



Building up social cohesion : working for unity amidst tensions.

Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil

SDB, Guwahati, India

1. An invitation to social commitment

By 2020 India will have the biggest working force in the world: young, gifted, dynamic, energetic. If they will be creative, well-motivated, and forward-looking, there is no limit to what they will be able to achieve for the nation and contribute to the world. With nation's 'Look East' policy, Manipur can be the major beneficiary. But if, our young people happen to be unmotivated, disoriented, divided, unemployed and unemployable, they will be potential revolutionaries, insurgents, and radicals of every sort. If they will not be able to live together as brothers and sisters and cultivate values that will help them to collaborate with other communities, our society will be heading for major troubles. In fact, we are experiencing some of them.

When life together becomes challenging, people begin to ask questions. How do we live and work along with persons of other cultures who think and act differently from us? What shall we do when our interests collide? How do we deal with people who have other visions of life, other codes of conduct, other styles of relating with each other, other ways of showing respect, familiarity, approval; or dislike, disapproval, anger or resentment? How do we interact with people who have another understanding of what is right, good, polite, dignified, beautiful or appropriate? How do we join hands with neighbours of other beliefs in promoting common good and in handling problems in society, like growing violence, crime, dishonesty, AIDS, drugs? These are questions that committed citizens have been asking themselves these days.

Living in a pluralistic society may be considered as an unmanageable problem on the one hand, or a singular opportunity for learning from other communities on the other. But where do we begin if

we look at it as an opportunity? Will a few more self-help books and personality development courses suffice? Or do we need go deeper and accept the truth that certain things are conducive to social growth and certain things are not, that there things that are right that need to be done and there are things that are wrong that ought not to be done? Who will teach us what truly right and good? An inspired author says that if people are earnest seekers of what is good, divine wisdom springs up in their hearts "turning them into friends and spokesmen of God" (Wisdom 7:27).

2. The need to collaborate across cultural and religious traditions

The problem of what is just and right has agitated the Indian mind for centuries. In the ancient epic *Mahabharata* we meet with characters who, unlike Greek heroes, discuss the morality of war even in the midst of the battle. Yudhishtira keeps questioning *dharma* (uprightness) till the very end of the story (Das 281). Bhishma, the wise man, finally concludes, "Dharma is *subtle*" (Das 46). Conceding that there are difficulties in deciding what is right in specific situations, people of all civilizations have always thought that there are some things ethically right, while others are not. They felt convinced that there was a natural desire in human hearts to do what is right. The great Indian poet Kalidasa (5th century) referred to the '**inclination of the heart** of a good person' as a reliable guide in such matters (Das 48).

We need today the help of the wisdom that comes from many cultures to guide and inspire a violent, corrupt and confused world. We urgently feel the need to collaborate across diverse cultures and religious traditions. It is possible. If people of diverse traditions could join hands for the Independence Movement of India, if Martin Luther King, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Thich Nhat Hanh could unite in Civil Rights and Peace

initiatives in America, people of different beliefs and identities can do similar things in other places as well. That is the only way to build up a collaborative atmosphere among the various communities of Manipur, work towards fairness to all communities, and usher in an era of peace. The Buddhist book *Dhammapada* gives us a good formula: “to **avoid evil**, to **cultivate good**, and to purify one’s mind” (verse 183).

3. We can correct our past mistakes

History tells us that moral sensitivity arises spontaneously in human hearts. We remember how Asoka the Great felt ‘**remorse**’ after the Kalinga war, thinking over the deaths he had caused. His rock edict XIII reads, “Thus arose His Sacred Majesty’s remorse for having conquered the Kalingas, because the conquest of a country previously unconquered involves the slaughter, death and carrying away captive of the people. This is a matter of **profound sorrow and regret** to His Sacred Majesty” (Smith 119). From that time he gave himself to the mission of promoting an ethical order of universal significance: compassion, liberality, gentleness, peace, joyousness (Schweiker 343).

If in the recent history of our region, if we feel, we have had instances of violence or unfairness of one community against another, we only need to hearken to the voice of our conscience chiding us. And, like Asoka, we too may feel remorse. It is at such a moment we understand the need of bringing the collective wisdom of our communities into the field of action e.g. by refraining from violence, entering into dialogue with communities with which we have differences, assisting weaker communities, promoting the more fragile sections in society, and insisting on honest business transactions. It is in this area that committed citizens who are sensitive to and respectful of others can be of great help.

4. Civilizational heritages

Jesus praised intelligent persons who knew how to preserve good teachings of earlier times and combine them with the insights of the current days. “Well then, every scribe who becomes a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out from his storeroom things both **new and old**’ (Matthew 13:52). Pope Benedict XVI affirms the same thing in other words, “...new generations can build on the knowledge and experiences of those who went before, and they can draw upon the *moral treasury of the whole of humanity*” (*Spe Salvi* 24). Let us look at some of those central values that build up

our social fabric.

5. Love, altruism

Love for other people stands at the heart of all ethical codes. Every culture has some way of saying that we ought to do to others what we would like others to do to us. This is a powerful message in an age of ethnic conflicts, merciless competition, intense cultivation of self-interest. Islam too teaches something similar: “Not one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself” (Forty Hadith of an-Nawawi 13). So too Jainism: “A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated (Sutrakritanga 1.11.33).

Such precepts are very close to Christian codes. Leviticus 19:18 said, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”. Jesus taught “Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do to them” (Matthew 7:12). He insisted we must go beyond what is due, even beyond what the other person expects from us. “When a man takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well” (Luke 6:29). He tells us not to entertain even a harsh thought, not to use a hard word; to take the **initiative for reconciliation** even in cases when it is the other person who has taken the initiative for quarrel (Matthew 5:22-23). He proposes that when we are struck on one cheek we offer him the other (Matthew 5:39). And even after that he asks us to love him, and continue to love him still when he continues to harass and persecute us, since God himself loves him (Matthew 5:44).

One would have considered these mere ‘pious thoughts’ for pious people. But this, in fact, was the programme of life that Mahatma Gandhi brought to the political field with absolute confidence and unbroken determination. And it worked.

6. Promoting unity among all people

Most people agree that the rugged **individualism** of modern times has been a threat to family and community bonds. Self-centred individuals forget that they have **duties** to their own community and to other people as well. All cultural traditions seek to foster this sense of common belonging. Centuries ago, ancient Indians exhorted each other, “Meet together, speak together, let your minds be of one accord.... May your counsel be common, your assembly common, common the mind, and the thoughts... Let your aims be common, and your hearts be of one accord, and all of you of one mind, so you may live well together” (Rig Veda 10.191.2-4). And Atharva Veda taught, “Let us have concord with our own people, and **concord with people who are strangers**

to us....May we **unite in our minds**, unite in our purposes, and not fight against the divine spirit within us” (7.52.1-2). The Koran re-echoes similar sentiments (Koran 49.10).

But what is most outstanding in Asia is a **universal outlook** that embraces the whole of the human family. “Consider the family of humankind one”, taught Jainism (Jinasena, Adipurana). “Let all mankind be one sect”, advised Sikhism (Adi Granth, Japuji 28, M.1, p.6). People like Mahatma Gandhi and Tagore, spoke of the human race as one, as did Buddha, Asoka and others in their times.

The same teaching is strong in the *biblical tradition*. **Togetherness and harmony** are strongly urged. “How wonderful it is, how pleasant, for God’s people to live together in harmony!” (Psalms 133:1). Jesus prayed for unity, “I pray that they may all be one” (John 17:20-21). He warned them against divisions, “Any country that divides itself into groups that fight each other will not last very long. And any town or family that divides itself into groups which fight each other will fall apart” (Matthew 12:25). Such a teaching is very relevant in our times.

7. **Probity in public life, honesty**

We are all aware that in recent years **corruption** has been moving into the *highest places*—governments, bureaucracies, legislatures, judiciary, law-enforcing machinery. **International illicit trade and terrorism** flourish side by side making use the same techniques and facilities. In a such a situation, a call for probity in public life has become most urgent. The Bible teaching is clear, “Do not cheat anyone by using false measures of length, weight or quantity. Use **honest** scales, honest weights, and honest measures” (Leviticus 19:35-36). Among the virtues that the Bhagavad Gita teaches there are, “Fearlessness, purity... **honesty**...truth...lack of greed, reliability” (Bhagavadgita 16:1.4).

Centuries ago the Upanishads had taught “Truth alone triumphs and not untruth” (Mundaka Upanishads III,1,6). Kabir used to say “Better to be cheated than cheat others”; and Vivekananda, “Society must be moulded by truth”. Islam threatens severe punishments for the wrongdoer. “Lo! Those who devour the wealth of orphans wrongfully, they do not but swallow fire into their bellies, and they will be exposed to burning flame” (Koran 4.10). Koran “**Keep your promises**; you are accountable for all that you promise...give full measure, when you measure, and weigh with even scales” (Surah 17).

There is abundant teaching in the Bible about

honesty, truthfulness and uprightness: God does not tolerate fraud or partiality (2 Chronicles 19:7). He commands, you shall not defraud your fellow beings. You shall not commit robbery (Leviticus 19:13). When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him (Leviticus 19:33). The wages of a labourer shall not remain with you until morning (Leviticus 19:13). “Cease to do evil. **Learn to do good**. Devote yourselves to justice. Aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan. Defend the cause of the widow” (Isaiah 1:17). It is a great mission today to work for uprightness in society.

8. **Respect for life, for nature, environmental stewardship**

Reverence for life at every stage of its development is a theme that runs right through the heart of almost every religious tradition. The Asian soul instinctively recoils before abortion, euthanasia, *excessive tampering with nature* and violence to animal and vegetative life. Emperor **Asoka** wrote centuries ago, “I have ordered banyan trees to be planted along the roads to give shade to men and animals. I have ordered mango groves to be planted. I have ordered wells to be dug every half a mile, and I have had many watering stations built for the convenience of men”. **Tagore’s Shantiniketan** sought to recapture this spirit of closeness to nature. For him, trees were prayers and they spoke about God. “Silence, my soul,” he said, “these trees are my prayers”. And he went on, “I asked the tree, speak to me about God, and it blossomed”.

In the Bible, the Psalmist expresses similar sentiments in many places. He invites the trees of the forest to shout for joy (Psalms 96:12). In an era of rapid deforestation, how good to remember that “The world and all that is in it belong to the Lord; the earth and all who live on it are his” (Psalms 24:1), that we need to take *care of vegetation*. Wait for a period of time before you eat fruits from the tree you have planted, Leviticus 19:23-25 said, “When you come into the land of Canaan and plant any kind of fruit tree...in the fifth year you may eat the fruit. If you do this, your trees will bear more fruit”.

9. **Look to persons who can inspire**

India’s heroes have always been people with **spiritual depth** like Mahatma Gandhi, Tagore, Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa who speak in convincing vocabulary about peace and collaboration. They admire genuine intellectuals, not mere rationalists. They willingly listen to persons who have had a religious intuition and speak with spiritual unction,

and who are not merely sectarian or parochially minded zealots. They look to models of **self-giving and egolessness** who exemplify a flaming spirit; who therefore are persuasive agents of social cohesion, intelligent cultural transformation and integral development.

Let us look at the example of Mahatma Gandhi who drew his ideas from diverse traditions. He was attached to his own religion, but he was not sectarian; he kept learning from others. He was open to all truths; he was attentive to differences and was respectful of individual cultural identities. He had an inclusive outlook (Schweiker 360) and affirmed his **oneness with humanity**.

10. A World in crisis is looking for answers

We need inspiring persons to take in hand the problems that confront us today. Traditional values are in crisis in different parts of the world. What happens when love for money and power alone replaces social health, and the home values of cooperation, decency, kindness, hospitality are no more handed on to the next generation? **Today aggressiveness of arms competes with the aggressiveness of the market**. Sublime values are no more visible in public life. Efforts for progress and development are described only in terms of hostility and murderous competition, not of collaboration, common endeavour and sharing of ideas, heritages and resources.

But there is hope yet. The values proposed by the old cultures cannot die out totally. "Made up of history and experience, memory and expectation, **cultures have their resiliency**" (Dalla Costa 220).

For example, we begin to realize that being singularly selfish is self-defeating. 'Self-interest, self-rights and self-preservation involve and are even advanced by self-sacrifice, self-discipline and self-giving' (Dalla Costa 105).

With all the present uncertainties, the world is looking for leaders invested with moral authority, those who know how to **persuade** others to do what is right...those who truly inspire. That is true authority. What they ask is simple: accept what is true and good. They argue for the truth not merely with their words, but with their life and work. Since they are credible personalities, what they say becomes **credible**. People generally listen to persons of good judgement, who strive to make only acceptable proposals; persons who are knowledgeable, sensitive, and decent; and, more than anything else, people who seem to love and respect others. Enlightened persons like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King have been credited for their **gift of persuading others** of what is best in difficult circumstances, because they appealed to people's consciences as Jesus did. May our leaders of the future be such people.

The challenge which Jesus Christ has placed before humanity is amazing: be like the Father in heaven to whose goodness there is no limit. "There must be **no limit to your goodness** as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds" (Matthew 5:48). At this point we reach a *climax*. Beyond this we cannot go. We must keep striving towards this goal. Human intelligence attains its utmost potential, not when it splits the atom or explores the distant skies, but when it discerns what is good and what is evil, when it makes a **correct ethical choice**. It is then that the human person becomes most like unto God. The image of the Father that is in him reveals itself. It is precisely then that the human person becomes fully human and capable of showing a path to the future to his fellow-beings. Pope Benedict XVI says, "The love of God is revealed in responsibility for others" (*Spe Salvi* 28).

May we develop this sense of responsibility in the cause of peace, development and the total wellbeing of communities.

References

- Dalla Costa, John, 1998 : The Ethical Imperative, Addison-Wesley, Reading.
 Das, Gurucharan, 2009 : The Difficulty of Being Good, Penguin Books India, New Delhi.
 Kessler, Gary E., 2000 : Ways of Being Religious, Mayfield Publishing Co, California.
 Schweiker, William, 2008 : The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Malden.
 Smith, Vincent, 1992 : The Oxford History of India, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
 Spe Salvi, Encyclical Letter of Pope Benedict XVI

