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ASSEMBLEA NAZIONALE DELLA CHIESA CATTOLICA IN INDIA (BANGALORE, 20-24 SETTEMBRE 2000)

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- OMELIA DEL CARD. JOZEF TOMKO
- INDIRIZZO DI SALUTO DEL CARD. JOZEF TOMKO

Dal 20 al 24 settembre 2000 si svolge a Bangalore (India) l'Assemblea Nazionale della Conferenza Episcopale dell'India, sul tema: "*Yesu Kristi Jayanti: Towards a new Society*".

Pubblichiamo di seguito l'Omelia che l'Em.mo Card. Jozef Tomko, Prefetto della Congregazione per l'Evangelizzazione dei Popoli, invitato a presenziare i lavori, ha pronunciato nel corso della Celebrazione Eucaristica di apertura, nonché l'indirizzo di saluto rivolto all'Assemblea:

• OMELIA DEL CARD. JOZEF TOMKO

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

May the grace, mercy and peace of God our Father and of Our Lord Jesus Christ, in the love of the Holy Spirit be with all of you gathered here for this National Assembly for the Catholic Church in India. Through this meeting you celebrate the culmination on a national level of the various diocesan and regional programmes formed over three years ago for the Great Jubilee of the Birth of Jesus Christ - *Yesu Krist Jayanti 2000*.

As a sign of our common faith and as a recognition of our fellowship in the Church Universal, I gladly accepted the invitation to participate in this event extended to me by the Chairman of the National Committee for the Great Jubilee 2000, Bishop Gali Bali of Guntur, as well as the personal invitation extended to me by the late Archbishop Alan de Lastic, the then-President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India.

This morning, I bring with me the personal greetings of the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, who sends to you his special Apostolic Blessing which I will impart on this Assembly at the close of today's Eucharistic celebration.

I also greet with all my heart all of you, the Bishops, priests, Religious and laity gathered here with us today. May the peace of the Lord be with you always!

1. Jesus Christ "*The same, yesterday, today and always*"

At the very core of our celebrations is **Jesus Christ**, who "*is the same yesterday, today and always*" [Heb. 13:8]. We all are aware of the meaning of various jubilee celebrations: we think of 25, 50 and even 75 years (the so-called silver, golden and platinum jubilees). But the Jubilee which the Church celebrates this year throughout the world is very special. It is special not only because of the two millennia we observe, but above all it is unique because of the Person at the centre of the specific event which we commemorate.

This Person is Jesus Christ, considered by many as a teacher of wisdom, a spiritual guide, a Good Samaritan, a liberator and healer, the compassionate friend of the poor [cf. EA 20]. As we read in the Scriptures, there were many prophets throughout history "*but here there is one greater than a prophet*"; there were many as wise as Solomon, "*but you have a greater than Solomon here*" [cf. Mt 12:41-42, Lk 11:29-32].

Yes, here we have **Jesus Christ "*the Son of the living God*"** [Mt. 16:16], as God revealed Him, and as the Apostle Peter gave witness. Here we have one who gave signs, performed miracles, one who raised Lazarus from the dead after being in the tomb for four days, and who, with a heart pierced by a lance, rose from the dead after three days. Here we have the Son of God who two thousand years ago became man and assumed our human nature: "***And the Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us***" [Jn 1:14].

And so here is an event which is not only exceptional but also unique in all of human history: the account of his incarnation and birth! This is the true sensational news for all time, the true Good News - *evangelion* - which must be proclaimed to every living being, to all men and women of every age. This man rose from the dead and remains alive as the God-Man, as our *Emmanuel*, our *God with us*; his incarnation remains a permanent state, for "***He is the same yesterday, today and always***" [Heb 13:8].

And as we celebrate and commemorate an individual and an event which do not have any equal in all of human history, we also recognize that Jesus Christ has a special relationship with each person who comes into the world. He is the "***one who died for all***" [2 Cor 5:14], and "***who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and by the power of the Holy Spirit was born of the Virgin Mary and became man***" [Nicene Creed]. He, "***the only Son, ever at the Father's side***" [Jn 1:18] is "***the beloved Son, through whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of our sins... It pleased God to make absolute fullness reside in him and, by means of him, to reconcile everything in his person, both on earth and in the heavens, making peace through the blood of his cross***" [Col 1:13-14, 19-20].

Because of this uniqueness of Christ, he has a significance and relationship which is universal for all men of every age and time, for which, while it is part of history, it is also the core and the end of the same history: "***I am the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end***" [Rev. 22:13; cf. RM 6 and GS 2]. And the Scriptures underline that "***[God] wants all men to be saved and come to the truth. And the truth is this: God is one. One also is the mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all***" [1 Tim 2:4-6]. For this reason, this Jubilee is truly great and has significance for all people.

2. Jesus Christ - the Hope for a New Society

You have chosen as the theme for the Opening Mass of this Assembly "**Jesus Christ: The Foundation of our hope in a new Society**". I applaud the choice of this theme because it underlines that **Jesus Christ** is truly the foundation of our hope. This is also witnessed in the Gospel of today's Mass.

As we have heard in today's Gospel, the crowds follow Jesus even into remote and desolate areas, and he never tires of distributing the spiritual food of the Word concerning the Kingdom of God. However, at the same time, he cures their sick, and, with great compassion, he takes care of their bodily hunger, multiplying the five loaves and two fish.

On one side "*through the working of the Spirit, there already exists in individuals and in peoples an expectation, even if an unconscious one, of knowing the truth about God, about man, and about how we are to be set free from sin and death*" [RM 45]. On the other side, Jesus Christ knows well that which is in the very heart of every person [cf. *Jn* 4:39], and he is moved by the sight of the crowds and of people who suffer and who long for true integral human development. Jesus nourishes both their spiritual and their bodily hungers. As our Holy Father has taught, "*The Church does not have technical solutions to offer for the problem of underdevelopment as such, but offers her first contribution to the solution of the urgent problem of development when she proclaims the truth about Christ, about herself and about man, applying this truth to a concrete situation*" [*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 41 and RM 58]. Thus "*through the Gospel message, the Church offers a force for liberation which promotes development precisely because it leads to conversion of heart and of ways of thinking, fosters the recognition of each person's dignity, encourages solidarity, commitment and service of one's neighbour, and gives everyone a place in God's plan, which is the building of his Kingdom of peace and justice, beginning already in this life. This is the Biblical perspective of the <new heavens and a new earth> which has been the stimulus and goal for mankind's advancement in history*" [RM 59].

And this commitment of service finds its inspiration in the promise foreseen in the prophecy of Isaiah in today's first reading, the prophecy of the great Messianic feast prepared for all people on God's holy mountain. It is the promise foretold by the Apostle Paul, in our second reading of that great **hope** to which we are heirs as "*children of God*". It is the same hope ratified each time we gather around the Eucharistic table of the Lord, eating his Body, and drinking his Blood, and proclaiming the death of the Lord Jesus **until he comes again!**

My dear brothers and sisters of India, we have the courage to **believe**, and because of our faith, we dare to **hope**, and the foundation of our hope is **Jesus Christ**, the same yesterday, today and forever. We believe in Jesus Christ, "*the Incarnate Son of God, who is the way, the truth, and the life, the full revelation of divine truth*" [*Dominus Iesus*, 5], source of life for the world.

Yes, we truly **believe** that Jesus Christ, true God and true man, can bring with his message a great light and immense hope for renewing Society. May the conviction of this profound faith and hope inspire this National Assembly as you joyfully make your pilgrim way into the Third Millennium, recalling that your only joy "*is that which comes from sharing with the multitude*

of Asia's peoples the immense gift which [you yourself] have received - the love of Jesus the Saviour" [EA, n. 50].

[01869-02.04] [Original text: English]

● **INDIRIZZO DI SALUTO DEL CARD. JOZEF TOMKO1. Greetings**

It is a distinct privilege for me to be with you at this National Assembly of the Catholic Church in India, a gathering which is the climax of a series of Great Jubilee events celebrated throughout India over the past few months, commemorating the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ in this important moment of passage from the Second to the Third Millennium.

While again expressing my thanks to all the members of the National Committee for the Great Jubilee 2000 for this invitation to address the Inaugural Session of the Assembly, I would also like to again express my deep condolences to the Church in India over the recent loss of the late Archbishop Alan de Lastic, who is now celebrating this Jubilee Year, as we all believe, in the full light of God's heavenly mansion.

I warmly greet all my brother Archbishops and Bishops of India gathered here, together with my esteemed brother Cardinal Simon I. Pimenta, and our Apostolic Nuncio to India, Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri. I also greet all of you, the delegate priests, Religious and laity representing the Dioceses of every region in India. To all of you I bring the personal greetings and Apostolic Blessing of our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II.

2. The Importance of the Church in India

We are privileged to live in the midst of a truly memorable historic period, the time of the Great Jubilee of the birth of Jesus Christ, or as you say *Yesu Krist Jayanti 2000*. In this two-thousandth year after the birth of Christ, the world marks an important passage from the Second to the Third Millennium. The Catholic Church celebrates this Jubilee throughout the world, on diocesan and national level, and obviously on an international - and central - level in Rome. From among the many national celebrations marking this year, I only accepted the invitation to participate in this one, your national celebrations in India, to give witness to the respect which the Holy See has for the entire Catholic Church in your nation, and for the three Ritual bodies present here, and to give attention to the prominent role which the Church in India plays both in Asia as well as in the Universal Church.

The Catholic Church in India, with her 16 million faithful, has full rights to citizenship in the context of your national society, which now numbers over 1 billion people. In the context of Asia, the Church in India is numerically second only to that of the Philippines. Historically you are one of the most ancient church foundations after those founded in the Middle East, where Jesus was born and where he spent his earthly life. Dynamically you are one of the most vibrant churches in Asia, with the largest number of Bishops, Religious Institutes, Seminaries, formation houses, pastoral and educational works found on the continent. Your presence in various continental organizations, for example in the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, has been strong and active. The role of your Bishops and experts in various Synods - most importantly in the Special Synod for Asia - has been indispensable, so much so that you could consider the *Synod for Asia* as yours, and easily apply its conclusions with great fervor for the faithful in India.

The Church in India is also important for the Universal Church, beginning with Rome, whose Bishop is, by divine providence, the universal pastor for all the People of God, and who honoured India as the place for promulgating *Ecclesia in Asia*, and who recently asked me to bring to you his personal greetings and Apostolic Blessing upon all the participants of this National Assembly, as he recalls with deep emotion his spiritual pilgrimage here less than a year ago.

May this Assembly help you, then, to take full knowledge that:

- you are an Indian Church: one which is multi-ritual, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural;
- you are part of the Church in Asia, with its typical religious and cultural values [cf. *EA* 6];
- you are part of the Church founded by Jesus Christ which is one, holy and catholic;
- and you share intimately in the Missionary Mandate of Jesus Christ.

3. The theme of this Assembly

The theme which you have chosen for this Assembly is: *Yesu Krist Jayanti 2000 - Towards a New Society*". This underscores the starting point of your discussions as well as the heart of their inspiration: the person of Jesus Christ in this historic moment; it also expresses the basis of our hope for which our Christian faith pushes us towards a new future, a new society.

If you desire to bring into Indian society your own particular contribution, you must above all present yourselves and act within your own authentic identity, that is as members of the Church, which is at one and the same time Catholic, universal, and Indian, while also being authentic disciples of Jesus Christ. He is our identity. We call ourselves Christian because He, Christ, is our head, our Lord, our Teaching. Jesus asks us today, as he asked his first disciples, "*And who do you say I am?*" [*Matt* 16:15]. Together with the Apostle Peter and with all his disciples spread throughout the world, from the North to South Poles, from East to West, we profess the same faith: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!*" [*Matt*. 16:16]. Together with the disciples of the universal Church, from the very first centuries up until our modern times, we confess this Profession of Faith each time we celebrate the Eucharist.

This is not something superfluous. Rather the renewal of our faith in this Jubilee of Jesus' coming into this world,

and especially our confession in Him as Son of God who was born, and who died for all [cf. 2 Cor 5:14], and who is the only Saviour of the entire human family, and who, as St. Paul says: "[God] *wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth. And the truth is this: God is one. One also is the mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all*" [1 Tim. 2:4-6]. Only with such firm conviction of faith can the Church in India and in any other part of the world bear the fruits of renewal both for herself as well as for society. Only in this way will there be assured a point of departure, and foundation which is firmly inspired, precise and efficacious.

Her proposals for such a new society, rooted in such a profound faith, will be also deeply human. Because of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, all that is genuinely and authentically Christian is also sincerely and profoundly human. For instance, to form and shape such proposals within the context of Indian Society, your local Church can draw from the tremendous wealth of reflection and experience of the Universal Church, which the late Pope Paul VI defined as "*an expert in humanity*," as are, for example, the great documents of the Second Vatican Council, and specifically the Apostolic Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* on the Church in the Modern World. Similarly you have at your disposal some of the most important documents of the Pontifical and episcopal Magisterium regarding the development of the social doctrine of the Church (for example, the Encyclicals *Populorum Progressio*, *Laborem Exercens*, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* and the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*), as well as the many documents which touch on the Mission of the Church (the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, and the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*). The Post-Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia : On Jesus Christ the Saviour and his Mission of Love and Service in Asia*, upon which the contribution of many Indian Bishops who participated in the Synod and who presented many proposals is based, is an authoritative, up-to-date and contextualized collection of responses on many questions which you are treating in this Assembly. And most recently the Holy See issued the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* which offers a compendium of the most solemn faith affirmations of the Magisterium on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.

With this background, allow me to share with you a few general thoughts which I hope can be of assistance in your common reflections in the coming days.

4. A praying Church

In the wealth of numerous themes, problems and proposals which this Assembly will confront, you will also have to, at one point or another, face the question which is the most important today for the Catholic Church in India, which is moving towards a new society. Faith in the Triune God and in our Saviour Jesus Christ must be alive in order to become an active witness and sign of efficacious action in society. We are not managers or technocrats, but we are co-operators in building up the Kingdom of God. As is underscored in *Ecclesia in Asia*, "*the more the Christian community is rooted in the experience of God which flows from a living faith, the more credibly it will be able to proclaim to others the fulfillment of God's Kingdom in Jesus Christ... In Asia, home to great religions, where individuals and entire peoples are thirsting for the divine, the Church is called to be a **praying** Church, deeply spiritual even as she engages in immediate human and social concerns*" [EA n. 23]. The Synodal Fathers from India and from all of Asia, in communion with the Holy Father, remind us that "*the heart of the particular Church must be set on the contemplation of Jesus Christ, God-made-Man, and strive constantly for a more intimate union with him whose mission she continues*" [*ibid.*]. Further the fire of faith which will inspire this ministry can only be lit by something which is itself on fire [cf. *ibid.*]. Each action or apostolate done in society must be rooted and inspired by faith.

5. A free Church

A second reflection concerns the concept of religious freedom. This is a precondition of your activity. But above all, it is a fundamental and universal human right. This is not some privilege indulgently conceded by the State, but it is a right which touches upon each human person and each civil State must simply guarantee and protect this right.

Religious liberty is recognized as an international norm in the Declaration on Universal Human Rights, which, in Article 18 states: "*Each person has the right to freedom of thought, of conscience and of religion; this right implies the freedom to change one's religion or convictions, and even the freedom to manifest publicly one's*

religion or convictions, alone or with others, whether in public or private, through teaching, practice, or through religious cult practices."

In the light of this and other Documents, such as, for example, the *Declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion and belief*, one sees clearly how this human right is repeatedly guaranteed and promoted.

This same right to religious liberty is enshrined in the *Constitutions* of almost every modern State, including India. More recently our Holy Father reiterated that *"No State, no group has the right to control either directly or indirectly a person's religious convictions, nor can it justifiably claim the right to impose or impede the public profession and practice of religion, or the respectful appeal of a particular religion to people's free conscience... Individuals must be recognized as having the right even to change their religion, if their conscience so demands."*

With regard to the Catholic Church, religious liberty is solemnly formulated in the **Declaration Dignitatis Humanae** of the Second Vatican Council, which states: *"This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. Freedom of this kind means that all men should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups and every human power so that, within due limits, nobody is forced to act against his convictions in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in associations with others."*

6. A Church in Mission

Being members of the Catholic Church you are also part of a Church **in mission**. The Church exists to evangelize just as a fire exists to burn: this is its nature. The Mission of the Church is a continuation of and extension of the Mission of Jesus: *"As the Father has sent me, I also send you"* [John 20:21]. We have received a mandate which binds us: *"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you, and know that I am with you always, until the end of the world"* [Matt. 28:19-20; cf. Luke 24:46-48, Mark 16:15-16, John 17:18]. The missionary activity of the Church is therefore always under the Lord's protection: the Mission remains his, and we are called to cooperate with him in this activity. The Mission of the Church is born from this mandate of Jesus Christ, and it is fulfilled through the centuries by the proclamation of the mystery of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and of the mystery of the incarnation of the Son as a singular salvific event for all humanity. If the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us [cf. John 1:14], and if Christ died once for all [cf. 1 Cor 5:14], then we, like Paul and the other Apostles must preach Christ crucified [.....], for which *"preaching the Gospel is not the subject of a boast; I am under compulsion and have no choice. I am ruined if I do not preach the Gospel"* [1 Cor. 9:16].

Asian Bishops have rightly affirmed in the Synod: *"Evangelization today is a reality that is both rich and dynamic. It has various elements: witness, dialogue, proclamation, catechesis, conversion, baptism, insertion into the ecclesial community, the implantation of the Church, inculturation and integral human promotion. Some of these elements proceed together, while some others are successive steps or phases of the entire process of evangelization. However in all evangelizing work, it is **the complete truth of Jesus Christ** which must be proclaimed"* [EA n. 23]. The great missionary, St. Paul, gives the reason behind this: *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe unless they have heard him? And how can they hear unless there is someone to preach?"* [Romans 10:13-14].

As the Church believes and has taught repeatedly, *"The Church evangelizes in obedience to Christ's command, in the knowledge that every person has the right to hear the Good News of the God who reveals and gives himself in Christ. **To bear witness to Jesus Christ is the supreme service which the Church can offer to the peoples of Asia**, for it responds to their profound longing for the Absolute, and it unveils the truths and values which will ensure their integral human development"* [EA n. 20; cf. RM 46]. To accuse the Church of violence or of a fanatical spirit of proselytism is completely false. *"The Church proposes, she imposes nothing. She respects individuals and cultures and she honours the sanctuary of conscience"* [RM n. 39]. At the same time she considers it an act of freedom and a fundamental human right to be able to change one's opinion, even when

dealing with religious matters.

Therefore, the Church cannot renounce this right, this duty to proclaim the Gospel through the witness of life, through dialogue, through preaching and through an inculturated evangelization etc... We stand in awe and respect of those many Christians of different confessions who brought the witness of their faith even to being martyred, and to those who, even today, suffer discrimination because of their faith.

I would also like to call to mind how important it is to maintain and follow a practice of ecclesial communion for mission. The Church is the communion for the mission and our Lord prayed precisely for this when he sent out his disciples: "*May they be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me*" [John 17:21].

The Church in India is called to live out its great missionary potential *ad intra* and *ad extra*. The Holy See encourages and thanks you for the many missionary men and women who bring the name of Christ to various parts of your own nation, as well as to other nations in Asia, Africa and Oceania. They are the hope of the missionary Church.

7. The role of the laity

Finally, the building up of a new society - the theme of this Assembly - calls for a greater involvement in human promotion. The fields for this are enormous, and many of them were discussed in detail during the Special Synod for Asia: the poor, the family, human life, health, education, peace, globalization, the international foreign debt, the environment, social communications. The Post-Synodal Exhortation of Pope John Paul II brings together the fruits of the discussions of your pastors and these can be a great help also for you.

In the area of its relations with the modern world and society, your Church has a great need of a strong and involved Catholic laity. These are the ones who will be responsible for bringing the values of the Kingdom of God and of Christ to society. *Ecclesia in Asia* speaks directly to the laity when it says: "*By the grace and call of Baptism and Confirmation, all lay people are missionaries; in the arena of their missionary work are the vast and complex worlds of politics, economics, industry, education, the media, science, technology, the arts and sports*" [EA n. 45]. However the laity also must be well formed and prepared for this task. Therefore the Synodal Fathers proposed the establishment of various formation centres for the laity, whose scope is to prepare them to operate as witnesses of Christ in society.

Most important also is the participation of women in the Church's mission for the building up of any society, whether in the circle of the family, or in various sodalities or associations at various levels of social life. The Synodal Fathers underlined that "*the presence of women in the Church's mission of love and service contributes greatly to bringing the compassionate Jesus, the healer and reconciler, to Asian people, especially the poor and marginalized*" [*Ibid.*].

Conclusion

With the celebrations of the Grand Jubilee 2000 we enter into the Third Millennium. The Catholic Church both in the world and in India, enters it in the totality of its human reality, but also as an organism, empowered by the Holy Spirit, which is both mystical and real, whose Head is Him, the risen Jesus Christ, "*the same yesterday, today and forever*" [Heb. 13:8].

We are not alone, and this celebration is not only for us. The year 2000 will pass, but Jesus Christ the Saviour will remain alive with us to continue, with our cooperation, his mission of love and service in India, in Asia and throughout the world. "*You are my witnesses... even to the ends of the earth*" [Acts 1:8].

To you, the representatives at this National Assembly of the Catholic Church in India, a Church to which we all look with hope and confidence, I pray that you will know how to draw abundant fruits from the reflections of this important gathering as you walk on the path towards a new society. May the Spirit of the Risen Christ accompany you on this important pilgrimage and journey as you rededicate yourselves to the Mission and Mandate of Jesus Christ, our Saviour.

[01868-02.02] [Original text: English]
