLES, *Models of the Church*, Garden City: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1974, p.16.
12. JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, 1999, n. 23.
13. *Ibid*, no. 24.
14. As quoted by Y. CONGAR, *Lay People in the Church*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1964, p. 62.
15. PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* nos. 29-34; John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, nos. 13, 15, 26, 31, 32, 57 and 59.
16. Some people may wonder why in the description of the mission of the Church I do not refer to the preaching of the good news of Christ. I am of the opinion that right now the situation in India is such that it may not be opportune to directly proclaim Jesus Christ. The rise of fundamentalism in different religions and the growth of communal hatred and violence in various parts of the country have created an atmosphere not at all conducive to such a proclamation. As Vatican II points out, the Church's mission can be fulfilled even in such a situation: "Closely united with men in their life and work, Christ's disciples hope to render to others true witness of Christ, and to work for their salvation, even where they are not able to proclaim Christ fully. For they are not seeking a mere material progress and prosperity for men, but are promoting their dignity and brotherly union, teaching those religious and moral truths which Christ illumined with His light. In this way, they are gradually opening up a wider approach to God. Thus too they help men to attain to salvation by love for God and neighbour.

And the mystery of Christ begins to shine forth. In this mystery the new man has appeared, created according to God (cf. Eph 4:24). In it the love of God is revealed” (AG 12).

17. I have dealt with many theological themes in Kurien KUNNUMPURAM, *Towards the Fullness of Life: Reflections on the Daily Living of the Faith*, Mumbai: St. Paul’s, 2010; see also my books: *The Indian Church of the Future*, Mumbai: St. Paul’s, 2007; *Towards a New Humanity: Reflections on the Church’s Mission in India Today*, Mumbai: St. Paul’s, 2005.