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SUTRAS ON CHRISTIAN MISSION IN THE INDIAN CHURCH

(A Tribute to Fr. Jacob's Contribution
to Inculturation and Evangelization)

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L. Fr. Jacob: a Friend and a Colleague

The Psalmist says, "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity" (Ps. 133:1). I think that it is also pleasant when brothers and sisters walk together in search of a goal to be realized. I came to know Fr. Jacob first as a friend and a companion on the Indian path of theological thinking a quarter century ago, when many of us in India were still searching for the realization of an Indian Church. Later I could co-operate with him in the pursuit of the same ideal, during his 25 years in NBCLC, especially from the days he was its Director. Following the path of late Fr. D. S. Amalorpavadass, the founder-visionary of NBCLC and of Fr. Paul Puthanangady, sdb, the dynamic director after him, Fr. Jacob, with his youthful vigour and searching mind, has rendered great service to this Centre and to the Church of India at large. As he is now leaving the Centre, I am only happy to remember him and present this tribute in his honour as a friend and a colleague.

I am trying to summarise his vision in three *sutras*. The inspiration and justification of this is his own articulation of *sutras* in his article "God's Dream for Mission" published in *Word and Worship*, vol. 34, (Jan-Feb, 2001) pp. 15-29. I have remoulded the content of these *sutras* in Sanskrit and am trying to present Jacob's vision of inculturation and evangelisation by expanding the meaning of the *sutras*. The *sutras* are not literal versions of what he has written in English. I do not claim that through the language of these *sutras* I expose all the theological insights and points Fr. Jacob has developed and articulated in different papers and articles. However, I was fascinated by his expression of *sutras* regarding our mission in India. These *sutras* are Trinitarian in nature and somehow summarise our mission in India with its twin objectives of evangelisation and inculturation. These *sutras* are: 1) *Pitr-pritih tanaya-sambhavena swa-prakashaka*: God's love is his own self-manifestation in and through Jesus. 2) *Krista-snehah atmadanena Yesu jeevadayakah*: Christian love is to give the very

life of Christ through self-offering. 3) *Pavitratma-pritih bhaktanam devastva-praptaye*: The Spirit's love is the divinisation of the devotees through transformation.

About Trinitarian nature of these *sutras* Fr. Jacob writes:

It is in this perspective that we can appreciate the Trinitarian foundation for mission as spelt out by the Second Vatican Council: "The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This plan flows from "fountain-like love", the love of God the Father.¹

This vision could well be complemented by another statement in his paper: "*A New Way of Being Church*":

That the Church is at its deepest level a communion (*koinonia*) rooted in the life of the Trinity, and thus in its essential reality a sacrament (*mysterium et sacramentum*) of the loving self-communication of God and the graced response of redeemed mankind in faith, hope and love.²

With this short introduction let us go through the *sutras*.

II.1. Sutra No. 1: *Pitr-pritih tanaya-sambhavana swa-prakashaka* : God, the Father's love is his self-manifestation in and through Jesus

The Christian experience is an experience of a great mystery. It was to celebrate this mystery of Christ that Christians gathered together from the beginning of Christianity. As other fellow travellers of different religions gathered to celebrate their mystery cults, the first Christians, following the commandment of Jesus, gathered together to celebrate the mystery of Christ. What is this great mystery Christian celebrated? St. Paul gives the answer:

"Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom...for those who love him" (I Cor. 2:6-9).

This hidden mystery of God was revealed to us in and through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God's own self-gift to humanity. God, who is invisible, incomprehensible and inaccessible, is now made visible and somehow understandable and accessible through the reality of Jesus Christ. Christ has thus become the visible face of the invisible Father as Jesus himself told his disciples. "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9).

Before the beginning of all beginnings God thought of his own self-giving to humanity. For this purpose a medium of his own self-expression was necessary. This was Jesus, God's self-gift made accessible to us. God is love and love is self-defusing. Creation was the primordial expression of this self-defusing love. But the presence of God in creation was only a reflected semblance. God was not fully satisfied with this self-gift through creation. He wanted to give himself more and totally. In other words, to give himself totally to humanity, he allowed his very consciousness, the Word, to become flesh and be born in history, in time and space, like any one of us. Love of God is like a river flowing from the hilltop down to the valley. Like the great Ganges which flows down from different peaks of the Himalayas and passes through different cliffs and mounts and merges into one big ocean, watering and fertilizing several cities, so does the divine love flow from the heart of God in manifold forms as concern, compassion, peace, justice and truth, reaches the human hearts, washes away their sins, enobles and empowers them. This incessant flow of love is singularly manifested in the person of Jesus Christ whom God the Father gave us as his self-gift. Pointing to this mystery of divine love Jacob says:

One way of envisioning mission is by appealing to images and events of the mystery of God's love made manifest in Jesus the Christ, that we are called to proclaim and make present. It is also important to concentrate our attention to these salvific events as we are celebrating the Jubilee of Christ event, and not merely of his birth.³

Christ is both an event and a mystery. The word 'event' points to history, the birth, life and death of Jesus as a human being, subject to culture, rules and regulations of the local government, love and the hatred of the people of the country. Jesus became message of God's love because, whether accepted or rejected, whether praises or curses were heaped upon him, he always manifested the love of the Father, giving us his consoling message: there is a loving Father in heaven for all of us and therefore you too should love one another. There is no greater love than that you lay down your life for your brothers and sisters. In fulfilment of this heavenly message he laid down his life for us the humans, whom he wanted to deliver from the ditches of sinfulness, hatred and egocentricity. This life of Jesus became an example for us.

God's loving activity still continues on the earth through his Son Jesus Christ and the Spirit who proceeds from both of them. We can see this in the trees which selflessly yield their fruits to us, in the stars

which shower their light incessantly and indiscriminately on all of us, and above all in human consciousness which moves towards God through manifold religions and movements of our times. Fr. Jacob writes:

To realize the deepest aspirations of the people around us, we ought to recognize the epiphany of God in the total human situation, the secular and human realities of our life. For God unfolds his presence and plan in our historical context inviting us to transform it by an on-going process and make it move towards its full realization in the kingdom of God.⁴

There are two poles or sources for Christian theological enterprise. The first one is "God's self-giving, self-revealing manifestation initiated in Israel and culminating in Jesus Christ."⁵ The second is "our own human world of experience."⁶

Taking the world of human experience seriously naturally takes us to a world of inter-religious dialogue, to the agonies and aspirations of humanity in their search for God, their rich contributions enfolded as well as expressed in the culture and climate of the place we live in. Where religions failed, secular movements have come to the fore to unveil the unseen God hidden under the veil of truth and justice and has become an undeniable part of human experience.

The necessity of relating or co-relating these two poles in a critical and on-going manner is our task today. An approach which takes human experience seriously, an approach in which the Bible (faith in Jesus Christ) becomes the point of reference for interpretation of life leading to transformative action is the only valid methodology for pastoral action.⁷

The sum and substance of the second *sutra* is this valid methodology for our pastoral action: Christian love as God's love on earth should be made now a reality through our self-offering.

II. 2. *Krista-snehah atmadanena Yesu jeevadayakah:*

Christian Love is to Give the Very Life of Christ through Self-Offering

Jacob formulates the second *sutra* as follows: "Jesus so loved the world that he gave himself to it totally to make humans fully alive."⁸ God's love was now made present to humanity through the reality of Jesus. The humans are called to participate in this love, to be charged with it and to make this earth an abode of divine love which is communicated to each other through one's own self-offering.

As God the Father made his self-gift and Jesus made his self-gift on the cross, each of us is called to make our self-gift for the other. Then only Christians will follow in the footsteps of Jesus fully and the humanity will become fully alive. Hence, the *sutra* says: *Christavam sneham atmarpanena Yesu jeevadam*. Christian love is a self-giving love just like God's love is self-giving and has been manifested in and through Jesus Christ. Our duty as followers of Christ's mission is to make the same Jesus now living on earth. But this is to be done through us. It is in and through us, through our words and deeds, he is now operating on earth. Jacob writes:

It is obvious that we are called to 'proclaim Jesus'. Jesus is not simply a name. He is the **living person** who is at the same time **the saving deed of God's love in history.**" What we Christians perhaps fail is in this: "to make Jesus a living reality here and now."⁹

This is done through our self-offering to the great ideals of Jesus. Hence, when we follow the footpath of Jesus, make his ideal of unconditional love alive in us, lay down our lives on the altar of sacrifice that our brothers and sisters may have better lives, we are giving the very life of Christ to the people. This is what he wants us to do: "whenever you gather together you do this in memory of me."

In the Indian art of understanding, knowledge is becoming. To know Christ is to become another Christ. Hence, Christ is to be preached not from our head but from our hearts, not from our brain but from our being. If Christ identified himself with the marginalized, with the suffering, let us do the same. Fr. Jacob says:

We need a renewal of mission. Any purely intellectual understanding of Christ in abstract terms of nature, substance, divinity, humanity, is not geared to commitment to him, or to his cause. The Biblical reflections on the incarnation are posterior to the reflections on the significance of the cross. In the New Testament it is the cross that gives meaning to the incarnation. That is why the birth of Christ is presented under shadow of the cross as self-emptying (Phil. 2:5-11).¹⁰

Self-emptying is the clue to our salvific mission. As God emptied himself in his self-giving in the form of Jesus Christ, and Christ loved all humans with a self-emptying love poured out to the people in service and sacrifice, so must every Christian be, a symbol of self-emptying love. In this love-mission knowledge becomes realizational. Fr. Jacob calls this mission as solidarity.

Mission as solidarity with the discarded and the victims, the excluded and the powerless is challenging and it gives scope for inter-religious dialogue and inculturation in one and the same involvement.¹¹

Jesus' solidarity with the excluded and the powerless was not of an intellectual analysis, but of a real life with them. Just as one of them he lived, sharing their lots of powerlessness, inconveniences and even discrimination and contempt. In his public ministry he was rather like a wandering monk, devoid of any possession rather than an academic social analyst. But from this position of non-possessiveness and freedom he made his sharp comments especially against the misuse of power by the religious authority of his own religion. He never criticised other religions, much less the authorities of other religions. This type of life-style and criticism against his own religion brought him to his final ordeal to be condemned to death as a culprit on the cross. But his life-style was fully Asian. In Asia, especially in India, we still have numerous wandering monks. Many of them are certainly sincere and selfless persons. These monks by their simple, unsophisticated, non-consumeristic life-style, certainly attract the attention of our religious minded people who are happy to see them and help them by their little gifts, as the widow's mite. These monks give them peace in return and, given the occasion, instruct them in spiritual wisdom without any monumental building for that purpose. Perhaps to touch the heart of Indian religious ethos we may need to take such daring steps in our Indian Church. "Living Christ means a living cross, without it life is a living death."¹²

II. 3. *Pavīratma-prītiḥ bhaktanam devastva-praptaye*: The Spirit's love is the divinisation of the devotees through transformation.

To be another Christ every Christian needs inner transformation. This is the work of the Spirit. Fr. Jacob writes:

At Pentecost the Spirit of the risen God is offered as a gift that empowers the disciples for the work of the kingdom (Acts 1:6). The Spirit is the spirit of **boldness** in the face of adversity and opposition. The church continues her mission not by her power but by the power of the Spirit.¹³

The Christian life is a life of self-transformation into the life of Christ. To become another Christ in thinking and living is the best way of knowing Christ. This is not a bookish knowledge, nor academic brilliance nor social analysis. It is becoming another Christ charged

by his own Spirit which he has breathed into his disciples. The symbol of breath is very important. Once again it is an Eastern symbol which Jesus uses here. The *Guru* breathes his spirit into his disciples with a *mantra*. Here the *mantra* is: "I give you my peace. Abide in me and I abide in you." The Spirit of the master is received individually by a living touch of the master and in course of time the master's life becomes the very breath of the life of the disciple. This is what Paul says: "Now it is not I who live but Christ liveth in me."

The Spirit brings about *koinonia*, fellowship, a communion which actualises God's love in which love and justice, concern and forgiveness are operative. This communion of the spirit-filled people is not a ghetto, not a club of the saved people. The Spirit makes the community of the disciples for the purpose of establishing communion in the whole world, not as an independent entity. The moment the Church withdraws from the world, it betrays the only purpose for which the Spirit gathers it – as communion within the human family.¹⁴

The Spirit of God is the Spirit of Christ breathed into us by Christ himself. This Spirit is by nature unrestricted and infinite consciousness which blows like wind everywhere and in all directions. Openness is its true nature. It embraces all that is good and true on the face of earth and gathers up human individuals to a loving and forgiving community.

The Spirit operates in the Church, visibly and invisibly, in his own marvellous hidden ways, known to him alone. The Spirit constantly calls the Church to self-reflection and renewal, empowers it to face the challenges of the Gospel and of our own time. To listen to the voice of the Spirit we must be pure and attentive. As *Katha Upanishad* says:

This Spirit is not attained by instruction or by intelligence or by learning. By him whom he chooses is the Spirit attained. To him the Spirit reveals his own being. The one who has not turned away from wickedness, who has no peace, who is not concentrated, whose mind is restless – he cannot realize the Spirit, who is known by wisdom.¹⁵

That we may be filled with this spirit, that his transforming power may divinise us, we have to be selfless, wholly surrendered to the power of the spirit operating within us. Then only we can work out a heavenly abode on earth, which in fact is not our work but the work of the spirit. Fr. Jacob puts it as follows:

The Spirit is at work in the whole world and in other religions, cultures and traditions, in movements, and groups who work for the transformation of the life in the world. Not to recognise the Spirit in these realities will be a great failure in our vocation to be a spirit-filled-people. For recognising the Spirit elsewhere is inseparably connected with being endowed with the Spirit.¹⁶

Inculturation as a theological act has to very seriously accept the work of the Spirit in other cultures and religions. From the beginning of creation the Spirit is at work in all cultures and more so, in human consciousness. Our duty as Christian disciples is to harmonize and combine the Spirit's work in culture, other religions and in the Church. True inculturation is not copying external elements, but approaching the cultures with a positive attitude, discern the work of the Spirit, foster it, purify it from human misconceptions and conditionings, inform it with Christian faith and thus make it truly and authentically Christian at the same time. Fr. Jacob's quote from Radhakrishnan is very relevant here.

If Europe interpreted Christianity in terms of her own culture, of Greek thought and Roman organization, there is no reason why the Indian Christian should not relate the message of salvation in Christ to the larger spiritual background of India. Possibly India's religious insight may help to revivify Christianity, not only in India but in the world at large.¹⁷

This comment of Radhakrishnan sounds true as many from the West are coming to India to learn *yoga*, mysticism and other salient points of Indian Spirituality. If we had a fully inculturated Indian Church, perhaps they could have found in the Indian Church, in its numerous convents and monasteries what they seek. In his article on 'Inculturation as Mission' Fr. Jacob presents the early Church as a marvellous exemplar of inculturation, hundred percent Jewish and Christian at the same time, the four Gospels as models of inculturation. Later the Western Church got thoroughly inculturated "That it even went to the excess by over – identification with the European culture and society as Western Christendom."¹⁸ The Holy Father, in his encyclical letter, *Fides et ratio*, makes mention of the Hellenistic cultural wrapping of the Christian tradition. Then he calls India to work out our own process of inculturation. What we have to learn from the inculturation of the Western Church is summed up by Fr. Jacob as follows:

A Hellenistic Christian's profession of faith in Christ as Liberator had meant for them that they do not have to be uprooted, alienated from their own roots as human beings belonging to a particular culture and tradition. But that it is integral to their being Christian; that they do not have to come under the weight of Jewish traditions and customs. But that they are freed to be fully human and fully Christian, for Jesus the Lord cannot be imprisoned in any particular cultural realization and therefore, the Church too.¹⁹

The Spirit establishes the kingdom of God on earth. The kingdom of God is a symbol which Jesus uses with the renewed meaning going through the different connotations of the kingdom during the periods of the New and the Old Testaments, Fr. Jacob concludes his vision of the kingdom of God as follows:

The phrase 'reign of God' on the lips of Jesus refers to the definitive manifestation of God's unconditional love. That is why it appears hidden, small, having a slow growth (Cf. Mk. 4:30-32), as a present (Lk 17:20) and a future (Mk 9:1) reality.²⁰

This means that the reign of God on earth is a reality subject to growth and flowering. It is heading for a culmination; on its march, it has to confront the reign of evil and the unjust structures it has made. In this confrontation many holy men and women die as victims, just like Jesus died. But it is the Spirit who guides them, speaks through them and finally empowers them to proclaim God's unconditional love even in the midst of world's worst conditions of life. Fr. Jacob concludes:

This revolution of God's unconditional love brings about a response in those who move toward the gift of God's reign. It brings about **all-round freedom, a fellowship of radical concern, and enduring just relationships among** the people of the kingdom. All this manifests itself in a community of persons – the community of the disciples, who will embody the gift of the kingdom and will become in turn both its sign and servants. The gospels present these characteristics of the kingdom as communicated by Jesus by his words and deeds.²¹

In spite of all these clarion calls for inculturation the net result in the Indian Church is not very impressive. The Church largely continues on in its traditional Western life style. Fr. Jacob enumerates in detail "inadequacies and failings in our communities" on the way of making a new Church. I consider this as the sincere lamentations of a prophetic theologian. He begins:

In our inner convictions and personal and collective spirituality there has often been insufficient interiorization of, and conversion to, the teaching of the Gospel and the Council on authentic Christian community: e.g., praying together as brothers and sisters, one in mind and heart; openness to one another in sharing, mutual concern and self-giving; attitudes of “being *with others* and *for others*,” making the joys and sorrows of the community truly our own.²²

Then he enumerates different areas of ecclesial life where we could have achieved much more, but did not. Elsewhere in his paper on Inculturation as Mission he gives the deep-rooted reason for this failure:

A great many Indian Christians, young and old – feel “at home” and consider as “ours” the foreign cultural expressions of our faith and Christian way of life in and through life-style and spirituality and worship. (Latin was considered (even today!) the mother tongue of the Church. In the last analysis the deepest problem is one of cultural alienation. Ironically we are unaware of living in a false identity.²³

I think the Church in India is not willing to change. To change means to give up what we hold on to, to be ready for sacrifice, to adapt ourselves to a new mould. We do not want to do this. To be truly and authentically inculturated we have to be much more selfless. Our Indian Church must be much more spiritual. As the document we submitted to Rome before the Synod on religious life clearly acknowledges, in spite of our numerous vocations for religious life and successful active apostolate in the field of education and health care, our spirituality is not profound enough. We easily adopt what is more comfortable. A brilliant example of this is how easily the Church in India, except the orientals, gave up abstinence following the Western regulation, though we know very well our fellow travellers in other religions, both in Hinduism and Islam, still have great respect for fasting and abstinence and are very much practiced in this country. Our inculturation is largely peripheral, e.g., change of habit to sari or any other secular dress, though this much is good.

As the Holy Father says: “Philosophy is the mirror which reflects the culture of a people.”²⁴ If this is true we must deeply enter into the Indian art of thinking which has shaped the soul of India and re-articulate our Christian faith. It is here the third *sutra* has its working force. The Spirit should work in us, transforming us and making us

divine persons. *Brahma-sakshatkara*, God-realization is a high ideal in the Indian thinking. This can very well be understood in a Christian manner as the divinisation of the soul by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will purify everything including our being, thinking and all cultural factors which we accept and integrate into the expression of our Christian faith.

III. Conclusion

The story of mission is the story of a descending and ascending love of God. God's love descends to us in and through the incarnation. It is the supreme sharing of God's consciousness to humanity. Jesus is the embodiment of this divine consciousness on earth. By forgiving sinners, accepting the untouchables, curing the sick, dining with the marginalized and the discriminated, he displayed this unconditional love of God through his actions on earth. Finally, dying on the cross for all of us, his mission as the head of the human race, is marvellously accomplished. He had called us to his discipleship. True discipleship is participation in the consciousness of the master. Listening to the master, following his footsteps are the initial means for fostering discipleship. But, finally, the Master's consciousness should be awakened from within. In other words, the Master who abides within us as our innermost Self must start functioning from within us. This is what Jesus says when he said: "I am the vine and you are the branches...without me you can do nothing" (Jn.15:5). The branches must be activated by the power of the Vine. This is the function of the Spirit, the Spirit of the Father and of the Son which Jesus breathed into us, his disciples. Breathing is a symbol of the new awakening of the Spirit. The Spirit within us works as an ascending love. The human love is called to be characterized by the divine love and reflect the divine all through its actions. Thus the human love is day by day transformed by the Spirit, divinised by it, it becomes one flame of love in which the human and divine consciousness merge and cry in one voice 'Abba Father'. It ascends higher and higher as the flames of the sacrificial fire rise up to the heavens in incessant yearning to be united with God. Thus Spirit's love divinises the human soul and leads the whole humanity for the final communion of saints.

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