



ICONS Of the **UNSEEN**

Asian Theology through the eyes of
Artist Joy Elamkunnappuzha cmi

Editor: Johnson Vadakumchery cmi



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search of an Indian Christian art

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1. Fr. Joy, a Confrere, Comrade Companion

A slim long body, long, lovely fingers trained to hold sketch pens and brushes out of which arise some of the loveliest drawings, a serene yet jovial face, ready to burst out in laughter as a timely break after his long, silent pondering over converting ideas into art; a man of carefree life style with his long khadi kurthas and pajamas, a man, wandering like a monk from station to station in pursuit of art; a man housing a spirit of subtle yet wide range of artistic imagination; a man, given to the *tapasya* of giving life to Christian art in genuinely Indian cultural forms: that is Fr. Joy Elamkunnappuzha whom I know for many years as my student, colleague and companion.

The marriage of Christian faith and Indian culture is the artistic concern of Fr. Joy. Today numerous churches and chapels in India, especially in the North, witness to the creative contributions of this singular and auspicious union of faith and culture Fr. Joy has envisaged and elaborately worked out. As we admire these works, remain in silence under the mystic spell they cast on us and it may be worthwhile to direct our minds also to the extraordinary personality behind these marvellous masterpieces of art.

2. Joy, a Man of Relentless Search and Sagacity

Every artist is a seeker. The inspiring spirit of an artist is search. We do research on the works of art. But the artist is always on the path of search. Search is pioneering and visualising. Search is giving oneself to a new mould of thinking, a new way of living, new vistas of self-expression. The artist searches for figures and colours, lines and letters to immortalise the aesthetic experience he had. Confronted with a blade of grass or a cloud in the sky, its hidden wealth of beauty, which, in a privileged moment, opens up and unveils itself totally to the inner and penetrating eyes of the artist, his endeavour to immortalise this heavenly moment of revelation begins. It is a search in an agony of self-expression. Art is not a mere imitation of a thing, however excellently beautiful it be to our naked eyes. Rather it is a life-long search to

find out an appropriate medium which eventually will evoke in the admirer the same experience which the artist had the privilege of experiencing, when the invisible beauty of the 'thing' blossomed before his eyes, be it just for a moment. Yes, that moment is blissful, something, like a *kairos*, the meeting of heaven and earth, which awakens the artist, inspires him and sets him in motion. The goddess of art has really appeared. Then onwards begins the agony of search. Real art is born from the authentic experience of the artist wherein the artist is led from the visible to the invisible, from the present to the future, to the manifold expressions of his experience. That is why the agony of search becomes part and parcel of artistic intuition, experience and expression. But quite often the artists are requested to work out some art-piece by someone else. One who requests may have ideas but not necessarily artistic experience. Once requested, the artist tries to imbibe the ideas, personalise them and engender in him the aesthetic feelings necessary for the successful working out of the art. Only from the aesthetic experience of the artist an authentic work of art will be born.

I remember that I requested Fr. Joy to work out in an Indian Artistic way the symbolic expressions of the seasons of the Church according to the Syro-Malabar tradition. The idea was to give these symbols in the CMI liturgical calendar published and distributed from Prior General's House. Fr. Joy accepted the idea and, after a short period of contemplative pondering over the seasons, he presented his drawings ready for publication. These drawings were an exquisite blending of the oriental faith in liturgical seasons and the Indian symbols of art capable of engendering the same religious awe and joyful experience of the divine rhythm communicated to us through the seasons of the liturgical year. For many years these drawings found their pride of place in the CMI liturgical calendar. Now, enchanted by the artistic beauty and the suggestive power of these drawings, I wish to immortalise them once again, depicting them in the cave Chapel of our ashram.

Search and sagacity go hand in hand. While the artist makes his long journey through the varieties of the nation's cultural symbols and images, it is the power of sagacity embedded in the artistic genius, that comes to

his help to choose the right symbol and to work out the appropriate form of synthesis. Without any doubt Fr. Joy is a man of sound sagacity, open to all cultural heritages and religious traditions of the country. Uninhibited as he is, driven by the sole interest of combining and harmonising faith and culture, he works out his projects of art searchingly and sagaciously. About sagacity it is said: "Unlike cleverness, sagacity increases with age". Long years of relentless search and experience of going through the agony of expression make Fr. Joy very resourceful as well as successfully sagacious.

3. Joy, a Man of Profound Insight and Creative Imagination

What makes a person a real artist? Is it intellect or imagination? This is a very fallacious disjunctive. We cannot opt one and reject the other. Philosophers have a lot of intellectual thinking, but they are not necessarily artists. For many of us the wildest imagination may be at work, especially in dreams; but this does not produce art. Artists are people who spend their time in a kind of dreamless dream. They see the invisible in a piece of

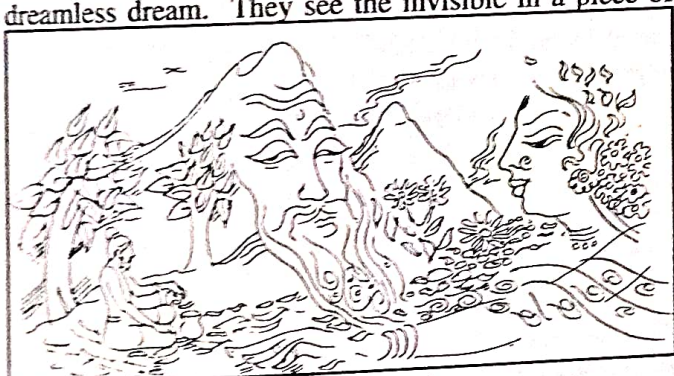


Fig. 94 Songs of Solitude 1992
dead rock; they see life emerging from a mighty mountain; yes, the mountain begins to speak.

In the pieces of clouds carelessly strewn in the blue sky they see the descending hand of God and new life emerges from the face of the earth. They see clouds as the messengers of love (*Megha-dut*) a bunch of banana as the summation of the stunning story of a poor peasant in Kerala (*Vazhakkula*), ashrams as venue of great national and world events (*Shakuntalam*, *Swapna-vasavdatta*). This insightful capacity of the artistic eye we call intuition and the illustrative power of establishing it, transcendental imagination. When intuition and transcendental

imagination merge we have a creative artist. This is what we see in Fr. Joy Elamkunnappuzha, a happy merger of profound insights and wide ranging imagination.

4. Joy, a Man of Humble Tapasya to the

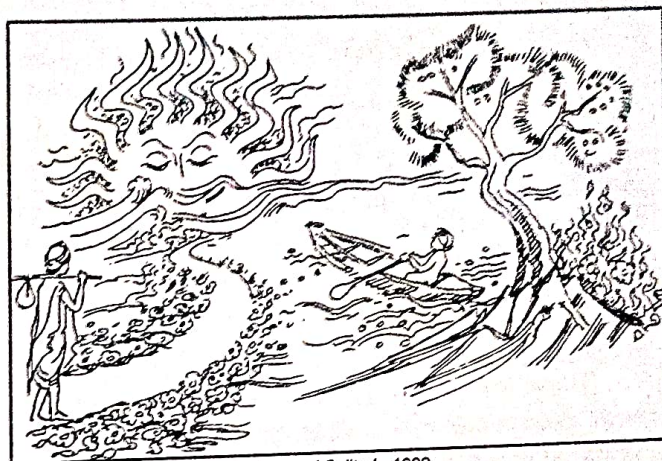


Fig. 95 Songs of Solitude 1992

Goddess of Art

Once I watched a short documentary film on the world-renowned sitarist, Ravisankar. To the question, "how you mastered the art of playing sitar so well", he replied: "Without *tapasya* and *sadhana* no art can be learnt". I think this is the story behind the success of Fr. Joy, the artist. It is a story of humble *tapasya* before the goddess of art. If art is anything worth admiring it should proceed from the brain and blood of the artist. Of course, a lot of study enhances the original movement from within. But *tapasya* is a must. *Tapasya* is not only ardour and zeal, but also determination and the disciplined approach to the opted subject of expression. Fr. Joy opted art, and specifically Indian Christian art. The door was open and the challenges were many; but the *tapasya* of determination was needed. Reminding us of the answer of the young Samuel to the Lord, the young Joy said: "Yes, here I am". Then onwards it was a life of *tapasya* dedicated to the goddess of art.

Who is this goddess? This is the goddess of Indian Christian art. Some may say that she was born from a lovely lotus arising from the depth of an ocean. But no; This goddess does not have a mythological origin. She is the brainchild of many Indian Christian artists. She is not a statue, not even a picture. She is an inspiration, a

challenge. She appeared to Fr. Joy, beckoned him to accept the challenge, to search for the invisible, the not-yet-born baby of the Indian Christian art. Yes, Fr. Joy was awakened. Radically seeing *tapas* is the inner awakening and *tapasya* is one's own life-long dedication to it. As the disciples of Jesus, once awakened, went back to Jerusalem, so did Fr. Joy, with a firm determination, went after his future pastoral ministry: to give birth to Christ in Indian art and cultural ethos. Perseverance is another aspect of *tapasya*. Fr. Joy has never given up his commitment to Indian Christian art. It continues still with full vigour and vitality as new and new chapels appear in more and more enchanting architectural beauty as *avatars* of the goddess of Indian Christian art, who has inspired him from the very beginning.

These fruits of art are the results of many years of *tapasic* determination and dedication to the work of art. Groping in darkness, through the nightmares of possible combination of Indian symbols and Christian faith, Fr. Joy has made his long journey ever serenely, ever trying and retrying. It is patience and perseverance, determination and dedication, yes, a life of genuine *tapas* that bears fruit. As Jesus said, the tree is to be judged by its fruit. Yes, Fr. Joy, you can now rejoice. Your untiring work has born fruits which we all admire. May the goddess of art bless you and may many more artistic works proceed from your rich and resourceful blood and brain.

5. In Pursuit of Poetic Pen-sketch

Philosopher and poet: they both think, but not necessarily alike. When the philosopher argues, the poet sings. When the philosopher moves to the abstract, the poet moves to the concrete. Yet the vision or the insightful thinking is the real backbone for both of them. Then, what about the poet and the artist? I think that they both have much more in common, because, once intuition or insight is clear, they both move to the concrete presentation of their experience. The artist can exhibit a poetry on a canvas or carve it out from a piece of rock.

Though I am not a poet, I too had a temptation of writing some poems in my spiritual diary. I called them 'poems of my heart' rather than metric poems, as they were short spells emerging from my meditations. I have collected some of them and was about to publish them in



Fig. 96

Songs of Solitude 1992

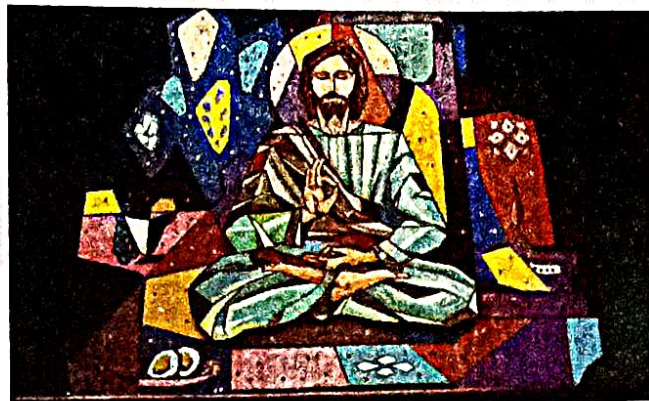
a booklet under the title: Song of Solitude. I thought of Fr. Joy who could convert poetry to pictures. But I did not have much hope. As I have mentioned earlier Fr. Joy is like a wandering monk with his *tapasya* for art, very difficult to be deciphered. My manuscript was ready. Then suddenly one day, as if out of the blue, Fr. Joy turned up in Dharmaram where I was staying. Like Elizabeth, when she saw Mary by her side, I too exclaimed: "My God, where from I got this fortune of having Fr. Joy with me in Dharmaram, when I was in need of his help!". I approached him and told him about my wish. I think the word 'no' is not in the dictionary of Fr. Joy. He accepted the manuscript and took it to his room. Then followed days of perfect silence. After a few days I asked him: "What about the drawings"? "Yes, I have read your manuscript." He said. I thought the goddess of art has not yet appeared; may be she is taking rest for sometime after having inspired him many a time. The next day Fr. Joy brought two pen sketches depicting one of my poems. One was with thinner lines and the other with slightly broader lines. He asked: "Which style you like more". I chose the thinner lines. Just two days later he came with the complete set of enchanting drawings for all my poems. They were really inspiring and the lines were flowing in matchless melody and rhythm. I had a feeling that the pictures were better than the poems and was really proud of publishing them along with the poems. With his searching eye the artist flies far and wide to the scenes of nature and sagaciously selects the apt symbols expressive of the theme. For example look at the picture on friendship: We see there two lovely human faces, male

and female, along with a tree with creepers, a girl dancing on a drum and a pair of peacocks, male and female, all of which show how images of friendship can be taken from nature. Sound of drum and dancing rhythm go hand in hand, strong stem gives support to the creepers and the pair of peacocks make each other happy. Finally the book *Song of Solitude* was published which had its second print within six months. I gratefully remember Fr. Joy whenever I take this book in my hand.

6. Dharmaram Chapel, a Masterpiece of Joy's Artistic Originality

Fr. Joy was still young. He was a student of Theology. His artistic wings were getting ready to take off. As Jonathan Levingston's seagull, he found that he had well developed wings to fly high and search into the vast sky of artistic intuition. With the same wings he could steep down and fly over the wavy waters of the sea of changing vistas of human life, much of which we find depicted over the walls of his churches or on the windows of his chapels. And in Dharmaram chapel, the masterpiece of his younger age, his artistic intuitions had its immaculate and ingenious expression on the façade of the Church, on the panels on either side of the main altar and finally on the tiny circular grills all along the balcony rails of the Chapel.

I like to visit this chapel again and again", said a Hindu friend of mine, a prominently placed businessman in Bangalore. "Quite often I bring my guests from India and abroad to this place. The sole purpose is to show them the *Jagatguru*, well worked out on the façade of this chapel, the eternal serenity of his face. This reminds me of the Buddha absorbed in meditation, - the lustre of light beaming through his immaculate eyes." The *Jagatguru* mentioned above refers to a marvellous piece of mosaic art, depicting Jesus the Guru, in a meditative posture, his right hand expressive of *jnana-mudra*, a symbol quite appropriate for a chapel for the students in search of sacred wisdom. The artistic stone-work of this has been done by the famous artist Balan. But it was the young artist, Fr. Joy, the young Jonathan Levingston of the sixties, who did the original sketch of this *Jagatguru*. As the pride of Dharmaram chapel, it still invites admirers from India and abroad. In the second part of eighties when the late Fr.



Pl. 93 128" X 130" Mosaic, Jagat Guru, Bangalore 1974

Amalorpavadas organized an exhibition of Indian Christian art, a beautifully enlarged photo of this *Jagatguru*, along with the two panels on either side of the altar were centres of attraction for many.

The panels on either side of the altar, worked out in tiny pieces of coloured glasses, a product of Tanjur Temple art, are an exquisite blend of Christian faith and Indian genius. It was a time when hardly any symbol of other religions appeared in a Catholic chapel. Yet the panel on the left demonstrated the onward march of all religions in fraternal concord to the eschatological union in God. It is the Holy Spirit, in spite of our human imperfection, that operates through the religions of mankind. The panel presented to us the time-honoured symbols of world religions in an upward movement in perfect rhythm and co-ordination. Maybe to highlight the reality of their difference on earth, at the bottom of the panel, a Church, a mosque and a Hindu temple are illustrated. The following symbols are presented: 1) The dove which stands for the Holy Spirit, 2) The Tai-Chi (Ying Yang), representing Taoism, 3) The trident (*trishula*) symbolising Shaivism, 4) *Dharmachakra* representing Buddhism, 5) The crescent representing Islam, 6) *Om* signifying Hinduism, 7) The seven branched lamp representing Judaism and 8) The gateway for Shintoism. We hope that in spite of the shortcomings of humanity, the Spirit will guide our peoples through religions God has placed them in, with or without an awareness of the redemptive death of Christ for all of them.

The cosmic Christ is the major theme of the panel on the right. Reminding us of the Indian gods and goddesses placed on the lotus, Christ is presented as the



Pl. 94

164" X 50" Thanjoor Glass Work, Bangalore 1974



Pl. 95

redeemer of mankind, standing on the lotus flower. As lotus is in the water but always above the water level, unwet by it, so does Christ, though in the world, always remain unpolluted by its filth and faithlessness, make the most pleasing offering to God. Incarnation was the primordial mode of inculturation. Jesus was born as a Jew, lived like a Jew; but in his mystical body he is reborn everyday and in every human culture, assuming to himself all sane values of cultures of all the people of the world as well as their joys and sorrows, success and failures, until humanity reaches the other shore, where he himself shines forth as the Sun by whose light all of us will shine forth and move around (Rev.21: 24). Therefore, this Jesus standing on the lotus, is vested with the symbols of the cultures of humankind. Seven symbols are depicted on the garment of Christ: They are, 1) A Rocket which signifies the culture of scientific progress of our time, 2) The brush and the pallot pointing to the artistic creations of humanity, 3) The guitar and the violine, signifying the

world of musical culture, 4) The rolling wheel representing the industrial development of the modern world, 5) The book for the literary and intellectual achievement of the world, 6) The spike on the corn to depict the agrarian culture and human quest for progress and prosperity and 7) The flask signifying the investigation and discovery which should go on and on.

On either side of Jesus we can also see six faces expressing the various moods which affect our human life, the members of his mystical body are passing through. Thus Jesus, in whom all of us were conceived before the beginning of creation, when he came to this world, accepted all aspects of our human life, sanctified them and promised us a place within his heavenly kingdom, provided we did not give up our filial faith and trust in him.

The grills on the rails of the balcony is a book of catechism in itself, highlighting several aspects of our day-to-day prayer life. One can see the following symbols: 1) The dove and the lotus symbolising Mary the mystical rose and the Holy Spirit, 2) the *dhamaru* and the *Om* symbolising *Nadabrahma* from which the creative energy of God flows, 3) the cross and the hand extended downward symbolising perfect self-surrender, 4) the finger pointing upwards the middle of a *chakra* and triangle

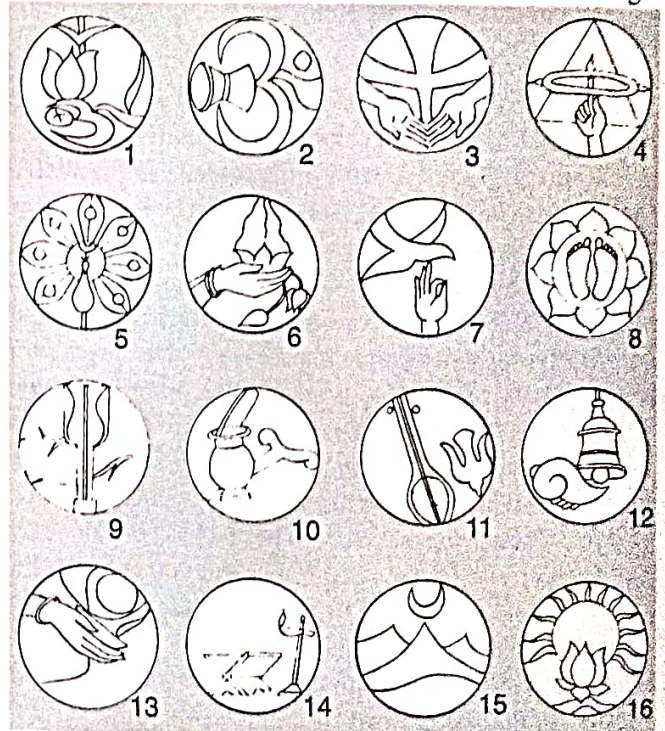


Fig. 97-112

symbolising the return to unity from multiplicity, 5) the peacock symbolising resurrection, 6) the hand with lotus buds symbolising the religious self-offering through three vows, 7) the dove and *jnanamudra* symbolising the descent of the Spirit and the rise of divine wisdom in the humans, 8) the *Padukas* symbolising the determination of the disciple to follow the master, 9) the *sarangi* and thorne symbolising stillness and suffering in our onward march for holiness, 10) *kamandalu* and support symbolising the perfect abandonment of a wandering monk, 11) *tamburu* and the dove symbolising the silent voice of God heard in stillness and serenity, 12) bell and the conch symbolising the church and the temple wherefrom prayers of the human heart rise up to the heavens, 13) the hand holding a lighted lamp symbolising inner illumination and devotion and supplication, 14) the Holy Book and the lamp symbolising the Word of God bringing divine light to us; 15) the mountain and the lunar crescent symbolising *tapas*, the source of inner strength and the presence of Our Lady providing us auspicious light of the crescent moon, and, 16) the Sun and the Lotus

symbolising the human rays to be illumined by the Son of justice and truth.

7. Conclusion

Though we see many works of art in many places, all of them are not worth the name. Some are mere imitations just made for sale. Some are stereotype products, incapable of inspiring us in any meaningful way. Only an artist of deeper aesthetical experience and creative imagination can produce a real work of art. Strictly speaking they are not at all 'produced', rather they are really 'conceived' just like a woman conceives a baby in her womb, carried over for many months in the artist's womb of fertile imagination and finally brought to expression with the agony of childbirth. Conception is always the result of union and in the case of Fr. Joy's artistic contribution, it is the union of Christian faith and Indian culture. A searching mind, a sagacious spirit, a creative imagination and above all a life of selfless dedication, made his art what it is now.



Dharmaram Chapel, Bangalore 1974