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THE SENSE OF POSITIVE PRESENCE

"The earth is like honey to all beings, and all beings are like honey to the earth. The shining immortal person, who dwells in the earth, dwells in your body. He indeed is just this Self. This is immortal, this is Brahman, this is all" (Brhadaranyka Upanishad II.5.1).

Our forefathers, at least some of them who went to the forests, were very much aware of the earth and nature. They felt the graceful presence of nature before them and in order to meditatively relish the unpolluted nature they left their family, all that they possessed, and went to the forest. This is not because the dear ones at home were not a living presence to them; but after relishing their presence in a loving family atmosphere, they were drawn to a silent presence of the immaculate nature, where they felt the Almighty, the Author of all creation, is more powerfully present. They thought that the all pervading silence can lead them to the unseen and unuttered presence of the One, who has neither name nor form and is neither to be heard nor to be seen by bodily ears or eyes. This takes us to the question that there are different kinds of presence before us. Before giving to see the different kinds of presence, let us first see what is this 'thing' called 'presence'.

Etymologically presence could be interpreted as a kind of sensibility we are drawn to, before we consciously look at it or make a judgment over it. It is simply a pre-sensation given to me before I begin to act. Presence is

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preliminary sensations by which I come in contact with a thing or a person, which or who awakens me, calls me, promises me companionship. The further steps of development entirely depend the way I respond to the call or invitation emerging from the presence, that is from the pre-sense I capture and develop.

In this context may I say a word of thanks for having invited me to contribute an article for the Festschrift to be published on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of the priestly ordination of Rev. Fr. Aykara. My relation to Fr. Thomas Aykara begins in Oxford, where both of us were doing our second doctorate. When one finishes one chapter of the thesis each one of us writes, this will be given immediately to the other for first reading and suggestions. These suggestions, if any, would be accepted and integrated. We accepted and appreciated each other and the friendship remained till the end of our studies abroad and it continues now also in the same way. We really enjoyed the sense of a positive presence.

1. Sense of Presence

Though the word presence points to an unavoidable truth of reality, the word 'presence' need not always be pleasing or promising to all. Mahatma Gandhi was an uncomfortable and even objectionable presence to the white domination in South Africa. At the same time it was a prophetic omen for Nelson Mandela and the so-called black population in the same continent. Left to itself, a positive presence is naturally complementary and socially constructive. It can also be uncomfortable and even threatening to the other group who are wielding great influence and holding high positions in an unjust power structure. Structures of injustice can never be considered eternal. Its days are numbered, depending on the presence of people capable of questioning the injustice involved. The presences of these awakened people are at the bottom of every successful revolution in the world. These are naturally exceptional situations where structures of injustice prevail unquestioned. Thus we may have to face different type of presence such as inspiring or imposing; compassionate or commanding; conciliatory or controlling; serving or dominating. But any type of presence in favour of one person alone will never last for long. All unbridled powers are pulled down by people in course of time.

But there can also be a different kind of presence, silently questioning the silent oppression of the poor by the rich as the latter's birth right of being born

in a wealthy family. Mother Theresa's graceful presence and performance in the streets of Calcutta and later in many parts of the world, was such a presence and was well watched, acknowledged and praised by the world at large.

Mother Theresa was certainly a positive presence peacefully taking upon herself the maladies of the marginalized and allowing them to breathe life in an atmosphere of love and selfless service for the other. The world recognized her powerful presence within no time and she was also the receiver of awards, national and international. But recognition does not necessarily mean commitment to participate in the work she is doing. Real presence is felt only when there is real commitment to the cause. And the person of real commitment is not at all bothered about public recognition.

2. Sense of Positive Presence

The example of Mother Theresa given above illustrates very well the real sense of positive presence. Positive presence is very much personal, cordial, accepting and relishing, conducive to mutual growth, expansion of consciousness to include more and more like-minded hearts thirsting for higher ideals. If one loudly proclaims through loud speakers a small deed he has done, it is not positive presence, but indolence and a great source of sound-pollution. A great sign of positive presence is to speak less, but do more. Actions are more powerful a language than speaking, especially when the action involves sacrifice. Our wandering monks never proclaimed anything, they simply went to the unknown forests for a life of prayer and silence. The result was, later generations were blessed with one of the earliest and religiously profound literature, commonly known as Upanishads. The Upanishads silently but very powerfully speak to us what kind of a positive presence of loving Gurus (masters) were there for the young students, but all in the heart of thickest forests. Positive presence does not make too much noise, but is a powerful consciousness, *cit shakti*, burning with ardour (*tapas*), determination and spirit of sacrifice. Bhagavad Gita continues: "By action alone, Janaka and others attained perfection; also simply with the view for the guidance of people, thou should perform action" (Bhagavad Gita 3:2).

Action is always a shining example for others to follow. Though, many may not follow, human history shows that there will be some young ones getting inspired and come forward to follow the master's way. Jesus the Supreme Master for Christians goes much further. Just before giving his last

(farewell) discourse to his disciples, he selectively performed one action, the action of washing the feet of his own disciples. Almost in all cultures, there was and still there is the custom of anointing the feet of the master (*guru-pada-puja*), as a symbol of veneration to the master. But Jesus turns this custom upside down. The new style of the positive presence of the action proposed was washing the feet of the disciples by the master (*sishya-pāda-puja*), a revolutionary change Jesus makes to teach them a lesson. He says: "I have set an example for you, so that you will do just what I have done for you" (Jn 13:15).

We see in this world several masters receiving unending adoration of the disciples. There is no doubt that elders and masters are to be respected and the Christian teaching also upholds this doctrine. But Jesus clearly gives us a message that the positive presence of a master is not enhanced by receiving veneration, but much more by surrendering his own life as a victim of sacrifice for the welfare of his disciples. The very next day of this symbolic gesture of his dedication to his disciples, he himself was offered as a sacrifice to his own heavenly Father. He was very much positively aware of the presence of his own disciples with him, when Jewish authorities came to capture him with the intention of sentencing him to death. So he said to those soldiers and Jewish authorities, "If you are looking for me, let those others (my disciples) go" (Jn 17:86). The master was very much positively aware of the presence of his disciples, even at the moment of the real threat to his own life, and managed to save them. The positive presence has untold dimensions of extensiveness. Presence takes us to the mystery of relationship. Relations are vivified, enhanced and fulfilled by mutual presence. It can be a very friendly presence as usual, a little word of encouragement at a time of fear or anxiety, a real sacrificial act for the friend, which can ultimately be giving up one's own life in order to save another life as in the case of Maxmillian Kolbe in the Nazi concentration camp in Germany.

3. Bhagavad-Gita on the Positive Presence of a Leader

The ruler of a country, the superior of a religious house, the leader of a political party or group of workers, must be a positive presence to the members or dependents concerned. All the positive characteristics of a good leader or ruler must be realized in the person chosen, of course with the unavoidable factor of certain human limitations. But higher limitations must not be in all factors of exercising power.

It is possible that a person well equipped with most of the leadership qualities may have a weak point. This is normally not a great issue to appoint such a person to the position, provided most of the leadership qualities are shining in the person chosen. Bhagavad Gita, a special spiritual classic of India, gives us a very good text to enlighten us in this matter of leadership qualities. The context is regarding the *rajasika* qualities of a king (*Raja*) who is destined to rule the country. This candidate can be by birth (a prince born in a Kshetriya family the real context of Bhagavad Gita); but it could also be applied very well to a leader elected by the people in democratic system, or a person appointed by a higher authority, such as a bishop of a diocese in the Catholic church, or a superior general of a congregation. All of them, should have the qualities of one who governs, namely the king, prince/ chief minister, principal of an educational institute, superior or president of a religious or secular association. Gita's text is applicable to all. Bhagavad Gita says: Splendor of personality, leadership, bravery, resourcefulness, unflinching courage, not escaping from difficult situations, these are the qualities of a good leader (belonging to the royal families destined to rule the country (Bhagavad Gita 18.44).

4. Fr. Aykara's Positive Presence in CMI Congregation and Dharmaram

My intention here is not to analyze each one of these qualities mentioned in the Gita and demonstrate each one of them in Fr. Aykara. But as a person I am well acquainted with, pursuing similar studies in the same university (Oxford) and as my companion and colleague in Dharmaram, my feeling is that as a leader and a superior Fr. Aykara does possess most of these qualities, if not literally all, to a great satisfaction of his own authorities, comrades and students.

Rectorship is not the same as political way of governing or ruling over the people under his jurisdiction; but is a serious responsibility to see to the all-round welfare of all, especially the younger ones entrusted to his loving care. This must be a person carefully chosen from the larger community he belongs to. The constitutions concerned usually give certain norms for the procedure, and also perhaps the basic qualities expected. I am now quoting from Bhagavad Gita, which describes the expected qualities of a king or the ruler of his people at large. Though the nature of power is not at all the same, the text from the Bhagavad Gita, quoted above is an eye-opener for all sort of people entrusted with power to govern. The main points are: 1) Splendor of

personality, 2) Bravery and unfailing courage, 3) Resource fullness, 4) Not escaping from difficult situations, which all together build up true and reliable leadership (Bhagavad Gita 18:44).

The splendour of personality does speak a lot. It is the power of consciousnesses at work in the person that matters. And who is a good or noble person. He is the one endowed with a noble consciousness. *Ayam atman Brahman*, says the Upanishad (Brad. Up. 2.5.19). Why this atman (the Self) is said to be Brahman?; because he/she has consciousness. And Brahman alone is by nature consciousness (*prajnanam Brahman:Aitareya Up. 3.1.3*). Because there is consciousness in this person, he, if not Brahman, certainly does belong to the family of Brahman. This is because he participates in the consciousness of God, or enjoys the gift of consciousness. Therefore the splendor of personality is said to be a decisive quality of leadership along with many other qualities, which are practically much needed associates of the same quality and application of this consciousness in action. Naturally bravery and courage are two standing soldiers on either side, ready to act, ready to protect the leader in action.

This may be the reason that Fr. Aykara is again and again elected for various governing posts within the congregation. Just after his return from Oxford, with his second doctorate, in the very next General Chapter which took place rather immediately; his name was proposed to be the prior general of the CMI congregation. He was very much unwilling and I am a direct witness of that, because of his comparatively younger age. But the Chapter elected him as the Prior General, though he declined very strongly, with a compromise that a well experienced father, in the person of Fr. Canisius will be given to him as a the Vicar General at least for a few years. Fr. Canisius gently obliged and retired from the post after three years. Immediately after the General's post, he was elected as the provincial of the St. Joseph's province of Kottayam. He was also the Managing editor of the *Deepika*, the only daily newspaper run by a religious congregation in the world. He is of course an accomplished academician with two Doctorates, one in philosophy from the University of Louvain, Belgium and the other in theology from the university of Oxford, England. After his academic accomplishments he started teaching philosophy in Dharmaram College, Bangalore which is now part of Christ University, Bangalore, existing on the original Dharmaram campus and his classes were well appreciated. But the members of his congregation saw in

him also a brilliant Administrator, capable of being at the helm of the institute, no matter what it is, Prior General, Provincial, or the Rector of a great major seminary, with students from all over India and even some from abroad. He is a welcoming superior to all of them, allowing enough space for each one's identity and yet gathering all to the higher goals of pursuit of divine and secular wisdom, with a super sense of discipline as well. As far as I know him, he never makes easy compromises, sacrificing the ideals, but at the same time is very sensitive to the real needs of an individual in any critical situation.

As the Prior General of CMI Congregation, as the Provincial of St. Joseph's Province, Kottayam, as the managing editor of the Deepika, daily news paper, as an eminent professor in Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Fr. Thomas Aykara has successfully served the CMI Congregation in many ways and still continues to serve even in his late seventies, as the Rector of Dharmaram, who is the ultimate authority over a number of educational institutes such as Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Institute of Philosophy, Theology, Canon Law, Psychology and Counselling; Christ University, Christ Schools, English and Kannada medium and other educational extension centres or full-fledged off-campus institutes.

Conclusion: A Man of Outstanding Positive Presence

As a comrade and colleague of Fr. Aykara for several years, I was and still am, very happy to collaborate with him. His was always a positive presence to me. Though our tasks and talents agree to certain extent, we do differ a lot; but we ever remained good friends appreciating each other's initiatives and always supporting them. While we both were in Oxford, pursuing our (second doctorate) studies, one day, quite incidentally I told him, "I do not know why I came to Oxford to do a second doctorate, though I did simply obeyed when Fr. Jonas Thaliath (late bishop of Rajkot), the founder of Dharmaram, suggested this to me. In the heart of hearts I have a desire to start an Ashram and slowly move towards contemplative prayer." His immediate reply was this: "If you have such a desire it is good for our congregation and also to the Church. Though I do not feel this is my vocation, I will certainly support you in any way possible to me." This promise was literally followed up when the time came and he did help me with his valuable suggestions regarding the Ashram and also to a certain extent to raise money for the beautiful meditation hall which is very much appreciated by the people who

visit the ashram. I give greater value for the support of the idea, though it is not his opted way of life, than the lead to a financial support which was of course a sincere expression of the wholehearted support for the new enterprise. Fr. Aykara is not at all a person fleeing away from serious challenges. Bravery and courage is part of the characteristic note of a good leader.

This positive presence as it inspires and builds up confidence has also a sacrificial aspect of one's own self-offering for the welfare of others. This can be a silent offering as the Lord Buddha's silent, but deeply meditative presence among his devotees or disciples. Buddha also spoke to his disciples and also sent them as wandering monks carrying the message of a newly awakened consciousness, Buddha-hood, a word derived from the root *budh-* *both*: to be awakened. It is through the continuation of discipleship the presence of the master is experienced and handed over to the forthcoming generations.

Jesus as a true Master (*sad-Guru*) very strongly insisted on the unshakable impacts of the positive presence of his disciples in this world. Allowing not a bit of compromise he told them rather boldly: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl, instead he puts it on the lamp stand, where it gives light for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine before the people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven (Mt. 5:14-16). Fr. Aykara is certainly an outstanding disciple of Jesus who can and does communicate the wish and vision of our Supreme Master Jesus Christ to the comrades and disciples entrusted to his care. This we call a positive presence which gives us confidence, continued communication, sharing of ideas, discussions all of which ensures and leads to common planning and timely executions.

A brilliant example of this is the birth of the International quarterly: The Journal of Dharma in Dharmaram. One day, while we both were still at Oxford, a few months before my departure from Oxford back to Dharmaram, Fr. Aykara suggested the idea of starting an International Journal from Dharmaram. We both discussed about it; and, having obtained the permission from the authorities in Dharmaram, the details had been planned. For the International Board of consultants, we both directly contacted our professors in the university of Oxford, Belgium, California (Raimond Panikar) with whom I

had direct contact staying with him at Varanasi. We also invited many scholars from India, because we knew many of them through CSWR, which was already at work. The brochure was drafted by Fr. Aykara, which was modified through discussions with some of our own professors who supported the idea. He asked me also to be the editor in chief, though it was not my option at all, because I was returning to Dharmaram immediately.

Positive presence is set for mutual benefit and naturally contributes to the full flowering of each person and the institute they work in. As we have already seen splendor of personality does play a big role in these matters. But the splendor of personality is not limited to the leader alone. A great and good leader is always on the lookout to see how the splendor of personality is slowly blooming and yielding fruits in all persons entrusted to his care. Hence each one of us must be careful how to build up one's own personality by cultivating higher values, by studying and drawing inspiration from the great leaders of the world, spiritual as well as secular.

Called to be a religious priest with an accepted responsibility of showing the right way to the people entrusted to our care, priests have also a duty to be shining examples of what they preach. Since I quoted *Bhagavad Gita* before, I give here too a text from the *Gita* regarding what is expected of priests, no matter what religion they belong to. Text from the *Gita* is quoted, not because we do not have better Christian texts, but to remind us of what Jesus, our High Priest said: "Unless your spirituality is higher than the spirituality of the people, what is the meaning of preaching to them?" Regarding the high degree of spiritual values a person called to the divine state of priesthood, the *Bhagavad Gita* says:

"Fearlessness, purity of heart, steadfastness in knowledge and yoga; almsgiving, control of the senses, *yajna* (sacrifice), reading of the *sastras*, austerity, uprightness; Non-injury, truth, absence of anger, renunciation, tranquility, absence of calumny, compassion to beings, unconvetousness, gentleness, modesty, absence of fickleness; Boldness, forgiveness, fortitude, purity, absence of hatred, absence of pride; these belong to one born for a divine state (of priesthood), O! descendant of Bharata" (Bhagavad Gita 16.1-3).

All of us who are called for priesthood should be shining examples of these values. I am quoting these values here because I am proud of our country which has so carefully and elegantly chosen the perennial values that

inevitably belong to true leadership and authentic priesthood. Dharmaram is a seminary in India and I am really proud of this institute, as my *alma-mater* as well as a religious institute in which I was called to serve, and a few years with Fr. Thomas Aykara. His high ranking position in the congregation as I mentioned above, and well recognized administrative qualities, kept him away quite often from Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, though he kept coming and teaching as a visiting professor, whenever possible. During these days of his absence in Dharmaram, his positive presence was accepted and was acknowledged by the congregation at large.

What is the secret of success of Fr. Aykara's positive presence? I really do not know. But I may ponder and provide some clues. 1. The decency and decorum of his general pattern of behaviour, 2. The vision and commitment to the mission entrusted to him, 3. The ability to admire the mystery and the marvels of the human talents of his confreres and comrades working together with him, 4. A natural tendency to rise above the average standard of thinking in search of high ideals, yet not imposing them on others all on a sudden. I am happy to state that in the person of Fr. Aykara we have a genius, well versed in academics as well as in administration, doubtlessly a man of outstanding positive presence. All I spoke about positive presence is on earthly and embodied presence, but innerly aglow with the light and power of the Spirit. There are two factors always meeting and merging here, namely the inherent limitations of the body, time and space and the inner luminosity of the Spirit reigning above them. Real success in leadership and priesthood lies in our ability to combine both of them, meeting the challenges and transcending the pitfalls.

Let me conclude my reflections on the positive presence of Fr. Aykara with a prayerful wish, that the Lord who has adorned Fr. Aykara with so many positive qualities of an inspiring presence, may continue to bless him and guide him. Wherever he is, even without any administrative job, he will always be a positive and inspiring presence to the people around him. In fact, with regard to positive presence, it is the quality of the person that really matters and the job assigned to him plays only a secondary role.

With happy reminiscences and prayerful remembrances, as a dear friend, who admires him very much, I wish him all the best on the special occasion of the *Golden Jubilee* of his *Priestly Ordination*.