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TOWARDS NEW HORIZONS OF INDIAN CHRISTIAN LIVING

1. Introduction

We are born human; but in the course of a life lived consciously, *we become human*. Some of us, who succeed in reaching the higher levels of consciousness, capture new realms and heights through an immanent as well as a transcendent contact with the Source of life. In this process, they become authentic persons in having realized and integrated humanity and divinity in their own selves. In their lives, the principle “action follows being” (*agere sequitur esse*) is realized: whatever they do ultimately originate from what they have become, what they are in the inner core of their selves.

Father Vineeth, born on 15 May 1935 in Kandasankadau (Thrissur, Kerala), has lived his life consciously for the last 75 years; of these, 50 golden years were lived as an ordained Catholic priest in the

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community of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI). As he incessantly continues his search for the Ineffable, at this juncture, I propose to venture into an appraisal of the life and works of Father Vineeth. As I have been associated with him for the last twenty five years, which began with the four fruitful years that I could spent as his student in philosophy, I am a witness to the fact that Father Vineeth has been living an authentic life originating in his successful and vibrant integration of the human and the Divine in various realms of his life and mission.

This essay makes an attempt to capture some heightened moments in the life and writings of Father Vineeth in view of presenting his vision and mission as a human being, a Christian, a consecrated Catholic priest, a professor of philosophy and theology, and, above all, as an authentic *Guru* to all who approach him at Vidyavanam Ashram, Bangalore, imparting the wisdom that leads them to a transformation into Jesus Christ, the Supreme Being, the *Sadguru*.

2. Preparing for the Search

Though the life of Father Vineeth as a student at school did not record anything very extraordinary, his incubation period is marked by his natural liking for quietude and simplicity which were coupled with his prayerfulness and special interest for reading. As he was close to his teachers and the priests in the parish church, he had access to a variety of books, ranging from those needed for his regular studies to the biography of St. Francis of Assisi and the autobiography of St. Theresa of Lisieux, all of which he had read before he completed his high school. It is worth-noting that, as a young boy, he was more inclined to matters of faith than that of worldly wisdom, which made him stand in good stead among his peers. His development into a philosopher-theologian and further transformation into a mystic and a *guru* of spiritual wisdom chronicle the full blossoming of the inner urges that Father Francis cherished even from his childhood days.

Another important aspect of his school days that contributed to the making of his person and the bend of mind for Indian wisdom is his

Sanskrit learning, which he had availed as a young school student. The introductory instructions in Sanskrit kindled in him a very special taste not only for the beauty of the language but also for the sublime life vision enshrined in those wonderful Sanskrit classics. Moreover, we find that even after having mastered the incisive Heideggerian analysis of being, he returned to the Indian lore largely because of the foundational orientation Sanskrit learning had instilled in him.

Communicating his wish to become a Catholic priest (which he is said to have made both to the Franciscans and the Carmelites) while he was still in the high school was quite natural and spontaneous. The spiritual bend of mind that Father Vineeth possessed, as a young school boy, gave an impetus to further deepen it through the arduous training in the seminary. Although the final decision to join the indigenous Carmelite community, the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), was not necessarily a conscious decision in terms of a preference over the Franciscans; later on, however, he was convinced that the Divine Providence had been preparing him gradually to quench his spiritual quest in and through the Carmelite tradition, which he considers to be fundamentally mystical in orientation.

The information we could gather indicates that Father Vineeth, as a young seminarian, was exemplary among his companions, who was well respected for his special affinity and support to those who were in need, a character trait that would, later on, endear him to many even when he would comfortably inhabit the intellectual domains of philosophy and theology. It is attested by his companions that, during the seminary days, Father Vineeth would make the optimum use of the opportunities offered to him in the community. His orientation for quietude and taste for reading were well suited for the seminary training, which naturally also endeared him to his superiors. The seriousness that he had given to his initial intellectual training, especially during his seminary formation, has made a lasting impression on his later career as a teacher and a venerable *guru* in the Vidyavanam Ashram.

Another aspect of Father Vineeth's later development as a prolific writer, both systematic prose and inspirational poetry, had its

inception in his seminary days. Everyone who has come to know Father Vineeth would attest to his spontaneity and simplicity, on the one side, and elegance and precision, on the other, in his writings. Quoting a couple of verses from a Malayalam poem that Father Vineeth wrote as a novice (1952-1953) would give us not only a feel of his natural talent for poetry, but also indicate the depth of his thought and the bend for the spiritual and the Ineffable from his very young age:

Counting on and on, day after day
I went on searching for nothing, but You!
Yet, you did not turn up to me
That milk and honey may flow
Through the garden of my soul

The longing of my heart is only this:
To place flowers at your lotus feet.
I do not desire to live at all
If it would hurt your holy heart.¹

Apart from the literary style and charm that these lines express, the underlying spiritual quest is far greater in intent. His natural aptitude for quiet moments led him to make optimum use of the chances for prayer and contemplation, for which he had a special taste. In his self-formation he insisted on the need to be configured to Christ in order to be transformed into Jesus, a transformation that had made him what he is today, which he would also take up, later, as his mission as an ordained priest.

Searching for the Lord, as he continues to live at the feet of the Lord in loving devotion, Father Vineeth's life has transformed in leaps and bounds. He made himself available to the Word to be formed and to be transformed; not only did he participate in the revealing-concealing (*āvaraṇa-vikṣepa / alethea*) dynamics of the Reality but also he constantly strived to be integrated into the Ineffable One, both of which

¹The original Malayalam is as follows: “*Eṇṇi jñān eṇṇi jñān ennātma nāthane/eṇṇi jñān ere nāl aśāyode/ Ennitum ennāthma poonkāvīl ānanda poonthenzhukan nee ethukille?/ Thāvaka hruthāril modhapargangal/ thuvukayanante jeevithānthyam;/ Jeevitham veṇamennillikalpavum/ pāvānanageyku khethamākīl.*”

were resulting from his earnest desire to discern the will of the Father for himself and through him for the others.

3. Ordained to Break the Word and the Bread for Many

Prepare me, always prepare me
Don't tell me for what it is
Whatever that you will
I shall accomplish day by day.²

The eventful life of Father Vineeth as an ordained minister of the Word and the Sacrament began on 17 May 1960. The bend of mind and personality of Father Vineeth had made it clear that he was called to make distinct contributions in his life as a minister in the Church. He was convinced that his ordination as a priest is not meant to carry out secular tasks. As the foundation of a Catholic priest is in the person of Jesus Christ and as he is ordained for the people of God to break the Word and the Bread for them,³ he was definitive that the tasks that he has to carry out shall be directly pertaining to the realms of the sacred. He was offered the opportunities to pursue studies in secular sciences, but he had made a very clear choice about his ministry so much so that he simply said no to those possibilities. Although, then, he had no idea as to what is in the offing, his desire was to be a priest who would make himself available for the people of God in meeting their spiritual needs.

However, with the wise discernment of the superiors, later, there emerged plans to send Father Vineeth, along with three other CMI confreres, to specialise in philosophy in view of making his services available at the seminary. Arrangements were made for his academic pursuit at the prestigious Gregorian University, Rome. It was in the providential plan that Father Vineeth must study in Rome at a

²Francis Vineeth, *Enne Orukku Nee* (Malayalam), Bangalore: Vidyavanam Publications, 2007, 25 (English translation by Benny Nalkara).

³Later, in 1999, Father Vineeth wrote in his *Prayer and Power*: "The Christian priest who brings elements of bread and wine, gifts of creation to the altar, in order that they be converted into the body and blood of Christ, publicly proclaims his desire to make his world more and more God centred." Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1999, 52.

time the Church was making earnest attempts to make its life and mission more spiritual and, thus, relevant to the world. Although it took some time to make definitive practical steps in the Church to this effect, having shared the mood and the spirit of renewal that prevailed in the Vatican Council II, as a person who lived at that time in Rome, it made an impact on and an impetus to Father Vineeth to share the concerns of the Council, which were so close to his heart. Later on, when he would return to India, and as the Indian Church would begin the process of making her own life more spiritual and the mission more relevant to the people of the land, he would venture into it in full swing, especially to contribute his unique share as a seasoned philosopher and an erudite theologian with the capacity to bridge the ennobling spirit of the traditions – Christian as well as Indian – the yearning for spiritual depth and relevance in the present time and place of his Christian mission.

The fundamental philosophical question of being as treated by Martin Heidegger, a phenomenologist and an existentialist thinker from Austria who made his philosophical career in Germany, was taken up by Father Vineeth for his doctoral research, under the able guidance of renowned Heideggerian Johannes B. Lotz.⁴ As this systematic study progresses through its three parts such as (1) Introduction to Heidegger's Thought, (2) Heidegger's Philosophy of Being, and (3) Reflections on Heidegger's Philosophy of Being, we experience the masterly interpretation of Heideggerian Being as the fertile ground that facilitates the experience of the mystery, which can take any search to the immanent as well as transcendent domains of reality. It is, indeed, an understanding that surpasses the metaphysical scrutiny of Being to the deeper levels of consciousness, which philosophy may not succeed to penetrate, but could be accessed by an "onto-theo-logical" approach. According to Father Vineeth, "Ontology, when it turns to be onto-

⁴This doctoral dissertation was later published under the title, *Discovery of Being: The Analysis of Being according to Martin Heidegger*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1970. Along with his studies at Gregorian University, Rome, Father Vineeth also availed a scholarship from the German Academy (Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst), and carried out his studies in German language and philosophy at the University of Munich, Germany.

theology, passing through its *ek-sisting* ground arrives at its subsisting grounds, which is the ultimate ground of metaphysics."⁵ In analysing "the ground of *what is*," as it was carried out by Heidegger, Father Vineeth could not only present the penetrating philosophical insights of Heidegger with mastery, but he could, by going beyond the 'secular' garb, interpret its quite sublime mystical foundation as providing a solid spiritual anchoring for the being. Heidegger's metaphysical invitation to come out of the 'oblivion of Being', which is identified as the problem of the whole western philosophy, turns out to be the locus to rekindle a desire to earnestly involve in a search for realizing the Being of beings. The free primordial self-disclosure of the Being is treated as the ground of both immanence and transcendence, at the same time, which, if realized in one's own existence, could lead to authenticity and self-realization.

Trained in the Heideggerian philosophy, Father Vineeth returned to India in 1965 and started teaching philosophy at Dharmaram College, Bangalore. His lectures were well received not only because of his erudition but also because of his simplicity and openness with which he approached the students. Interestingly, as he started to teach, along with his expertise in western philosophy, Father Vineeth made it a point to study Indian philosophy in depth and to initiate his students into the same. As Dharmaram had already made it a practice of teaching Indian and western philosophies side by side, in view of enabling the students to imbibe an integral worldview, it was spontaneous for Father Vineeth to wholeheartedly plunge into Indian philosophy with greater enthusiasm. It may be noted that his early initiation into Sanskrit had given him a better edge in gaining expertise in the Indian thought. It was not a learning process just for the sake of instructing students doing philosophy and theology. His doctoral studies on Heidegger having given him an effective tool for philosophical inquiry, and with his natural orientation for the spiritual and the mystical thought, Father Vineeth took every chance to go into the depth of the Indian thought by learning the *Upaniṣads*, the *Bhagavat*

⁵Vineeth, *Discovery of Being*, 131.

Gīta, etc., in their original Sanskrit version; his erudition also enabled him to look for various translations and interpretations offered by recognized scholars. Both of these came quite handy in making his own synthesis of philosophical thought, which was well received both by the students and the staff of Dharmaram College.

It was in 1971 that Father Vineeth was given another chance to pursue his academic excellence in theology. Having proved himself as an erudite scholar and creative thinker, and having made a very positive impact upon the student body of Dharmaram College and sections of erudite public in different parts of India, the authorities had realized the potential in Father Vineeth to make a creative synthesis of the Eastern and Western thought. His expertise in western philosophy had to be further complemented with theological erudition and expertise. Hence, the authorities offered him an opportunity to pursue a second doctorate at Oxford University in the UK. His expertise in western philosophy and the impressive teaching career that he had already started helped him to undertake a deeper comparative research between the Indian and western philosophies. He chose the theme of "Self and Salvation in Ramānuja and Paul Tillich," which he had carried out under the guidance of John Macquarrie.⁶ Apart from having made a thorough systematic analysis and theological interpretation of Ramānuja and Paul Tillich, this research gave Father Vineeth a golden opportunity to realize the mystical depth of Vedantic thought. As he was naturally inclined to mysticism, this research gave an impetus to re-focus and revitalise his inner urge for the *antharyāmin*, the inner Spirit abiding in everyone. Further, as he puts it in the preface of the published version of this study, the whole academic endeavour gave him a chance "to make a genuine synthesis of what we are by birth and by faith so that our religious life and theological vision may converge and be more relevant to our soul and soil, cult, and culture."⁷ The critical acumen that Father Vineeth gained from his philosophical training and the creative synthesis that was facilitated by this

⁶This thesis was later published in India under the title *Self and Salvation in Hinduism and Christianity*, New Delhi: Intercultural Publications, 1997.

⁷Vineeth, *Self and Salvation in Hinduism and Christianity*, x.

theological research at Oxford, finally, led him attempt a synthesis of eastern and western thought, Hindu and Christian genius in the religious and cultural realms. As these synthetic attempts were founded in a newly awakened consciousness of Father Vineeth, which was by now prepared to imbibe the best from religious and cultural patrimonies shared by Indian Christians while, at the same time, daring to transcend their limitations, he was ready to establish a strong but relevant foundation for a meaningful and fruitful Christian living in India.

4. Teaching Philosophy and Theology: An East-West Synthesis

While completing his second doctoral research at Oxford, in 1975, Father Vineeth had taught philosophy at Fordham University, New York, during the academic year 1974-1975. His lectures, especially on Indian philosophy and religions were well received by the Fordham academic community. Yet, as his mission in India was more promising, and he always wanted to be instrumental in giving a positive integral direction to the now emerging trend of Indian-Christian thinking both in the philosophical and theological discourses all over India, Father Vineeth returned to Bangalore in 1976, and resumed his regular teaching, this time both in the philosophy and theology faculties.

The unique blend of Indian and western genius that Father Vineeth had become, which all the students who attended his lectures had enthusiastically welcomed, was the ingenious integral outlook that he started articulating in his lectures. Whether it was a metaphysics lecture for the philosophy students or his theological anthropology lessons offered to theology students, always there was a unique and creative blend that made the students more at home in participating in the philosophizing and theologizing that Father Vineeth undertook in his lectures at Dharmaram. Another special feature of Father Vineeth's lectures was his ability to put across to the students subtle theological and philosophical concepts and theories in an uncomplicated manner, which made him very popular among the students. His simplicity in attitude and life vision could be easily translated into his lectures. Thus, even average students could follow his lectures very clearly.

A telling testimony to the unique integration of East-West philosophical systems that Father Vineeth had attempted is his work *Foundations of World Vision: A Guide to Metaphysics – Eastern and Western*.⁸ Originally conceived as a textbook for his lectures on Metaphysics, this work is appreciated by many experts as well as students for its ability to capture the subtle metaphysical concepts in an original synthesis, where Father Vineeth brings the eastern thought represented in the Vedāntic Indian philosophy and the western thought represented primarily in the scholastic philosophy. The rationale that he adopts for this promising synthesis is “to bring in a new trend of philosophical training” based on the “complementary resources of a common heritage” that the Indian Christians have bequeathed. Rejecting the cultural monopolies that the exclusive subscribers to these classical traditions have maintained, Father Vineeth wanted to make a “preliminary attempt to highlight certain aspects of their complementarity.” The most important contribution that he brings into the whole metaphysical discourse is to underline the importance of doing philosophy as an inward journey, an exploration into the inner space of each individual, based on the Upaniṣadic method that has contributed into the making of his own person. So, the search for the being leads him into “his inner cave as he realizes the very same Atman as absolute Transcendence and the ultimate cause of this universe.”⁹

Openness to the reality is an important characteristic of the search Father Vineeth has initiated all through his life as a seeker. Indeed, the very opening pages of the *Foundations of World Vision* attest to this fact. Articulating the necessity of openness in approaching the study of being, he states: “Man with his limited intelligence is trying to understand unlimitedness of being... But endowed with a finite intelligence he gets only glimpses of reality. These glimpses are true and reliable, but incomplete. Hence, the right disposition to study metaphysics must be *openness* to further revelation of being, as it manifests in organic or inorganic, animate or inanimate, human or

⁸V. Francis Vineeth, *Foundations of World Vision: A Guide to Metaphysics – Eastern and Western*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1985.

⁹Vineeth, *Foundations of World Vision*, vii.

divine being. Reality reveals itself through everything."¹⁰ Realizing the limits of human intelligence, on the one hand, and the unlimitedness of being, on the other, necessitates an attitude of openness to every revelation of being. Further, from the perspective of openness, he maintains that an integration of various approaches is necessary. According to him, "no human articulation is complete in itself."¹¹ This indicates not only that no theory is complete in itself, but also that every theory needs to look for further exploration and integration of new domains of reality, as its self revelation continues in human history. Thus, deeper search into the inner recesses of reality from a metaphysical point of view leads Father Vineeth to the fundamental conviction that human beings must maintain a sincere epistemological openness which would necessitate an integral outlook in doing both philosophy and theology.

In spite of his unstinting commitment to integration in developing an Indian-Christian worldview (*darśana*), it is worthy to mention that neither the students nor the authorities have come across with any serious doctrinal problems in his teachings and writings, which was very likely in the case of a philosopher-theologian of his stature who explores an untraversed region of philosophical and theological speculation. His insistence is not to leave everything to fluidity to such an extent that no one knows the boundaries: in fact, blurred boundaries mark a tendency of escapism. As an authentic human being, he is well aware of the fact that there are certain lines to be drawn, sometimes definitive ones especially with regard to the foundations. Although his search is for 'foundations' (taken in plural sense), he does not want to create an impression as to what his personal cherished foundation is. Despite his criticism on the path traversed by Catholic philosophy and theology, when it comes to the foundation of his life, he is very definitive. He wrote in the first chapter of *Foundations of World Vision*: "Once the Absolute Being is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, then Christ and his teachings become very central to our life. It

¹⁰Vineeth, *Foundations of World Vision*, 3-4; see also 26: "A great man remains faithfully open to all manifestations of reality."

¹¹Vineeth, *Foundations of World Vision*, 5.

controls our vision and characterises our thinking. Those who believe in Christ now have a new vision, a theological vision or a Christian vision. Christian theology, properly understood, is a way of looking at everything enlightened by this new vision.”¹² This is exactly what Father Vineeth did in his lectures and in his writings. That is precisely the reason why many of his former students consider him to be a great teacher who, not even for an instance, doubted about his foundational commitment to the person of Jesus Christ. In fact, as Father Vineeth sees it, his unwavering commitment to Jesus has liberated him from many meaningless shackles of Christian as well as Indian traditions, and has instrumentalized him to look for meaningful means and methods to articulate and celebrate our commitment to the person of Jesus in the Indian cultural milieu in which we existentially find ourselves.

His conviction of the needed integration of Christian faith and Indian genius, as it is called forth by the incarnation of the Christian faith in the Indian soil, initiated a search for a proper Indian vision, which would enable him to effectively bring the person of Jesus to the people of India. His theological vision is very clear: “Christ, being the divine Word in whom and through whom humanity and the whole universe have been conceived, is the experienced synthesis of all, of all humanity and divinity in one. The Indian vision, though it does not speak of Christ, does stand for this cosmo-theandric synthesis to be realized in every man. The final level of this consciousness is simply bliss (*ānanda*) as it nears and unites with the Divine Self. Christ is the Word in whom the greatest synthesis of all creation has taken place.”¹³ The definitive Christic foundation of the thought that Father Vineeth had inculcated in himself, which he wanted to share with his students and the wider public made him involve in a wide range of activities of academic as well as spiritual nature, all of which, according to him, should initiate ongoing processes of transformation in every Christian.

Having integrated the best of the East and the West through his deeper analytical study and an ongoing integration, the mission that Father Vineeth undertook was taking a very clear shape. As he has put

¹²Vineeth, *Foundations of World Vision*, 7.

¹³Vineeth, *Foundations of World Vision*, 57.

it in the *Foundations of World Vision*, "our mission is to realize this divine within our consciousness and to testify to it and not simply teach something about the *atman* or consciousness."¹⁴ So, his teaching mission, that lasted almost four decades, was to share the experiential content from his inner consciousness. He believed that "sanctity is never the academic knowledge of truth but the actual realization of truth in one's own life."¹⁵ As one cannot share with others what one does not possess in oneself (*nemo dat quod nonhabet*), Father Vineeth's full time teaching and research were coupled with his constant search to realize the Divine Consciousness within himself. True to his inner call, he made it a point that his erudition was integral to his spiritual quest. His commitments as an academician did not come in the way of his ardent commitment to experience the person of Christ in silence and interiority. I can attest to it from my own personal experiences (though sporadic were my encounters, during my seminary days between 1985 and 1989) that Father Vineeth could be found in the late hours of the day and, sometimes, early mornings in front of the Tabernacle. He used to spend hours in Eucharistic adoration and deeper contemplation in a small chapel located in one of the living blocks in which I used to live as a student. Despite the long hours spent in research and teaching, his insistence for spiritual realization, which was always his priority, was not sacrificed for any mundane achievements. He knew that his inner yearning was to be with the Lord; he knew that his personal experience with the Lord will give him the orientation and focus in being and becoming what was in the Divine plan for him. Thus, charged with the Divine spark, captured in those long hours that he spent with the Lord, resting in Him, Father Vineeth brought to his lectures and writings a divine aura that made his person and teachings really a unique blend of human and divine consciousnesses.

¹⁴Vineeth, *Foundations of World Vision*, 19.

¹⁵Vineeth, *Foundations of World Vision*, 57.

5. Involvement in Inculturation: Quest for Rootedness and Relevance

The inspirational teaching of philosophy and theology at Dharmaram and many other centres of higher learning across India and abroad¹⁶ carried out by Father Vineeth from 1965 was simultaneously marked by his creative involvement in the inculturation movement that was given an impetus through the breakthrough in the Vatican Council II. After the Council was concluded, slowly the Indian Church in general also received a wake up call to make strides in making the Church in India really Indian in worldview as well as in liturgical and cultural expressions, which were heretofore largely carrying on the vestiges of the western categories and thought frames. The positive direction and encouragement stemming from the Council's spirit had to be transformed into everyday living as far as the Indian Christian living is concerned.

With the deeper understanding of the Indian ethos and practices that he had acquainted himself with, along with a group of eminent colleagues at Dharmaram, and his spontaneous spiritual outlook that dared to venture into the uncustomary and unconventional domains if they are found to be worthy of facilitating genuine God experience, Father Vineeth became one of the pioneers in the attempts of inculturation in the whole of India. One of the most important and unique contributions that he had made was to provide leadership (along with his professor A. Mathias Mundadan and many other collaborators) in the formation of a centre for liturgical inculturation in Dharmaram College. The first attempt was to design and conduct a prayer session along the line of Indian style meditation, which was also accompanied by the chanting of Sanskrit *bhajans*. Apart from some para-liturgical services they had conducted, the centre became important, later, in taking up the challenging task of formulating an Indian Christian form of Eucharistic Liturgy. After having studied various Hindu practices of worship in different places and personally

¹⁶Apart from his teaching career in Fordham University, New York, Father Vineeth taught theology for one semester at Tuebingen University, Germany, in 1992. His insightful lectures on "The Theology of Inculturation" were well appreciated by the academic community of Tuebingen.

imbibing the spirit of those practices in and through meditations, Father Vineeth and his companions developed a complete Eucharistic Liturgy, based upon the then used official version of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana. Consciously retaining the central part of the Eucharist in the form of the Anaphora of Addai and Mari, they integrated a lot of meaningful Hindu ritualistic practices to make the celebration of Eucharist very much experiential and relevant to the Indian context and psyche. It was to the credit of this team of Dharmaram, which was headed by Father Vineeth, and the persuasive good will of the then ecclesiastical and CMI authorities, that, finally, this Indian Mass was twice celebrated during the All India National Seminar on May 23, 1969. As many bishops and delegates from all over India participated in this celebration, who were genuinely appreciative of the whole Eucharistic celebration, it gave a unprecedented recognition to this initial but bold move for taking the Indian Church to a new direction.

Although later on official interventions had halted this innovative movement and Dharmaram has almost given up its pioneering leadership in the much appreciated attempts of inculturating the Church life, the successful initial attempts, especially the Indian liturgy that Father Vineeth and his companions and students had developed must be appreciated and recognized. Had it not been for this initial move, probably, the later thrusts made by some mission dioceses and the National Centre (NBCLC) in Bangalore would have taken some other direction. It is true that the Indian Church as a whole has taken almost a reversal attitude, especially with regard to liturgical renewal and inculturation; yet, the spirit of openness and the quest to design a more meaningful liturgical celebration that were at the back of these earnest attempts must be recognized and resuscitated. What we lack now is the foresight and farsightedness among the hierarchy and the innovative and daring attitude among the theologians, both of which need to be firmly rooted in the sound and deep God experience with its unwavering centrality in Jesus Christ.

In his 2004 book, titled *the Asian Vision of God*, Father Vineeth, in no unmistakable terms, declare that he is deeply interested in

inculturation and dialogue.¹⁷ For him, it was not merely an academic endeavour, but the result of an earnest search to give expression to his own faith commitment to Jesus in forms and practices that would truly reflect the religious sensitivity and cultural ethos which are, indeed, closer to the Indian heart.

The leadership and initiative of Father Vineeth seen in the area of liturgical inculturation, contrary to the unfounded criticism of a bunch of detractors, were not limited to sheer externalities. His Christian experience was more at home in the Indian worship patterns, as they were more akin to give vital expression to the inner depth that he had encountered in the person of Jesus Christ. His own personal conviction that knowledge must be transformative, that each one should become what he or she knows, was fundamentally a Christian as well as Indian emphasis. While the ancient Christian dictum insisted that “every Christian is another Christ,” the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* maintained that “he who knows the Supreme Brahman becomes Brahman himself” (III.2.9). Hence, he wrote: “Knowledge and existence should embrace each other. In human beings absolute identity of these will never take place. However, it should always be a process of becoming more and more intensely one.”¹⁸ Moreover, his quest for inculturation was also backed up by a sound Christian theology, with its sufficient grounding in Indian thinking. So, he was not looking for sheer external adaptations, but was more insistent upon deriving the inner spirit of incessant quest for the Ineffable which cannot be finally and completely grasped through any human method, whether religious or scientific. This deeper quest enshrined in the Indian ethos and worship patterns, Father Vineeth wished, would give a better edge to the Indian Christians to make their faith experience more at home and effectively articulate, without in any way diverting or distorting the Christian uniqueness.

In fact, Father Vineeth was convinced that an authentic religion that Christianity is cannot but support attempts of genuine members to

¹⁷V. F. Vineeth, *The Asian Vision of God*, Bangalore: Vidyavanam Publications, 2004, 9.

¹⁸Vineeth, *The Asian Vision of God*, 15-16.

make Christian practices in tune with the ethos of the community in which it gets rooted. According to him, a "religion that curtails the freedom of thinking and nips off the philosophical growth of the world is no authentic religion at all."¹⁹ So, although the Church is in need of a definitive direction with regard to the practice of Christian faith, undue emphasis on external ritual practices, especially by basing on some of the traditions that are not at all relevant to the people and their faith experience, especially on the pretext of preserving the patrimony, should be eliminated;²⁰ on the contrary, identifying the fact that the personal faith encounter of a Christian in the person of Jesus Christ as the most central Christian patrimony and facilitating its continued experience in the lives of all Christians through more personalised forms of prayer and worship would make the Indian ecclesial life more vibrant and meaningful.

As he could delve deep into the inner core of Indian spirituality, through his mastery in Hindu scriptures and cultural forms, his initiative of inculturation was more refined and oriented. All his initiatives had a very clear orientation as to effect a deeper level of Christ experience among the Christian faithful in India. As he was already rooted in firm Christic experience, it was spontaneous for him to make a deeper theological synthesis of various faith dimensions with the cultural and ritualistic practices. He was very clear about the course of action: "In the process of inculturation what we are really concerned about is not to swallow any thinking from any other sources, but to absorb into us the basic pattern which is not incompatible with our Christian faith."²¹ Furthermore, the attempts of inculturation and dialogue, both of which were the existential passions of Father Vineeth, were fundamentally originating from his foundational experience in

¹⁹Vineeth, *The Asian Vision of God*, 44.

²⁰As most of the recent liturgical renewal practices concentrate more on the externalities, Father Vineeth is categorical with regard to the importance of interiority and faith experience: "... mere imitation and repetition of what has been handed down is not the best way of preserving the deposit of faith. Preserving the faith in prayer is best done by imbibing the spirit of that prayer and integrating it into oneself." *Call to Integration*, 104.

²¹Vineeth, *The Asian Vision of God*, 28-29.

Jesus Christ, which was beyond any doubt or challenge. In calling his theologizing attempts in the context of inculturation and dialogue as his own story of life, Father Vineeth makes his unwavering faith statement as follows:

From the point of view of faith, Jesus is seen as all in all. He is not merely a historical person who gave us a religion. Christian faith does say that Jesus is genuinely historical. Historiography will say that Buddha is historical, Nabi is historical. Hence, historicity of Christ alone is not the decisive factor in Christian faith. It has other dimensions as well: where Christ comes from, how he operates, and where does he lead us to... Now it is through the eye of Christ, which is the Spirit of Christ abiding in me, I look at other religions. As Christ is the Word who became flesh, through whom everything was conceived and created, through my eye of Christian faith, I see the touch of Christ in all creation and the Spirit of Christ operating everywhere... Christ experience as the eternal Word of the Father, who lived on earth, died for us, breathed his spirit into us is certainly part and parcel of the content of the Christian faith. If such an experience is deprived of from the content of Christianity, there is nothing specifically Christian in it. There is nothing also to share with other religions.²²

So firm and clear is his faith commitment ensuing from his personal realization; he believes that his attempts to encounter other religions, involving in dialogue with openness, and trying to imbibe the best from their cultural and noble religious practices would only enhance attempts of a Christian community to deepen its Christ experience.

Another distinctly pioneering involvement of Father Vineeth is seen along the line of developing a new style of Indian Christian meditation. His personal preference for prayer and contemplation had attuned him not only to experience the Ineffable in the form of Jesus in his own heart, but to make it more vibrant and effective through the use of the methods of prayer emerging from the cultural ethos and religious practices of the land. His 'Indian Meditations' are well appreciated by

²²Vineeth, *The Asian Vision of God*, 189-191.

many so much so that the organisers usually insist on having, at least, a meditation session along with the lectures that Father Vineeth offers, be it in the Ashram or outside. His unique blending of the Christic centrality and the Indian style of meditative prayerfulness, coupled with rhythmic chants, that many a time he himself would compose, presents before us a seasoned Indian Christian master of meditation.²³

In spite of having pioneered the inculturation movement in and through the avenues of Dharmaram for almost four decades, the overall feeling is that of discontentment. Not only did the initial enthusiasm from among the authorities and theologians fade away, but contrary to the expectations, the Church seems to be almost backtracking on any initiative for the renewal of Christian life and practice in the Indian context. One of the lame excuses that many detractors come up with is the so-called radical argument that liturgical inculturation must always begin with a more fundamental theological synthesis and doctrinal clarity. However, many a time, they conveniently forget the historical fact that no local Church or Rite of the Catholic Church had come up with a distinct and dogmatically fool-proof theological position, which then led to the formation of a liturgical celebration. As the community of believers came together for worship, the first thing to happen was the spontaneous facilitation of celebrating their communion in Jesus Christ at the table of the Word and at the table of the Bread, and only later did theological articulations were given shape and their dogmatic authenticity was debated and established. Indian Church is in need of being led by the Spirit and the Spirit-filled leaders, instead of being led by those who do not let the Spirit operate among the faithful.

Further, Father Vineeth laments that the Indian Church needs to liberate itself from the cultural shackles of the West. He writes: "The Church in India still looks to the West as if the ideal Christianity is in

²³Some of these meditations are available in his book, *Yoga of Spirituality: Christian Initiation into Indian Spiritual Traditions*, Bangalore: Vidyavanam Publications, 1995. It has about 15 meditations and related exercises. Moreover, a few meditations were also made available in cassette and CD forms. Some of them, "Śabdham and Jyoti" and "Guru and Bhakti," are excellent in leading a sincere seeker (*sādhaka*) to God experience with subtle elegance and persuasiveness.

the West. In a country that floods with mystical and devotional literature it still uses the prayers and liturgical texts of the western Church. Though the eastern Church is an exception to this sense of fidelity to their own identity and tradition, it is often so uncompromising that they become the preservers of certain Middle East traditions, no matter where they are now actually living. Quite contrary to the genuine nature of the Oriental Church, today it seems that change to the local culture is more difficult in the Oriental Church than in the Latin Church."²⁴ Thus, whether it is the church of the East²⁵ or West, the slavish allegiance to the traditions bequeathed from alien cultural milieus, which were originally forced upon the Indian Christians through hook and crook coupled with political might than the genuine need originating in faith experience and expression, it shall be the quest of the Indian Church, of all the three Rites of the Catholic Communion and of all other Christian denominations, to develop not only an Indian face but also an Indian being (*sat*) to the Church in India, which I believe, along with Father Vineeth, is the existential need of Church, if it were to be really rooted in the cultural and religious psyche of the people and land.

6. Interpreting Religious Life: "In Search of Meaning"²⁶

Joining the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) congregation in 1950 marked the first step in a long search for integration and authenticity in

²⁴Vineeth Vadakethala, "Identity and Universality in Religion: The Quest for Personal Identity in the Religious Tradition and the Universal Mission of Jesus," *Third Millennium* 10, 1 (2007), 46-47.

²⁵Father Vineeth laments: "The various Oriental Churches in which the freedom of self-expression was much more alive in ancient times have also at times fallen under the spell of this power craze. When the Church is divested of its real spirit which alone gives it the radical power of transcendence over itself, it is just like any other power in this world and is really comparable with the political or cultural power struggles operating in colonial empires and their conquered nations." Vadakethala, "Identity and Universality in Religion," 59-60.

²⁶This subtitle is taken from the title of the first part of Father Vineeth's book titled, *Call to Integration: New Perspectives in the Theology of Religious Life*, Trichur: Jyothi Book Centre, 1979. This book was, subsequently, published from Bangalore by ATC (1980) and from New York by Crossroad (1981).

the life of Father Vineeth through the portals of religious life according to the Catholic tradition. While being committed to the call he had received from the Lord and positively imbibing the traditions of the Indian Carmelites, he prepared himself to make the definitive commitment of his life to Jesus the Lord in an attempt to unravel and relish His "all-enfolding love." Christian religious life, for Father Vineeth, is an ongoing process that leads a person into greater integrity in his or her commitment to the person of Jesus, which, in turn, leads to authentic Christian existence. Although he does not limit authenticity exclusively to committed religious, he is of the opinion that this special commitment and its ensuing responsibilities, if fulfilled in the right spirit, could lead any one to authenticity.

Having lived his religious life with unwavering dedication for a period of three decades, in 1979, Father Vineeth crystallized his reflection on religious life in the form of *Call to Integration: New Perspectives in the Theology of Religious Life*. This 143 pages long monograph draws an integral picture of Catholic religious life, by bringing together pertinent insights of philosophers and theologians along with the proven Gospel values that enshrine the total self-giving commitment inspired by the love of Jesus. Insisting that it is neither a philosophical treatise providing problem resolution nor a psychological handbook for quick-fix solutions that have a lot of market value among the present generation religious, in this work, Father Vineeth intends to offer a definitive plan of action for all Christian religious to establish integrity and authenticity by setting up his or her innermost centre in the intense union with God.

As religious life is primarily a personal call, received in the context of a Christian community, it should not be disgraced by attuning oneself to any institutional framework: it has to vibrantly remain primarily as a person to person relation, between the called person and the person of Jesus. It is fundamentally a call to be transformed in the Spirit, a transformation that has to be vibrated and shared among the other members of the human society in view of transforming the whole universe by the Spirit. A religious is fundamentally a catalyst of integration in the modern world of

fragmentation and individuation. The presence of religious within the heart of the Catholic Church is said to facilitate “rediscovering the original meaning of religious life, to save it from the present effects of institutionalism, and to rearticulate it to the people of our time.”²⁷

Call to Integration offers an excellent analysis of the theological foundations of the commitment taken up by a religious person along with the vows and the communitarian life, the latter two as facilitators of one’s continued unconditional surrendering to the Word in his or her being. Father Vineeth himself beautifully summarises his detailed theological reflections on the vows as follows:

The religious surrenders to the Word his very being, his flesh, his humanity, what he most intimately is. This unconditional offering of his flesh to the Word is what we understand as chastity. His flesh, however, is situated in the world; man finds himself as a being in the world. His offering of the self is complete only when he offers with it the world which forms his larger self, the world in which he finds himself. This surrendering of the world, of all that he has together with all that he is, is the sum and substance of the vow of poverty. When he has surrendered his being as well as his having, his flesh as well as the world of his flesh, his main concern is to listen to the Word of God and to realize it meticulously in his being and in his having, in all that he is and in all that he has. This concern for realizing the Word in all his life, in his being as well as his having, is the essence of his obedience.²⁸

The self-oblation that each religious performs on a daily basis in view of attaining the ultimate integration, according to Father Vineeth, would be meaningful and fruitful only if it is founded and centred on the Word of God. Hence, along with the vows, he considers that a deeper prayer life and a communitarian living are inherently part of Christian religious life.

Regarding prayer, Father Vineeth emphasises that it must primarily establish a personal relationship with the centre of one’s

²⁷Vineeth, *Call to Integration*, 19.

²⁸Vineeth, *Call to Integration*, 29.

being, i.e., Jesus Christ. Although certain patterns of prescribed prayers may be required for the communitarian spiritual exercises, he is of the opinion that undue emphasis on tradition, rubrics, and ritualism would only undermine genuine spirit of prayer and make it a shallow show of ritual performance. In fact, his emphasis of attaining a higher level of Christ consciousness among the religious, facilitated through continued prayer and meditation, can be realized only by spontaneously giving expression to more personalised and vibrant prayer forms. As "rituals are the external expressions of internal dispositions and attitudes," "we need a continuing revision and renewal of the forms of worship and prayers in every religious community."²⁹ Indeed, it is the prayer understood as meditation, concentration, and self-surrender practised by every individual that ultimately facilitates the fine-tuning of everyone to the Divine, that power Source from which we could channelize the power needed for dwelling in the Spirit.³⁰ Indeed, it is transformative as well as liberative. It lets the individuals to be themselves by giving the inner courage to be; a community of religious who have earned the courage to be at their personal level would finally be constituted as powerful and effective witnesses of the Word to the rest of the humanity.

The insistence on the importance of prayer and contemplation as an essential dimension of religious life does not let Father Vineeth to be blind to the demands of apostolate in the life of committed religious. In fact, he considers all apostolates to be means of extending one's consciousness, charged with the Divine consciousness, to the rest of the humanity and creation. It has to be a spontaneous outflow of the enlightened and enhanced consciousness, whether it is at the level of uplifting the poor or fighting against injustices prevailing in the society. The outlook of integration that Father Vineeth insists as the goal of every religious, which can be attained only through the re-centring of each religious, should not curtail us from activism that is called forth in various social and cultural settings. In his *Prayer and Power* he holds

²⁹Vineeth, *Call to Integration*, 104.

³⁰V. F. Vineeth, *Prayer and Power*, 2nd revised edition, Bangalore: Vidyavanam Publications, 2005, 39-40, 48-49.

that the activist is there in each one of us completing the integrating process. What he advocates is the enhancing collaboration from the contemplative and the activist within the domains of religious life, and not mutual exclusion:

... the contemplative turns to the activist and the activist turns to the contemplative. They are both in each one of us but in different degrees of realization. Hence, some are prone to be more contemplative and their realms of action restricted to research and selfless actions in everyday life. But some others are more active, and so with the contemplative ardour they acquire through prayer, they enter into the arena of more demanding action, involving even physical confrontation. In this context the contemplative should support the activist and the activist should feel at home with the contemplative. Both are trying to re-centre the universe in its divine centre.³¹

Although individuals may differ in the degree of their contemplative and active dimensions, according to Father Vineeth, every religious is called to integrate these two vital dimensions of Christian existence in his or her life.

A life of total surrender that every Christian religious is called to live is epitomized in blessed virgin Mary, the mother of all Christians. For, in her, Father Vineeth sees the model of a perfect Christian *bhakta*, as one who has totally surrendered oneself in loving devotion. According to him, in Mary, we find all the nine features of a perfect *bhakta* as enunciated in the *Bhagavatam* (such as *śravaṇam*, *mananam*, *vandanam*, *kīrtanam*, *smaraṇam*, *sevanam*, *dāsyam*, *arpaṇam*, and *ātmanivedanam*). We come across with it in a beautiful meditative reading of the first chapter of the gospel of Luke that Father Vineeth makes.³² The continued surrender to the Lord's will that characterises Mary's life, from annunciation to the death and burial of her only son Jesus, accompanied with the contemplative response to every divine intervention and a perfect designing of her daily life lived in the given setting could be taken as the model for a religious of any time and any

³¹Vineeth, *Prayer and Power*, 59-60.

³²Vineeth, *Prayer and Power* (2nd edition), 126-139.

place. Hence, great is the admiration that Father Vineeth has to the person of Mother Mary.

As far as a Christian religious is concerned, the attainment of integration shall not only be restricted to the integration that a person attains in himself or herself; in order to be complete, it must be extended to the entire cosmos. The Christian religious, if truly an integrated one, is called upon to be a *jīvanmukta*, a liberated one who continues to engage in the liberation and integration of the rest of the world.

7. "My Lord and My God": Aspirations of a True Son of St. Thomas

The most sublime faith affirmation in the post-resurrection community of Jesus' disciples is found in the words of St. Thomas the Apostle, "My Lord and my God!" (Jn. 20:28). In spite of the doubting character attributed to St. Thomas by some commentators, a closer look at the context indicates that Thomas' insistence was welling up from an ordinary human being who lived with Jesus for quite some time and in whom he had so much of confidence and commitment. However, his personal experience, at a very deeper level, facilitated by Jesus himself, paved the way not only for shedding his stubbornness but also for a spontaneous total surrender to the Lord and God. The way of Thomas, as it could be gathered from this foundational experience in Jesus, offers a paradigm for the Indian Church, the foundation of which was sealed in his blood.

This is the experiential method that is the pivotal point in many a discourse of Father Vineeth. Indeed, it is the thrust of his teaching as a venerable *Guru* that he has imparted to all those who have sought his assistance in the growth in religiosity and a steady life in 'Jesus Consciousness'. If we go through the writings of Father Vineeth, we come across with repeated references to the centrality of Jesus experience in being and becoming a Christian. We read in one of his inspiring mystical poetic compositions:

You are the adorable Lord,
The One without beginning and end
Life principle of my soul

Strength, salvation, and eternal bliss
You alone are the peace and hope
You alone... You alone...³³

True to the nature of Christian life that is founded on the paradigm of Apostle Thomas, the Indian Church, in general, and the Syro-Malabar Church, in particular, have the bounden duty to design their ecclesial life in such a way that personal encounter with Jesus Christ would be the cornerstone of all endeavours, whether it is daily Christian living of an ordinary faithful, the climactic liturgical celebration of the Eucharist presided over by the priest, or the governance of the Christian community along the hierarchical structure. Personal encounter with Christ and that alone shall be the criterion in choosing the right act and the right person as far as any ecclesial event is concerned.

The life of Father Vineeth attests to the fact that he is a true son of Apostle Thomas inasmuch as he has been earnestly striving for this centrality in Jesus experience; his sole aim is to seek and live in the continued encounter with Jesus. In the preceding discussion, I have already described how he was preparing himself for the personal encounter with Jesus, and how he continues to remain rooted in that personal relationship with Him. His yearning is very down to earth:

Give me your power
To remain the same
In fame and blame,
To feel your loving touch
Which makes me steady and strong.³⁴

The quest for mystical union, which is said to be the burning desire of a sincere seeker is centred on the person of Jesus. Having had partaken in that unique experience for once, at least, the seeker cannot be snatched away from it: he would remain grounded in that, whatever might ensue in the ever unfolding life. Father Vineeth has beautifully captured his inner status in a couplet as follows:

³³Vineeth, *Enne Orukku Nee*, 27 (English translation by Benny Nalkara).

³⁴Vineeth, *Prayer and Power*, 71.

United in Him your life entire,
To Him subdued all your desire
Arm in arm, you march with her
To the Gates of Heaven that all aspire.³⁵

Contact with Jesus, the divine source, is not merely a temporary soothing experience, which everyone would wish to relish, as it is usually done in ordinary human encounters. Centrality in Jesus brought about by a genuine personal encounter necessitates a re-centring of one's own consciousness and the life of one's community. This is what we find in the life of Apostle Thomas and his later mission in India. Moreover, re-centring of the life of a Christian when he ultimately encounters Jesus can really shake up many a comfort zone in one's life; it may not only challenge one's own accepted rationally justified theories, social frameworks, and spiritual comforts but would basically challenge and enlighten the inner core of the person. Once the accepted foundations are challenged and shaken by the foundational experience ensuing from a Jesus encounter, it becomes necessary for the seeker to confront some situations and structures that establish and perpetuate injustice, sometimes, even in the name of Jesus and his Church.

We find such a courageous move on the part of Father Vineeth in one of his books, *Justice and Reconciliation*.³⁶ As he was sadly aware of the injustice done to the Syro-Malabar Church by the Latin hierarchy over a long period by suppressing the right for freedom and self-rule of the former, that too on the pretext of serving the good of the Church, and as all the ecclesial structures favouring its continuance, Father Vineeth squarely confronted the authorities as well as theologians with his penetrating analysis of the sad plight. His sharp criticism of the injustice perpetuated in the Indian ecclesial circles, I believe, welled up from his inner consciousness enflamed by Jesus experience that

³⁵Vineeth, *Prayer and Power*, 142.

³⁶Originally presented in the Indian Theological Association's annual meeting held in Bombay during 22-24 October 1982, this paper was published as a monograph. See V. F. Vineeth, *Justice and Reconciliation: The Sad but Living Story of a Church in Fetters*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1983.

demands justice and freedom for all. It is very clear that Father Vineeth had no personal quest for temporal powers and his arguments were not at all designed along that line. However, the continued denial of justice to the Syro-Malabar Church through hook and crook, always kept sugar-coated in the jurisdictional language, especially in the name of 'unity of the church' argument, could not convince him of the sincerity among the ecclesiastical authorities, and, hence, he unmasked the injustice in no uncertain terms as follows:

... It seems to me that the Latin jurisdiction in India, as it operates today, is one of the most inhuman and unchristian power-structures that exists in our world. It is inhuman, because it denies human dignity and equality to the Orientals. They are denied the right to exist and express themselves freely. It is unchristian because it is against the Law of Christ, which is love, to keep people suppressed by the tyranny of law, for the benefit of another group. After the Vatican II, the present structure is also illegal, in the sense that the structures are retained in flagrant violation of the directives of the Decrees.³⁷

Although his sincere plea was not completely heeded by the ecclesiastical authorities, it did make an impact in letting things move in the right direction. At least the consciousness of many Latins and Orientals was enlightened with regard to the injustices prevailing in the Indian Church. It is worthy to note that the classical analysis coupled with philosophical acumen and theological depth that Father Vineeth has carried out in this monograph is still considered to be substantially true and groundbreaking in intent. As we go through the pages of this work, we could feel the genuine concern of a true son of the Church and his sincere desire to see that the Church, the champion of the cause of the justice, succeeds in setting the things in order first within itself, so that she could claim that she is the true representative of Jesus and his legacy. Apostle Thomas proclaimed his faith in Jesus and confirmed it in and through his life dedicated to the Word, even to the extent of shedding his own blood for Jesus. Father Vineeth, imbibing the true

³⁷Vineeth, *Justice and Reconciliation*, 42. The document referred to in the quote is "Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches, §6.

spirit of a Christian disciple, treading the path of faith opened up by St. Thomas, goes deeper into his faith experience and fights for the true freedom of the community that the Apostle had founded within the larger community of Christian disciples!

It is so puzzling that a Church of Apostolic origin, existing almost for twenty centuries in India, constituted exclusively of the natives and more Indian in approach and practices, although the vestiges of Middle Eastern and Latin traditions still pose a problematic to it, has to follow the dictates of another church for its life and mission. While the missionary endeavours of the Latin Church thrive without any external hindrance, especially with a large number of intake of missionaries from the Syro-Malabar Church, the authorities need to be more conscientious with regard to the continuation of colonial policies perpetuated in the name of the unity of the faithful. In fact, multiple jurisdiction is a fact within the Kerala territories, where the Syro-Malabar Church was already an active and recognized Christian community as the Latin Church arrived in the sixteenth century; indeed, even at present, the Syro-Malabar Church has its faithful and Hierarchy spread all over Kerala and in spite of that the Latin dioceses are established in many places, even though their numeric quantity is comparatively far lesser than what is stated to be the case in many cities elsewhere in India. Thus, when it comes to the territories outside Kerala, which are already claimed to be under the jurisdiction of the Latin Church, its authorities vehemently oppose multiple jurisdiction and fight tooth and nail to keep away those pastors of the Syro-Malabar Church from attending to the spiritual needs of the faithful with freedom and justice. It is strange that a native Church continues to be suppressed by other natives just because the former comes from a different spiritual and liturgical tradition.

As the puzzle remains unresolved even in the twenty-first century,³⁸ let the original 'way of Thomas' rooted in the personal

³⁸Father Vineeth is very much aware of the fact that not much has been achieved along the line of justice to the Syro-Malabar Church. He wrote in 2004, 22 years after the presenting his penetrating analysis and critique on the denial of freedom and self-rule to the Syro-Malabar Church: "The sad reality in the East is the dominant

encounter with the Lord and the ensuing faith proclamation give firm foundation for the faith life of the people; the spontaneous mission mandate received from the Lord shall be carried to the corners of the world despite the opposition from any power. As the personal faith experience gets deepened, let every member of the Syro-Malabar Church be equipped to come to the proclamation, "My Lord and my God!" No one, then, will be able to challenge or block the celebration of faith and proclamation of the Word carried out by the sons of Apostle Thomas, especially any where in the Indian soil.

8. Dharmaram to Vidyavanam: "Knowing Is Becoming"

As a renowned scholar of western as well as Indian philosophy and as a pioneer in Indian-Christian theology and inculturation, Father Vineeth had made a name for himself in the academic and Christian religious circles. His four decade long teaching at Dharmaram College and many other centres of philosophical and theological learning made him a stalwart in seminary training. His natural aptitude to be wholeheartedly committed in the task he takes up made Father Vineeth invest the best of his endowments for the philosophical and theological training and character formation of many young seminarians who aspired to become priests. His simplicity in personal contacts and the clarity of thought made him dear to so many of them, which, in turn, gave him the opportunities to impart his vision and outlook to them in direct and indirect ways – both inside and outside of the lecture halls.

While "philosophical training [of seminarians] must ... provide a world vision which would help to live one's faith and religion,"³⁹ theological training shall make available the tools to deepen one's faith experience with the help of intellectual tools at their disposal. The training into the Upaniṣadic method of learning, which was prevalent in the Indian *gurukula* system, attracted him so much that he wanted

Church, privileged with the ecclesiastical power, is still the colonial Church of the West, whereas the Eastern Catholic Church, especially in India, is neglected and her rights of equality are trodden under the foot by the powerful Western Church." Vineeth, *The Asian Vision of God*, 9.

³⁹Vineeth, *Foundations of World Vision*, viii.

such a personalised instruction to become part of the seminary programme so that personal transformation could be effected along the model of Jesus Christ. Indeed, if done, he believed, those who complete their studies would go out into the world as 'other Christs'.

It was, therefore, one of his convictions that the seminary where future priests are trained must not end up merely in imparting knowledge, just as it is usually done in other academic institutions. Having spent most of his life within the seminary premises, till he voluntarily retired, he was acutely aware of the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the seminary programme. He wrote in *The Asian Vision of God*:

The Christian resonance to the Upaniṣadic approach can be appallingly different if Christ is looked upon just as an object of our study and research. Long years of seminary formation make Christ too much an object of study, a theme of research, a matter of discussion. As far as academics are concerned, hardly any attempt is made to make a study realizational. An intellectual genius may write a PhD thesis on the divinity of Christ, and secure a creditable degree from a Catholic university. But it is not necessary that Christ lives in his/her heart. Holiness demands a becoming process, and in the Christian sense, a becoming of another Christ. If we look with this eye into the Upaniṣadic search for divine wisdom, it will make greater sense to us and pave a path of spiritual realization.⁴⁰

As a result of the questionable method followed in the seminaries, Father Vineeth laments that "the Indian ideal of knowing by becoming is practically forgotten in these places of formation."⁴¹ Hence, the insistence on the becoming process, the inner dynamic of spiritual realization, is taken to be the core of training a Catholic priest. In fact, the becoming that is aimed at is nothing but realizing one's divine centre in Jesus, making Him the ultimate subject, the Supreme Self within one's own individual self.

⁴⁰*The Asian Vision of God*, 27-28.

⁴¹Vadakethala, "Identity and Universality in Religion," 55.

The aspirant of Christian realizational knowledge ... understands Jesus by realizing him in his life. The spirit of Christ, once awakened, becomes the flood of light, the source of power in him. He marvels at the way it functions in and through him, the way it carries him over to its own thinking and doing. His life now becomes a continuous giving in, a continuous transformation, and a continuous silent admiration.⁴²

The effectiveness of any priestly training, therefore, according to him, needs to be tested in terms of having succeeded in developing the consciousness of Jesus Christ in an aspirant for priesthood.

As the progress made along this line was at the snail's pace, and as his inner desire to personally involve in this becoming process without any institutional commitments brought back Father Vineeth's original desire to live in an *ashram*, where he could dedicate more time for prayer and contemplation along with serious personal study of spiritual sources of various traditions. Of course, at that time, he was a full time professor of philosophy at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram and was involved in many other national and international programmes: it was the peak of his academic career. The inner ardour to start living in an *ashram* was so intense that finally he decided to part from his regular academic endeavours. Discerning that this is a genuine call, his religious superiors not only gave him the needed permissions, but also supported him with the required initial personnel, material, and monetary support. Thus, slowly his longstanding desire for living in an *ashram* was blossoming.

Moving from Dharmaram to Vidyavanam could be seen as his own personal realization of "knowing is becoming." The long years of study and teaching had made him wiser, not only philosophically and theologically, but also in personal realization. His deeper learning was destined not to end up in academic contributions, but to branch out to higher realms of learning, i.e., the very transformation of himself into the ever abiding Atman, the Ineffable. As he became more and more knowledgeable about the spiritual realities, his quest for the Divine was making insistent demands on his own self to move out of the mere

⁴²Vineeth, *Yoga of Spirituality*, 206.

academic world to a world that would ensure an ongoing transformation into the person of Jesus Christ, which was his central focus, be it in the academics or administration, cultural training or inculturation.

Switching from a very active academic life to a life of solitude and simplicity, prayer and contemplation, in fact, called for a paradigm shift in the life of Father Vineeth. Not only did he leave the comforts that Dharmaram and Bangalore City could offer, but also slowly moved away from the days packed with planned programmes to a life of an 'ashram rhythm', where *ekāntata*, *ekāgrata*, and *tapasya* became the second name for daily life. Indeed, there were a lot of activities: not imposed from external necessities, but called forth by the inner spirit.

The establishment of Vidyavanam Ashram was a challenging task for Father Vineeth, especially from the perspective of a sheer academician and an *Āchārya* getting involved in the thoroughly mundane affairs of construction of cottages and management of daily affairs, although he was always blessed with many willing and efficient hands to collaborate in the cause of the Ashram. It must be stated that the unwavering attention with which he carried out everything related to the Ashram witnessed to the practical acumen that he was endowed with.

As Vidyavanam Ashram became a reality, it was the realization of a long-cherished dream, which he first shared with Father Thomas Aykara, his companion and confidant during the doctoral studies at Oxford. Although it took almost twenty five years for the realization of this dream, the very fact that he got it done, that too with many unique features, indicates the inner thrust of this *ashram* ideal that he was gripped with.

In Divine Providence, we see the steady growth of Vidyavanam Ashram. From a hillock with hardly any greenery, over a period of twelve years, Vidyavanam campus has grown into a real *vanam* (forest) with a variety of trees and vegetation. The generous contributions of many persons and institutions have made the required moderate structures possible. As the Ashram is intent on providing simple but conducive ambience for prayer and contemplation, Father Vineeth has

made it a point that all the structures shall remain simple both in style and comforts. Yet, they are sufficient for any seeker who would wish to spend a few days in recollective prayer or *tapas dhyana* (the forty days' retreat offered thrice in a year).

The focus of the whole Ashram campus is the unique chapel, with a lot of impressive artworks⁴³ depicting the spirit of Christian *sādhana* and the resulting transformation. Vidyavanam Chapel, constructed in the model of a termitary and a *gharbha-grha* integrated into one, invites every seeker to enter there and be part of this transformative process, which is focused on the person of Jesus Christ. Both the central glass panel depicting the Tree of Eternity with *ūrdhva-mūlam*⁴⁴ that grows into the world – with the unique blend of banyan and neem trees symbolizing the divine and human blended into one – and the liturgical cycle of the Syro-Malabar Church immortalized on the beautiful windowpanes provide the necessary orientation and invitation to participate in the becoming process centred around the person of Jesus depicted in the Gospels and enlivened in spirit of the liturgical seasons. The lessons in Christian spiritual traditions, Indian *sādhana*s, yoga practices, *satsangh*, etc., offered at the Ashram are continued, personalised, and completed in the liturgical celebrations and meditations conducted in the House of God, all of which are primarily oriented towards enabling every participant to imbibe the divine wisdom through human assistance offered at the Ashram.

With its simplicity and natural elegance, silence and spiritual eloquence, Vidyavanam Ashram has already made an impact among those who have come to know the person of Father Vineeth and participated in various programmes. The success of the Ashram could be seen from the opportunities for transformation that the programmes offer to the participants. A committed seeker can receive an abundance

⁴³The genius of the uniquely gifted artist, Father Joy Elamkunnappuzha, has made the Vidyavanam Chapel really a great one. The creative blend of the inspirations of Father Vineeth and the innovative artistic abilities of Father Joy has made it a unique place of Indian Christian religious worship.

⁴⁴*Katha Upaniṣad*, II.3.

of graces facilitated through the Ashram which would ultimately lead everyone to personal transformation in Jesus Christ.

9. Conclusion

Father Vineeth, a person of simplicity and openness, continues his pilgrimage of life with an incessant quest for the Divine. The course that he has taken at various stages in his life has led him to the present status of a venerable *Guru* at the Vidyavanam Ashram and to many more persons who have learned from his person. In the Indian understanding, a *Guru* is distinguished from an *Upādhyāya* and an *Āchārya*. Unlike an *Upādhyāya*, an ordinary teacher, who merely passes on information to the students and an *Āchārya* who offers authoritative teaching based on a text, his learning, and moral integrity, a *Guru* founds his authority on his inner being, which emerges from his profound learning of the holy books (*veda pāndityam*), wisdom on the realities of the world (*vidvān*), and the steadfast anchoring in the Supreme Brahman (*brahmaniṣṭha*): all these come from his foundational experience (*anubhava*), which makes him original and creative. His creative utterances would, in turn, become the text for next generation. The foregoing appraisal of the life and vision of Father Vineeth indicates that he has already attained the status of a venerable *Guru*, precisely because his teaching has a sublime authority originating in his encounter with the Lord and the inner realization that he has already attained. Thus, to enshrine his personality, let me employ an expression that Father Vineeth has made to explain an authentic person: "... Such a man we call simple. He lacks duplicity. In him there is perfect synthesis of the internal and the external, of thoughts and their expressions. Such a man is loved by all, because he reflects the divine."⁴⁵

At seventy-five, Father Vineeth continues in his yearning for further realization. He believes that it is further evolving in the Divine Providence and is ready to let himself be led by the Spirit. His continuing quest for the Ineffable, at this stage, may be captured in a *mantra* that he himself has coined for a meditation, which I came to

⁴⁵Vineeth, *Foundations of World Vision*, 41.

relish when I participated in one of his meditations. It runs as follows: “*Pita, tava cit bhāvana; Sadā mama hṛt sādhana*”⁴⁶ (Father, thy will is always the way of my heart!). As he continues his earthly sojourn, his quest for attuning himself to the Lord’s mind and His plans becomes the only thrust of his life; he relishes it and is happy that he is made to be an instrument in the hands of the Lord in letting many others establish and continue in the same transformative experience rooted in the person of Jesus Christ.

⁴⁶This is the way that Father Vineeth personalises for himself the prayer of Jesus in the Gethsemane. Originally, this is part of a *bhajan* that he had composed for the *Dukkha* Day meditation at Vidyavanam Ashram. It runs as follows: “*Pita, tava cit bhāvana; Sadā mama hṛt sādhana / pāvanam paripāvanam tavamānasam / śobhitam paripūjitam marucetasse / śonitam mama jivitam balisādhanam / arpitam citahomitam tivasannite*”