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WORD OF GOD, SOURCE OF JUSTICE AND PEACE IN THE CONTEXT OF SOUTH ASIA

Key Note Address
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Introduction

I am still wondering about my competence to address this august assembly. I am sure that I am invited to deliver this key-note address, not because I am a scholar like anyone of you, but only because I happen to be the chairman of the CCBI Commission for Bible. Sincere thanks for extending to me this honour, which I don't deserve at all.

I don't have any profound thoughts or deep insights, but only a few simple reflections on the theme to share with you. In a way it is easier to talk to Bible scholars than to ordinary people. I am reminded of modern art. An artist takes a piece of paper, draws a few lines and spreads some colours. The ordinary people are not able to make anything out of it. But that is not the case with experts in modern art. They interpret every line and colour and are impressed by the painting. Likewise Scholars as you are, you may be able to read your own wisdom in my presentation. That is precisely the nature of Gods' word. Its content goes beyond the container.

The Theme

The theme we have chosen for our study and reflection in this Workshop is: *"The Word of God is the source of Justice and Peace in the context of South Asia"*. We will be studying this theme from the following points of view:

- I. Peace is the fruit of justice, as gift of God to humanity, an assurance given to us by the powerful Word of God who is faithful to his promises.
- II. This theme refers to the confusion, darkness and the tragic events that are prevailing around us, especially in South Asia.
- III. This theme contains a longing for a brighter future. The whole world continues to search for ways and means, for lasting solution towards universal justice and global peace. So many solutions are proffered; so many remedies are proposed. However, this theme suggests that there is only one solution: The Word of God giving shape to a new world order, the kingdom of God, as we learn from the history of salvation.

I. *Peace, a gift of God to Humanity*

Bible combines peace and justice. True peace, as prophet Isaiah teaches us, is the fruit of justice: "*And the effect of righteousness will be peace and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust for ever.*" (Is. 32, 17). According to the Second Vatican Council Peace is "the fruit of that right ordering of things with which the divine founder has invested human society and which must be actualized by man thirsting for an ever more perfect reign of justice" (Gs. 78). This is what the Psalmist means when he says, "*Justice and Peace will kiss each other*". (Ps. 85, 10)

There are several passages in the Scripture, which promises us lasting peace. We do have the assurance of peace in the words of Prophet Isaiah: "*My people will abide in a peaceful habitation in secure dwellings, and in quite resting places*". (Is. 32, 18) Through the prophet Jeremiah the Lord gives us again this promise: "*I myself know the plan I have for you, a plan for peace and not of woe, to give you a future full of hope*". (Jer. 29, 11) God "*speaks peace*" upon his people. (Ps. 85, 8) God gives the assurance that if his people keep his commandment peace will flow like a river and righteousness like the waves of the sea (Cfr. Is. 48, 18). Coming to the New Testament Jesus promises peace to his disciples: "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid*" (Jn. 14, 27). After his resurrection fulfilling this promise Jesus confers peace to his disciples and asks him to carry it to others: "*Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.*" (Jn 20, 21)

These and similar promises of God are the word, the assurance given to us by God. The word of God, as we know, is creative and dynamic. I like the expression "dynamic" very much. It reminds me of the dynamite that explodes. The word of God is more than an explosive; it is indeed a spiritual bomb, which contains in itself enormous powers. "*It has the power to pluck up and break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant*" (Jer 1, 10). The word of God is "*like fire and like a hammer that break the rock in pieces*" (Jer. 23, 29). The prophet Isaiah also draws our attention to this dynamic power of God's word when he compares it to "*the rain and snow coming down from heaven, watering the earth, giving seed to the sower, bread to the eater. So shall my word be that goes from my mouth*" says the Lord, "*it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the things for which I sent it*". (Cfr. Is. 55, 10-11) In the letter to the Hebrews the Word of God is presented "*as living, active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrows, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart*" (Hebrew 4, 12). So all the promises of peace, the assurance given by God will definitely be fulfilled. We do have again the assurance of Jesus in the Gospel: "*For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth will pass away, not a letter or a dot, will pass away from the law until it is accomplished.*" (Mat. 5-18)

II. *The Signs of the Times: The South Asian Context*

Now let us have a look at the South Asian context in which this dynamic word of God is supposed to explode and fulfill its promises of peace. Jesus calls us to "*read the signs of the times*". (Mt. 16, 3) This means that we are called to interpret our present realities and experiences in the light of the Word of God and discern God's will and plan for us. This mandate is reaffirmed in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council: "At all times the

Church carried the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task" (G.S.4).

Now what are the signs of the times we read in the world in which we live, especially in South Asia? What are the realities that promote justice and peace or disrupt tranquility and engender disharmony? Of course there are lights and shadows. In his post-synodal exhortation of Ecclesia in Asia, Pope John Paul II acknowledges the positive signs of the Asian cultures: "Asian peoples are known for their spirit of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence. Without denying the existence of bitter tensions and violent conflicts, it can still be said that Asia has often demonstrated a remarkable capacity for accommodation and natural openness to the mutual enrichment of peoples in the midst of a plurality of religions and cultures" (Sa 6).

However, as the Holy Father hints in the above-mentioned passage there are shadow signs that disrupt peace and endanger harmony. Of these shadow signs, we read in Ecclesia in Asia, as follows: "At the end of the twentieth century the world is still threatened by forces which generate conflicts and wars, and Asia is certainly not exempt from these. Among these forces are intolerance and marginalization of all kinds, social, cultural, political and even religious. Day by day fresh violence is inflicted upon individuals and entire peoples, and the culture of death takes hold in the unjustifiable recourse to violence to resolve tensions" (EA 38). Our experiences are different in different countries. A few shadow signs I would like to add here are mostly from the Indian context.

1. In South Asia we live in a multifaceted society characterized by a strong presence of religions exerting their influence in every sphere of society, often to the extent of destroying the national harmony and integration. Exclusive claims on behalf of the divine tend to disparage, if not demonize others.
2. Another sign related to this is the rise of militant fundamentalism of different brands and denial of religious freedom to minority communities. This negative attitude of monocultural nationalists, who look at religious and ethnic minorities with a hostile eye, is a matter of great concern. The violence against Christians, Churches and Christian institutions in Orissa last week during Christmas is really shocking. The official apathy, the public indifference and the freedom allowed to marauding bands of Hindutva fanatics and armed thugs in Gujarat has been repeated in Orissa in what is planned conspiracy against the Church and Christian faith.
3. Very little effort is made by our political leaders to eliminate caste and untouchability. Ideology and party politics have receded to the background and caste is used as a stepping-stone for selfish and political achievements.
4. The criminalization of our lawmakers and law-enforcement officers together with a brazen system of corruption among political leaders at all levels are frightening developments. The direction by the Supreme Court of India to demolish illegal structures by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, a result of the deep rooted corruption among officials at all levels in the administration and the cash for questions by 11 MPs, who were found guilty of breach of privilege by the House Committee are some of the examples.
5. South Asian Societies are burdened by all forms of discrimination, stressing more the difference rather than what is common.
6. Due to Globalization, survival of the fittest is becoming more and more the order of the day. In the economic, political and cultural spheres as well, the welfare of the

vast majority of the poor people is bypassed and neglected. About two lakh of the people living in Delhi earn more than 1 lakh each every month, whereas 89362 farmers commit suicide between 1999 and 2005. Since 2002, that has become one suicide every 30 minutes.

7. Consumerism and media are raising false expectations among masses resulting in a growing sense of frustration and anger especially among the youth. In the name of sociableness, modernity and adventurism youth have easily fallen apart, succumbing to gambling, drunkenness, drugs and immorality.
8. According to the 2005 Annual Report of the National Crime Records of the Government of India, 1 crime was committed against women in every 3 minutes, 1 rape in every 29 minutes, 1 molestation in 15 minutes, and 1 dowry death case in every 77 minutes. The NCRI recorded a total of 1, 55,553 cases of violence against women in 2005.
9. Children remain vulnerable to abuses of child-labour, recruitment as child soldiers, sexual violence and juvenile delinquency.
10. Terrorism is becoming more and more widespread. Last Thursday we were all shocked and horrified by the heinous assassination of Mrs. Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan. This tragedy underscores the menace that terrorism poses to us and to the stability of our societies. All violence needs be discouraged. But it is a pity and a matter of great concern that even those people who are shocked by revolutionary violence and react strongly against it, are justifying or simply ignoring structural violence, hiding it behind the pretensions of legality.

The Church in South Asia, situated in this context of plurality, fundamentalism, terrorism, pain and suffering is called to bring about God's reign, the Kingdom justice, peace and harmony through its faithful proclamation of the dynamic word of God. According to Lumen Gentium of the Second Vatican Council, this is precisely the role of the Church: *"In a world torn asunder by divisive forces, the constant call of the Spirit to the Church is to be a communion of all the people of God as a sign and sacrament of unity among nations"* (L.G.1).

But what we find instead is that the Church in South Asia is also caught up with problems, which inhibit her from responding effectively to the call of God. What is given below are only a few of these negative signs:

1. The practices of the Church and her approaches often lead to pietistic forms of living the faith.
2. According to the report of a national survey conducted recently in India more and more young Catholics are joining Pentecostal Sects. 72 percent of these young people say that they leave the Catholic Church because they find greater fellowship in Pentecostal sects, 77 percent have better God-experience there and 82 percent go away because Bible is given central place in the meetings of these sects.
3. The monopolizing attitude of the clergy and the lack of laity's participation in the life and mission of the Church is a matter of serious concern. The laity who constitutes the significant majority of the Church are by and large theologically uninformed. As a result of this they have become passive, dependent, disorganized and concerned more about their personal salvation rather than responding generously to their vocation of bringing about the 'Reign of God'.

4. The quest for power in all levels and the greed for money and pleasure in some quarters are disheartening, especially among the clergy.
5. There is a gap between what one believes about being the Church and everyday reality of living as the Church.

All these shadow signs both in the Church and in the world as a whole call for a radical change of the existing corrupt and oppressive setup and creation of a new world order.

III. A New World Order

A. Encountering and Experiencing the Word of God

Of course, all these threatening and frightening shadow signs are there in and around us. But we do have also the Word of God at our disposal. This Word of God is dynamic and creative i.e., it is capable of wiping away all chaos and confusions and bringing order and beauty. Now the question is why doesn't this dynamic Word of God explode destroying and over-throwing the evil structures we are in and bringing about God's reign, a just society characterized by freedom and fellowship, prosperity and peace?

For the Word of God to manifest its explosive and creative power, it is not enough that we have this word at our disposal, but we have to go through the process of encountering and experiencing it. Isaiah was encountering the Word of God and experiencing its power when the Seraphim touched his mouth with the burning coal taken from the altar. (Cfr. Is. 6, 1-9). Jeremiah was strengthened when the hand of God touched his mouth and put his words in it. (Cfr. Jer. 1, 4-10). This word became to him a joy and the delight of his heart (Cfr. Jer. 15, 16). Ezekiel too had a similar experience. He was asked to eat the scroll full of God's word. He ate the scroll and it was in his mouth as sweet as a honey (Cfr. Ez. 2, 9-3, 4). The psalmist also was experiencing a deep joy within himself whenever he was encountering the Word of God. *"How sweet are thy words to my taste, sweeter than honey in my mouth"* (Ps. 119, 103). *"More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter are they than honey and the dripping of the honey-comb"* (Ps. 19, 10).

Everyone who really encounters the Word of God and experiences its power and sweetness will find no pleasure in anything else except in the Word of God. He will be prepared to sell everything he has for the sake of possessing the precious treasure of God's Word. (cfr. Mt. 13, 44-46). This is what St. Paul said when he understood how precious the knowledge of Christ was: *"But whatever gains I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him."* (Phil. 3, 7-9).

After encountering and experiencing the word, one cannot hide this experience within himself. He will be forced to share it with others. There is always the urgency of sharing the Good News with the whole world. The hearts of the disciples were burning when Jesus explained the word to them on the way to Emmaus. This burning experience did not allow them to wait till the following morning, but urged them to return to Jerusalem the same night to share the Good News with the other disciples.

B. A lesson from the history of Salvation:

1. "Land flowing with milk and honey" as the new world order and the two fold revolution needed for that:

In Egypt the Israelites were a group of slaves. The situation there was conflictual and oppressive. They were victims of inequality and injustice. Their rights were trampled upon. They had no voice and no forum to express their protests. They were longing to come out of this oppressive system to enjoy the peace and harmony of an alternative community. The word of God came to them as a source of justice and peace. God appeared to Moses in the midst of the burning bush and gave this promise of peace: "*I have seen the affliction of my people... and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of Egyptians, and bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey*". (Ex. 3, 7-9) These words are at the same time a promise of peace and an invitation to a two-fold revolution i.e., religious and socio-political. True and lasting peace depends on God and man. God is the source of peace and man should be prepared to receive it.

A religious revolution was needed to impart knowledge and experience of the true God to the people of Israel. At that time Egypt was immersed in idolatry. Sun and moon, stars and heavenly bodies, forces of nature and various images of gold and silver were worshipped as gods. These gods were actually their own handworks and the creation of their own imaginations. Divine power was attributed even to pharaoh. Israelites were also freely mingling with others in these idolatrous practices. Moses was asked to confront the priests and magicians of Egypt to expose the powerlessness of the Egyptian deities and to lead the people of Israel to the knowledge of Yahweh, "*the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*" who is "*merciful, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin*" (Ex. 34, 6-7).

Religious revolution should go hand in hand with socio-political revolution. The knowledge and experience of God should lead them to a better relationship among themselves. The political atmosphere of Egypt at that time was very corrupt. What was prevalent there was a politics of injustice, cruelty, oppression and exploitation. Moses was asked to unite the people of Israel against these evil structures, liberate them from all sorts of discriminatory powers and instruct them to live as members of one family acknowledging each other as brothers and sisters and sharing all their goods in common.

The people of Israel were fascinated by the promise of this ideal alternative community of peace and harmony. But they did not understand the nature of this new order promised by God and were not prepared to go through the radical and revolutionary process necessary to bring about a transformation in themselves. They took the promise of God literally and were longing to possess "*the land flowing with milk and honey*". The delay in the realization of this promise and the hardships involved in this process made them disappointed and often rebellious.

2. *The Kingdom of God as the new world order and expectation of its fulfillment in future:*

What the liberator God promised them was freedom, prosperity, peace, and abundance, all included in the promise of the "land". But even after reaching the so-called Promised Land what the people experienced was poverty, conflict, oppression, bloodshed, war and exile. Such an experience weakened their faith in God and shattered their hope of ever possessing the '*land flowing with milk and honey*'. So they opted for monarchy in spite of the reluctance and severe warnings of Samuel. With the establishment of the monarchy once again all sorts of idolatrous practices and social injustice of Egypt came back to Israel. This was a great blow to the process of building up an ideal community started with Exodus.

However, God was faithful to his promise. God continued to address his word through the prophets inviting them to turn away from their idolatrous practices and to promote social justice among themselves with a view of realizing the alternative community. For all the power and eloquence of their criticism and invitation, the prophets also did not succeed in their efforts. In spite of that they, together with a small group of righteous people, kept the dream of an ideal society alive.

The problem of the prophets was how to resolve the tension caused by the clash between the promise of God and its fulfillment. The prophets and the righteous ones of Israel resolved this problem by projecting the fulfillment of this promise in to future. They believed and tried to convince others that there will come a day when God will certainly liberate his people from all the evil structures and bring them in to the land of abundance, the Kingdom of God.

3. *"The Time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand":*

Finally this is what we hear resounding in the words of Jesus; "*The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the Gospel*". (Mk1, 15) The kingdom of God was the main theme of his preaching and the content of most of his parables. (Cfr. Mt 13) His miracles were signs of the coming of God's Kingdom: "*If it is with the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you*". (Lk 11,20)

When Jesus announces the Kingdom of God what he is saying is that Israel's long sustained hope for liberation and their dream for a new world order, "*the land flowing with milk and honey*" is about to be or indeed is being fulfilled. To enter in to this Kingdom they have to repent and believe. This means, first of all, they have to turn away from all the so-called powers or gods which really can not liberate, but only create new forms of slavery; secondly this means that they have to believe in the unconditional love of God for the whole creation of human kind as the key to true liberation and promote this love among themselves. Thus the realization of the promise of a new world order takes place not in the way Israel was expecting, but in a new and more perfect way.

4. Love is the content of this new world order and Jesus is our Peace:

Jesus reveals to us God's unconditional love, which is ultimately the content, the milk and honey of the promised land, the Kingdom of God announced by him. During a discussion on the greatest commandment one of the scribes agreeing with Jesus said: *"You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is the one, and there is no other but he; and to love him with all the heart, and with all understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is much more than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices. And when Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "you are not far from the Kingdom of God" (Mk 12, 32-34). "On these two commandments depend all the laws and prophets" (Mt 22,40).* Whatever we said about the vertical dimension of monotheism, the horizontal dimension of social justice, the religious and socio-political revolution needed for the realization of the new world order or the Kingdom of God are all included in this one commandment of love.

Starting from Moses up to John the Baptist, the prophets were announcing the coming of a new world order, the kingdom of God. In what then consists the newness of Christ? According to Pope Benedict XVI this newness consists in the adverb of time 'now'. With Jesus the Kingdom is no longer only something 'imminent', but it is present. "The new proximity of the Kingdom of which Jesus speaks..." the Pope writes, "is to be found in Jesus himself. Through Jesus' presence and action, God has here and now entered actively into history in a wholly new way" (Cfr. Jesus of Nazareth, page 60). In Jesus the promise of the Kingdom of God is fully realized here and now. That is why Jesus says: *"The Kingdom of God is in the midst of you"*. (Lk 17, 21) This is the conviction, which later prompted St. Paul to present Jesus as our peace: *"For he is our peace in whom all the barriers and dividing walls between peoples, and between God and humanity have been broken down and communion is established"* (Eph 2, 14-15). Jesus envisioned peace in terms of the Kingdom of God irrupting in to the world through his person and ministry, a reign of God's unconditional love extended to all, generating freedom, radical concern and fellowship, peace and justice.

Conclusion

It is true that we do have the dynamic Word of God; the Word made flesh, Jesus our peace. Yet we can not deny the existence of threats to justice and peace, harmony and progress caused by our human sinfulness. Especially during terrorist attack and natural calamities we hear people asking: why did God allow this to happen? Could he not prevent this disaster that victimized so many innocent people? When a similar question was asked to Ann Graham, the daughter of Billy Graham, she gave an extremely profound and insightful answer. She said: "I believe God is deeply saddened by this, just as we are, but for years we have been telling God to get out of our schools, to get out of our government and to get out of lives. And being the gentleman He is, I believe He has calmly backed out. How can we expect God to give His blessing and His protection if we demand, He leave us alone?"

"In the light of recent events... terrorist attack, school shooting etc., I think it started when a certain Madeline Murray O'Hare complained she did not want prayer in our school and we said OK. Then someone said you better not read Bible in school. The Bible, which

says thou shall not kill, thou shall not steal and love your neighbour as yourself. And we said OK. Then Dr. Benjamin Spick said we should not spank our children when they misbehave because their little personalities would be wrapped and we might damage their self-esteem. We said an expert should know what he is talking about. And we said OK".

'Now we are asking ourselves why our children have no conscience, why they don't know right from wrong, and why it doesn't bother them to kill strangers, their classmates and themselves? Probably, if we think about it long and hard enough we can figure it out. I think it has a great to deal with. "*We reap what we sow*".

Peace, as St. Augustine teaches us, is the "tranquility of order" (Cfr. De Civitate Dei, 19, 13). Now unfortunately what we see often in the world around us is disorder. The idols of market, economic, political, military and even religious powers are worshipped in the place of God. The dignity of persons and human rights are simply ignored and often ridiculed. There should be a radical change to this situation. "*Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's*". (Mt. 22, 21). This is justice and the fruit of justice is peace. "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called Sons of God*". (Hb. 5, 9)

Thank You.