

Fr. Vineeth's Integral Vision of Sannyasasrama

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The concept of *sannyasa* belonged rather constitutively to the very religious fabric of Fr. Vineeth's *Weltanschauung*. In compliance with the traditional Indian thought, he too accepted *sannyasasram* as the crown and culmination of the other three *srams* or endeavours, namely, *brahmacharya*, *grhastha* and *vanaprastha*. Humans are expected to reach the perfection of their personhood (*purusha*) by successively undertaking these four *srams*. For Fr. Vineeth *sannyasasrama* is not the repudiation or liquidation of the previous three; in fact, the preceding three do progressively converge to and coalesce in the fourth one; they are subsumed by and consummated in *sannyasasrama*. This is the rationale behind the Indian yogic perception that human life is perfected in *sannyasa*.

May be under the influence of his Oxford mentor R. C. Zaehner (who translated yoga as 'integration'), Fr. Vineeth too had maintained all through his thought an integral/yogic view by looking at human life or existence itself as an *asram*. Consequently, it would be an oversimplification to restrict his concept of *asram* merely to a particular place or residence of silence and solitude, prayer and reflection or coexistent living of monks (*satsang*).

What is intended in the ensuing paragraphs is to offer a précis of Fr. Vineeth's integral view of life as an *asram* which the present writer had the good fortune to gather from his frequent conversation with the former during his lifetime.

To begin with: Fr. Vineeth was perceptive enough to take the term *brahmacharya* in its original meaning of being a student of the Veda and the vedangas. He translated its intent, in contemporary tongue, as formal education, secular as well as theological: that is to say, God-centred, value-based, systematic education. In general, he did not regard *asramite* life as something meant for the illiterate or uneducated, namely, for the aspirants of a solely or merely infantalistic, piety-oriented bent of mind. He strongly believed in the power of proper education to elicit *docta ignorantia* in the seekers for a knowledge of and thirst for what is Higher and Ulterior (*brahmajijnasa*) which alone would qualify them to be purposively admitted to *sannyasasram*. As is the case with the great Acharyas of Spirituality, Fr. Vineeth too held that it is solid and substantial education that would, as a rule, render one an authentic seeker of higher wisdom (*paravidya*).

The perception of Fr. Vineeth regarding *grhastha* as an indispensable prelude and prerequisite of *sannyasasrama* was significantly illumining and distinctive. I do remember him substantiating his standpoint concerning this to the following effect: "Conventionally, *grahastasma* is taken to mean the life of a householder, a state of married life. But, regardless of whether one is married or not, the thrust of the idea is on lived experience, active as well as passive, through a life of personal, self-sacrificing involvement. For instance, look at Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Though unmarried, she had an enormous bundle of lived experience that accrued to her from her life of serving sacrifice and active involvement in having lived for and with thousands of poor people. For her, all were her own brothers or sisters, sons or daughters. She had been existentially a *grhastha*. *Sannyasasrama* is not a call for the silly, inexperienced wanting to embrace it under the pretext of *fuga mundi*, negatively understood. If you

are a person of little or no lived experience, what are you going to interpret, detect and assign value to, in your asramite life?" To Fr. Vineeth's mind, in an ashramite context the primary material object for the *sadhaka* to formally interpret in the light of the divine word shall be, as was, for instance, the case with St. Teresa of Lisieux, naught else than his own lived experience.

Fr. Vineeth went on, saying: "The interpretation of lived experience, deciphering the values hidden therein, could be accomplished only by an even-minded activity of one's own inner spirit by way of self-observation, attention, abstraction, reflection, analysis and synthesis ending up in concrete, pointed articulation of the goal and gain of one's asramite life. This would require of the aspirant a mental stance of renunciation (*upeksha*) and non-clinging (*anasakti*), on the one hand, and, on the other, an ability to interpret his entire life-experience in the light of the WORD present and operative in the inner cave (*guha*) or wilderness (*vanam*) of his soul. This is why and how, in Fr. Vineeth's view *vanaprastha* becomes the immediate opener or initiator to *sannyasa*."

Fr. Vineeth in his integral and integrated yogic view of the four *srams* (*chaturasrama*) has clearly conceptualised the *sannyasasrama* as the apex towards which the former three converge and in which they get perfected. Thus, *sannyasasram* is the final goal and terminus of all forms of human existence. In the religious vision of Fr. Vineeth, it is the art and science, theory and technique of being free and freed even while living here on earth (*jivanmukti*): free with an existential openness to the All and the all; freed into all, to God, to one's fellow beings, to the Mother Earth, to the past, present and future in an unbreakable bond of relationship (*sannyasa* = religion) through a total offering of one's self (*atmanivedanam*) and actions, secular as well as scriptural (*loka-veda-vyapara-nyasa*), in a life spent as a *yajna* offered to God for the redemption of all (Lk 22:19; Gita 9:27; 3:9,20).

It is within these broad and basic outlines that we have to posit Fr. Vineeth's founding of the Vidyavanam Ashram in Bangalore. He wanted thereby that the seekers be led to the realisation of the wisdom of God (*brahmavidya*) upon which all other knowledges, whether secular or sacred, are to be established. Towards that end the *sadhakas* are initiated, trained and led by the guru, himself a person having listened to God's word (*srotriya*) and well-established in it (*brahmanista*). The disciples live there a word-bound, word-directed and word-oriented life with faith (*sraddha*) in the guru and a readiness to put his instructions into practice (*kriya*).

Asram is a resort for the seekers to live in the house of the master (*gurukulam*) in an atmosphere of interior enlightenment (*jnana*), universal love (*bhakti*) and selfless service (*karma*), united with God and all in supreme love (*paramaprema*) and unbreakable solidarity (*paranurakti*).

Narada Bhakti Sutras (35-36) enumerate the following as the outshining marks of an ashram dweller: renunciation of the things of the world (*vishaya-tyaga*), detachment (*sanga-tyaga*), uninterrupted divine service (*avyavarta bhajan*), singing-listening-praising the glories of God (*bhagavat-guna-sravana-kirtana*), grace of God (*Bhagavat krpa*), living in the company of great souls (*mahat sangam*), solitude (*vivikta sthanam*), eradication of the bondage to the world (*loka bandhanam*), detachment to the three predominant passions for pleasure, wealth and power (*nisthraigunyam*), and overcoming the instinct of acquisition and preservation (*yoga kshemam*).

All these are indispensable aids for the members of an ashram to live in God-oriented, people-oriented and Mother-earth-oriented oneness with and service of them. This would entail on the part of the *sadhaka* absolute self-denial (*atma vinigraham*), serenity of mind (*manaprasada*), kindness (*saumyatvam*), silence (*maunam*), honesty of motive (*bhavasamsuddhi* - *Gita* 17:16; *Mk* 8:35,35) with an exclusive focus on the OTHER and others (*Mt* 22:37-40). Needless to say, all this is quite in accord with the demands of Christian ashramite asceticism and is incorporated so visibly, credibly and authentically in the Vidyavanam's way and view of life, pre-eminently due to Fr. Vineeth's admirable calibre and ingenuity for integration and inculturation. It is a way of life lived in *upeksha* in view of *apeksha* (renunciation in view of relatedness), of *anasakti* in view of yoga (detachment in view of unitedness) with all: with God and the entire created universe.

And that is the wisdom (*vidya*) Fr. Vineeth wanted each one of us to learn by living in the *Sannyasarama* situated in the wilderness (*vanam*) or cave (*guha*) of one's heart (*Katha Upanishad* 2.12; *Mundaka Upanishad* 3.2.7) of which Vidyavanam was but a school of learning, practice and transmission.