

CONFERENCE OF DIOCESAN PRIESTS IN INDIA
CCBI COMMISSION FOR CLERGY
ON
WORD OF GOD, IN THE MISSION AND LIFE OF DIOCESAN PRIESTS
IN INDIA

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TRIPLE MINISTRY OF PRIESTS WITH AN EMPHASIS ON
PROPHETIC MINISTRY WHICH ANIMATES THE OTHER TWO

Key Note Address
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Introduction

The theme we have chosen for our study and reflection in this Conference is: The Word of God in the Mission and Life of Diocesan Priests in India. This theme is proposed in view of the forthcoming Synod of Bishops on the Word of God scheduled to take place in Rome in the month of October 2008. The objectives of this conference is to help us the priests of India to understand the theme of the Synod much more clearly, to dispose us to accompany the proceeding of the Synod and to inspire us to give the Word of God its due place in our life and mission..

Eminent scholars like Frs. Legrand are going to lead us deeper into the theme of this conference in the line of the Lineamenta. The key-note address I am going to give is only a formality. I would like to compare it to the pressing of a button. The other day I was invited to inaugurate a most modern and very expensive printing machine. I knew nothing of its operation. Everything was set; I had only to press a button and immediately beautiful and multi-coloured pictures were coming out of it. Similarly here also everything is set; inspiring talks are going to come out. I am now standing before you to press the button.

By way of introduction I am asked by the organizers to speak on the "Triple Ministry of priests with an emphasis on Prophetic Ministry which animates the other two." Though this is not a very easy subject to deal with, I venture now to present before you some very simple and very general reflections on this particular theme assigned to me. My presentation has four parts. The first part is a reflection on the Word of God, the content of the prophetic ministry. In the second part we will try to see what is this triple ministry and how the Word of God animates these ministries. The third part will give us an idea of the Indian context in which our priests exercise their triple ministry and the concluding part is a few concrete suggestions for the fruitful exercise of this threefold priestly office.

I. The Word of God

1. The Word of God, a divine medium communicating God's love to all

"God is love" (1 Jn. 4, 8). Love always longs for communication. In God there is communication among the three persons. Our God is Trinity, a loving community. God who is the source and summit of love longs to draw the whole world to himself. The medium by which God communicates himself to the world is his Word. "The Word was God...; all things were made through him" (Jn. 1, 1-3). The role of the Word is thus one of mediation and this is a priestly role. Hence the purpose of God's Word is to gather all human beings into a community of love or the Kingdom of God. Everyone who receives this medium of the Word of God is also called to fulfil the priestly role of a mediator by sharing this experience of God's loving Word with others for the purpose of building up of this community of love.

This Word of God is revealed to the human beings of all ages in a variety of ways, but it reaches its culmination in Jesus Christ in whom "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1, 14; Cfr. Heb. 1, 1-2). Thus Jesus Christ becomes the Mediator par excellence, the Eternal High Priest. In Jesus 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). But as far as we are concerned, the process of sharing God's love will continue until all mankind is gathered together into the Kingdom of God. "Then comes the end, when he delivers the Kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power" (1. Cor. 15, 24).

2. The Word of God and the Church

Jesus instituted the Church as the sign and Sacrament of this Kingdom of God in order to fulfil the priestly role of mediation of relating the whole mankind to God until the Church itself is transformed in to the Kingdom of God at the end of times. The Church is a community of disciples bearing witness to the Gospel or Good News. The Good News is this: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel." The Church is established and it exists for bearing witness to this Good News.

For bearing effective witness the Church should be a believing community, a praying community and a serving community. All these three characteristics are intimately related to the Word of God.

The Church is born and lives by the Word of God. The Church is constantly begotten anew by the Word of God. "You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God (1 Pat. 1, 23). She "listens reverently" (DV.1) the Word of God with a sense of wonder and with a humble and trusting faith she accepts the Word in order to proclaim it faithfully and with fervour. In this "reverent listening" Mary is the model of the Church (cfr. Lineamenta 17).

Our Blessed Mother, as we know, not only reverently listened to the Word of God, but gave her humble response (cfr. Lk. 1, 38) believing that "there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk. 1, 45). Secondly she was treasuring the Word of God reflecting on it in her heart in a spirit of prayer (Cf. Lk. 2, 19-51) and giving praise to God (cfr. Lk. 6, 46-55). Thirdly she translates her experience of God in her actions and shares it with

others in humble service (cf. Lk. 1, 56; Jn 2, 1-11). Because of these three characteristics Mary stands out as a shining model of the Church and a powerful witness to the Gospel.

As in the case of Mary, so in the case of the Church, God takes the initiative of announcing his Word. All those who receive this Word and give a response to it become a believing community (cf. Jn. 1, 12). This Word of God resounding in joy and praise in the heart of these believers makes them a praying or worshipping community. The same Word of God coming to life in the spirit filled activities of the believers renders them a sharing or serving community. By its very presence this believing, praying and serving community becomes a witnessing community, like the leaven, salt and the light of the Gospel. Thus all the characteristics of the Church are derived from the Word of God and are indeed different expressions of the Word of God. There is an indispensable relation between the Word of God and the Church and the Word is essentially needed for the origin, growth and mission of the Church. "The Scriptures are in the heart and hand of the Church", "the supreme rule of her faith" and "the food for the soul and the source of spiritual life" (cfr. DV. 21; Lineamenta 17). It is with this power of God's Word the Church continues to carry out its priestly mission of mediation, bearing effective witness to the Gospel, drawing all people to the community of disciples and moving towards the Kingdom of God. The priest places himself at the service the Church through the exercise of the triple ministry entrusted to him.

3. The Power of God's Word.

The basic thrust of the Judeo-Christian revelation of the Word of God, as we have seen, is the ingathering of the people of God from all corners of the world. It is a very powerful means at our disposal, especially of priests, for the building up of the Church and the eventual realization of the Kingdom of God. But, unfortunately, this power of God's Word is not properly understood and adequately made use of even by many priests.

The Word of God 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 explosives it is indeed a spiritual bomb, which contains enormous powers in itself. 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 breaks rocks 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 forth 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 the soul and spirit, of joints and marrows, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4, 12). God is faithful to his promises and keeps his Word. So the assurance given to us regarding the building-up of the Church by the Word of God and its transformation into the Kingdom of 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" (Mt. 5, 18).

II. The Triple Offices of Priesthood

Traditionally this triple office was presented as that of priest, prophet and king. But today more and more the expressions used are Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments and Leader of the Community. These three offices of priests through inseparable, are related to the three main characteristics of the Church. In the prophetic office, the Word of God is heard and a response is given. This Word is nourished and it becomes flesh in the Sacraments. Pastoral Ministry is intended to share this rich experience of the Word with others and to bring them into the Church.

Jesus Christ is the one who established the Church and builds it up by the exercise of his priestly role of mediation between God and men. The essence of any priesthood is this mediation and the mediation of Jesus Christ contains it itself the duties performed in Israel by priests, prophets and kings. As regards this priesthood of Christ we have to keep the following things in mind:

- unlike the old Testament priesthood there is only one priesthood in the New Testament, the Eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ. It is a unique priesthood ie, it is exclusive and definitive.
- Again unlike the old Testament priesthood the three offices of the N.T priesthood are not the accumulation of different functions in one person; rather it expresses the various aspects of the one and the same mediation.
- Building up of the Church is the responsibility of the entire people of God who share the common priesthood.
- However, the ministerial priest has an important role to play in this building up of the Church. "What determines this singular ecclesial centrality of the priest is the fundamental relation he has with Christ, Head and Pastor, as his Sacramental representation." (Address of John Paul II to the Plenary Session of the Congregation for the clergy 2001, no. 2)

1. The new meaning of the titles 'Priest', 'Prophet' and 'King'.

Another thing we have to keep in mind is that these three aspects of priest, prophet and king are realized in the N.T. Priesthood not in the same way as in the Old Testament, but in an entirely different way. Unless the N.T. priests have a concrete and clear understanding of the new meaning of the titles priest, prophet and king, they will not be able to exercise effectively these three fold office.

a) The new meaning of the title "Prophet"

The feature common to all prophets in the ancient world is that they claimed to speak in the name of and with the authority of their gods. In Israel also prophets were essentially men of the Word, spokesmen (cfr. 4, 15-16, 7, 1-2), instruments through whom God actually revealed himself. Prophets were directly inspired by God to give to the people a particular message in a definite circumstance.

Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish a prophet from the seers who were claiming that they knew secret things hidden from common people. For example, Samuel gives Saul all the required informations regarding the lost asses. This seems to be also a means of livelihood, for it is said that Samuel is to be offered a quarter of a shekel as his fee for providing these informations (cfr. Sam 9). Coming to the classical prophets we see Amaziah calling Amos a seer and advising him to go to the land of Judah to prophesy and thereby find a livelihood (Amos 7, 12-13).

In ancient Israel there were also associations or fraternities of prophets where young aspirants were trained to become prophets. These aspirants are called "sons of the prophets". They lived with a leader at their head who played an important role in their formation and enjoyed great authority. For example in 1 Sam. 19, 20 we see a group of prophets and Samuel standing at their head over them. So also Elisha is presented as a leader of a group of prophets (cfr. 2 Kgs. 4, 38 -f). Groups of prophets were living also in the royal courts. They were either pagan prophets (cfr. 1 Kgs. 18, 20ff) or prophets who degraded themselves from Yehweh's true messengers to become the 'rubber stamps' of the selfish desires of the Israelite kings (cfr. 1 Kgs 22) Amos' reply to Amaziah was a reaction to these categories of the prophets and their attitude: " I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son ... and the Lord took me from following the flock and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people, Israel (Am. 7, 14-15).

Like Amos, Jesus also came from very ordinary circumstance so much so the people were surprised and were asking: "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son?" (Mt. 13, 55). Throughout the Gospel Jesus is presented as a prophet. People were saying, "A great prophet had arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people" (cfr. Lk. 7, 16; Mt. 21, 11). In fact the promise of God given through Moses regarding the coming of a great prophet, different from the various categories of prophets mentioned above was kept alive for centuries: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren" (Dt. 18, 15). In Jesus the people recognized this great prophet. After the multiplication of the bread they said in one voice: "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world" (Jn. 6, 14). For the disciples on their way to Emmaus, Jesus was a prophet "mighty in deed and word" (Lk. 24, 19).

The characteristics which lead the O.T. prophetic ministry to its fulfilment in Jesus are the following.

- Prophet is the man of the Word and the purpose of God's Word is to draw all people to the Kingdom of God where the whole mankind will be united with God and among themselves in love. The teachings of all the prophets, in short, was a revelation of God "who is merciful, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34, 67) and an invitation to a reunion with this God bringing about a radical change in their life and practicing social justice. Jesus also came announcing the same prophetic message: "The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the Gospel" (Mk. 1, 15) In Jesus the Kingdom of God is not only imminent as the prophets were announcing but it is fully realized here and now" (Lk. 17, 21).
- The N.T. prophetic ministry is not restricted to a few individuals or categories of people, but it is extended to all people upon whom as prophet Joel had predicted God will pour out his Spirit (cfr. Joel 2, 8; Act. 2, 17).

- N.T. prophetic ministry is not a mere function of teaching, but involves the entire person. The prophet as a messenger of God stands always for God's claim without any compromise against all adverse circumstances and this leads to frequent confrontation and conflicts. For example Elijah was persecuted (cfr. 1Kgs. 19, 4-8) and Jeremiah was imprisoned (cfr. Jer. 20, 2), ridiculed (cfr. Jer. 20, 7) and condemned (cfr. Jer. 26, 11). This was the fate of all the prophets of Yahweh. Describing this fate of the prophet and applying its fulfilment to himself Jesus says: "Some you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute them from town to town (Mt. 23, 34).

As reflected in the description of Servant of Yahweh in the Book of Isaiah these sacrifices of the prophets are understood as means of salvation which reaches its climax in the Cross of Jesus. When the people took offence at him Jesus said: "A prophet is not without honour except in his own country and in his own house" (Mt. 13, 57). Again, when he was asked to get away from Herod, Jesus said: "It cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem (Lk. 13,33).

In this way we notice a gradual evolution and purification in the understanding and exercise of the prophetic ministry which reaches its completion and fulfilment in Jesus Christ. It is in this ministry of Jesus N.T. priests are participating. As in the case of Jesus so in the case of his minister his first and primary task is the proclamation of the Word of God which involves his entire person and affects his whole life. He stands in the Church and in the world with the same challenges with which Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God and called to the conversion of heart.

b) The new meaning of the title "Priest".

Speaking of the tribe of Levi Moses tells the people of Israel: "The Lord your God has chosen him out of all your tribes to stand before the Lord your God, to do the duties of the sacred ministry, and to bless in the Lord's name, him and his sons for all time" (Dt. 18, 5).

In the blessing of Moses (Dt. 33, 8-11) Levi is presented as a priestly tribe faithful to Yahweh. In all later references Levi appears as a priestly tribe. Both Moses and Aaron belonged to this tribe of Levi. Aaron and his sons are designated (Ex. 28, 1ff) and installed (Lev. 8, 1-10, 20) as priests with Aaron as high priest. This priesthood was hereditary.

Various functions were ascribed to the priest. They were custodians of sanctuaries (Nm. 1, 58, Nm 3, 23-32) men of sacrifice (Dt. 33-10; 2 Chr. 26, 16-20) and men of blessing (Nm. 6, 22-27; Lev. 9,22; Dt. 21, 5).

There are clear evidences which shows that the priesthood of Israel was not restricted to the custody of sanctuaries and sacrificial cult, but it included also teachings and instruction. So like prophets the priests were also men of God's Word. For example, in the blessing of Moses Levi is presented as giving oracles by means of Thummim and Urim and engaged in teaching: "Give to Levi thy Thummum and Urim... They shall teach Jacob thy ordinances and Israel thy law" (Dt. 33, 8-10). There are many passages in the Old Testaments in which Torah is attributed to priest, as judgement is attributed to kings, wisdom to the wise men and visions and messages to prophets (cfr. Mic 3, 11; Jer. 18, 18; Eg. – 7, 26). Moses wrote the law and

entrusted it to the priests, (Dt. 31, 9). This is done not only for safe custody, but also for teaching (cfr. Dt. 33, 10; Hos. 4, 6; Mal. 2, 7). The priest was delivering his instructions from the sanctuary, often regarding the correct way of offering worship to God (cfr. Lev. 10, 16-11; Ezk 22, 26, Esk. 44, 23; Hog. 2, 11-13). We see also that this teaching role of the priests goes beyond cultic precepts and extended to morality and religion.

From the time of exile onwards the priest ceases to have the monopoly of teaching Torah. Teaching was gradually separated from the Temple. Torah was read and interpreted mainly in the Synagogues. For this interpretation a new class of learned men called scribes or the teachers of the law (Rabbi – Rabboni) came to the scene. At the time of Jesus anyone of the Jews, priest, levite or an ordinary lay man could become a Rabbi.

Jesus does not belong to a priestly family and he has nothing to do with the temple worship of his time which was limited to the sacrificial cult and defiled by political intrigues. In Jesus there emerges a totally different priesthood, a perfect priesthood, a spiritual priesthood.

- In the Gospel we see Jesus assuming the wider priestly function of teaching and instruction and engaged in the interpretation of the law. Often we hear the people calling him Rabbi or Rabboni (Cfr. Jn. 1, 38; 1, 49; 6, 25; 20, 16). There is a difference in this teaching of Jesus. As Mathew indicates: "The people were astonished at his teaching; for he taught them as one having authority and not as the Scribes" (Mt. 7, 28-29). This is the authority of one who is greater than Jonah and Solomon (cfr. Mt. 12, 38-42), the authority of the Son on Man who "is Lord of Sabbath" (Mt. 12, 8).
- In the Old Testament there existed the idea of priesthood, not only of a special tribe or class, but also of the entire people. Addressing Israel God says: "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19, 6; cfr. Is. 61, 6). It is this universal priesthood Jesus exercises and brings it to its perfection by sharing it with everyone who believes in him.
- Attempts are there in the Old Testament to spiritualize and interiorize the idea of sacrifice. Samuel said to Saul: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Sam 15, 22). In the Book of Psalms we read: "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken heart" (Ps. 51-17; 50, 8). Very clearly this trend is seen in the following verses of the Psalm, which in Hebrew 10, 5-8 is applied to Jesus Christ: "Sacrifice and offering thou dost not desire... Lo, I come... I delight to do thy will O my God" (Ps. 40, 6-8). In this background it is possible to understand the total self-gift of Jesus to the Father for the sake of his people as a sacrifice (Mk. 10, 45; Mt. 26, 28ff... Rom. 3, 5; 5, 9; Eph. 13-23). It is this new and spiritual priesthood, where priest and victim, are one and the same, Jesus brings to its perfection and shares it with his ministers in a special way for the building up of his Church.

c) The new meaning of the title "King" or "Shepherd".

The image of the Shepherd emerged from the nomadic background of Israel. Shepherds were leading the flock with unchallenged authority as their leader and companion. As it is reflected in Psalm 23, from the very beginning Yahweh was the Shepherd of Israel. As long as Yahweh was with them they feared no evil. His rod and staff protected and comforted them. But instead of following Yahweh's path of righteousness they went astray and put only blind trust

in Yahweh. To teach them a lesson Yahweh abandoned them into the hands of their enemies and in the battle of Aphek (1 Sm. 4) he allowed the Philistines to capture even the Ark of the Covenant, the visible sign of Yahweh's presence in the midst of his people. Such an experience weakened the faith of Israel in Yahweh and shattered all their hopes of ever overcoming their enemies with the help of the Ark of the Covenant. The elders of Israel came to Samuel and asked him to appoint a king to lead them as their shepherd (cfr. 1 Sam.8). When Samuel consulted, the Lord said: "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them" (1 Sm 8, 7). Samuel told them clearly that instead of protecting and guiding them, the king they are demanding is going to oppress and exploit them (cfr. 1 Sm. 10-18). But in spite of all these warnings of Samuel they wanted a king for themselves as their shepherd to lead and guide them and Samuel yielded to their pressure.

In course of time the kings neglected their responsibilities and misused their authority. They were rejected by God and from that time onwards the image of the Shepherd began to center on a new leader, the Messiah. "Woe to the Shepherds who scatter the sheep of my pasture" laments Jeremiah (Jer. 13, 1-4).

Ezekiel says that once again Yahweh himself is going to be the shepherd of his flock. "Behold, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out... I will feed them on the mountain of Israel... I myself shall be the shepherd of sheep... I will seek the lost and bring back the strayed and will bind up the crippled. I will feed them in justice (Ezk. 34, 11-16. cfr. Michah. 4, 6). Thus the messianic kingdom is seen as an era in which Yahweh himself will take care of his people; the Messiah will be the chief Shepherd and there will be shepherds after God's own heart (cfr. Jer. 3, 15).

- In the New Testament this shepherd theme is taken and Jesus is presented as the new shepherd promised by God (Mt. 10, 6; 15, 24; Lk. 12, 32; Mt. 26, 36; Lk. 15, 4-7). The main text, however, is Jn. 10 based on Ezk. 34. What is highlighted in the text is the mutual knowledge of shepherd and sheep (10, 3), the exclusiveness of the shepherd as the only door against thieves and robbers (10, 7-10) and the shepherd laying down his life for the sheep that they should have life (10, 11-17).
- Jesus is so much concerned about the welfare of his flock that he entrusts it to Peter only after making sure of his love (cfr. Jn. 21, 15-17).
- Peter speaks of the spirit in which the pastors are to exercise their office. ie, "not domineering but being examples of the flock" (1 Pet. 5, 3). The disciples were very slow to learn this lesson. Already Jesus told his disciples: "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. "Since they did not grasp the full meaning of this advice, once again Jesus teaches this lesson by an example in the last supper. After washing the feet of the disciples Jesus said to them: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also have to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (Jn. 13, 14-15).
- This office is not limited to political and social authority, but refers to the entire life of the people. In particular it included the task of teaching. The primary task of the

shepherds is to feed the flock; they have to feed them, above all, with the Word of God. The Word of God is food indeed. The prophet Ezekiel was asked to eat the scroll which had writings on the front and on the back (Ezk 2, 9-3, 1). Jeremiah says: "Thy words were found and I ate them and thy words became to me a joy and delight of my heart" (Jer. 15, 16).

2. The inferiority and superiority of the triple office of the N.T Priesthood.

- Coming to the prophetic office, the N.T. minister is less a prophet than the prophets of Israel. The reason is that he is no longer announcing a new message from God. God has already spoken his final word in Jesus Christ and it is for the N.T. priest to interpret it for his time.

At the same time the N.T. priest has the privilege of proclaiming the perfect and final message fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Because of this perfection, finality and sublimity of the message and the union of the messenger with Christ the New Testament priesthood is far more superior.

- Priests of all religions perform their priestly functions of offerings, sacrifice, prayers, etc.. as their own actions for the sake of the people. But the N.T priest has no sacrifice of his own; his ministry is not his own, but continuation and representation of the mediating mission of Jesus Christ. Whereas the levitical priest stands in a highly dignified position in his relation to the unworthy people when he offers sacrifice, the sacrifice of the N.T. is offered by Christ in union with all his faithful, who are a royal priesthood and a holy nation, to whom the N.T minister renders humble service.

From another point of view the N.T. priesthood is superior to the levitical priesthood. The service he renders is no more in the realm of shadows, but of the fulfilled salvation. The sacrifice he offers is final and total. The people whom he serves are dignified.

- In the exercise of his pastoral ministry also the N.T minister stands in a lower position compared to the king of Israel. The authority exercised by the shepherd of Israel over their people was autonomous independent and unchallenged. Now the N.T. shepherd has no authority of his own and no flock of his own. He has to feed the sheeps of Jesus (cfr. Jn. 21, 15-17) with the spirit of humble service (cfr. Mk. 10, 42-45) according to the example given to him by Christ (Jn. 13, 15).

The superiority of the New Testament pastoral office is derived from the fact that he guides the people in union with Jesus and Jesus says: "He who receives you receives me, and he who receive me receives him who sent me" (Mt. 10, 40). Because of this identification with Jesus, he makes Christ present in the midst of his people and guides them safely in the light of the Holy Spirit.

III. The Indian Context : Signs of the Times

As the theme itself suggests our reflections in this Conference are focused on the Diocesan priests of India. So we have to look into the Indian context in which priests proclaim the dynamic Word of God through the exercise of their triple ministry. Jesus calls us "to read the signs of the times" (Mt. 16, 3). This means 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" (GS. 4).

Now what are the signs of the times we read today around us? Of course there are lights and shadows. The observation of Pope John Paul II in *Ecclesia in Asia* is all the more applicable to our motherland: "Asian people 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" (E.A.6). We are proud of the significant contributions the Church in India is making to our motherland especially in the sectors of education, social development and health-care. Christians who are less than three percent of the total population of India cater to 20% of all the primary education in India, 10% of all the literacy and community health care, 25% of all the existing care of the orphans and widows and 30% of all the existing care of handicapped, lepers, aids-patients, etc.. We are a peace-loving people who go on proclaiming to all for the last two millennium the dynamic Word of God. These and similar bright signs are many and they are taken for granted. Now there is another side. There are many obstacles on our journey towards the Kingdom of God. Some of these shadow signs are the following:

(a) Shadow signs in our country as a whole

1. In India 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 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 a 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.
5. Indian society is 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 committed 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, sexual violence and juvenile delinquency.
10. Terrorism is becoming more and more widespread. Frequent and unexpected attacks of the terrorists are a constant threat to the stability of our societies and to a normal and peaceful coexistence. 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.

(b) Shadow signs in the Church

The Church in India, situated in this context of plurality, fundamentalism, terrorism, pain and suffering is called to bring about God's reign, the Kingdom of 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 India 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.

(c) Shadow signs in the life and mission of our priests

1. What St. Gregory the Great said centuries ago about priests is valid even today. He writes; "It grieves us to have to say that the labourers for the great harvest are few; because there are not enough people to preach the good news, although there are people waiting to hear it. We see around us a world full of priests, but it is very rare to find a labourer in God's harvest because we are not doing the work demanded by our priesthood although we accepted the office". (cfr. Breviary week 27 of the year, Saturday)
2. In the 2007 September issue of the magazine "Jivan" Fr. Ama Samy tells the story of a very intelligent, affable and serviceable seminarian who decided to leave the seminary because of faith-crisis. He was told by his superiors that this was something normal and the crisis will pass away in course of time. He was asked to find meaning in priesthood in terms of his option for the poor and downtrodden. Actually he was a social worker before joining the seminary and because of the same faith crisis he decided to become a seminarian longing for a deeper God-experience. If this is not possible in the seminary he was wondering what is the point of sacrificing his life to end up in mere social work!

What about his companions he was asked. Did they not have such questions? He answered that quite a few were having the same questions, problems, doubts he himself was going through. But then, some did not want to probe any deeper, some were rather agnostic and opportunistic, some preferred the securities and privileges of priesthood and others hoped that the questions would disappear gradually.

After telling this story Fr. Ama Samy makes the following observation: "There is a serious crisis facing the priesthood and many priests are behaving like the proverbial ostriches or like the blind man leading the blind. Our priests are good social workers, church administrators, organizers, philosophers and theologians, but seem not to be God-realized persons. Many priests are obsessed with the human to the forgetfulness of God and grace. In reality they are trying to cover up and hide the atheism of their hearts in external works and achievements.

3. A concrete example of the above mentioned observation is the famous theologian Charles Davis. A little before he left priesthood he made the following confession in the review "America": "After Vatican II I was enthusiastic about the prospects there were for Church renewal, for updating and changing structures. I would offer to packed audiences the wonderful new theology of Vatican II that contained such rich potentials for aggiornamento and reform. But gradually it dawned upon me that all

those faces turned up towards me were not seeking a new theology; they were seeking God. They were not looking up to me as a theologian with a message, but as a priest who might be able to offer them God. They were obviously hungry for God. Then I would look into myself and realize with a sinking heart that I could not offer them God; I barely had him myself! There was a great void in my heart and the more I was with things like Church-reform and updating and structures, even with the liturgical renewal and scripture studies and pastoral methods, the easier it was for me to escape from God, to escape from the void of my heart." If we are honest enough, most of us will be forced to make similar confessions.

IV. Suggestions for a fruitful exercise of the triple office through an effective proclamation of the Word of God.

Of course, all the threatening and frightening shadow signs indicated above are there in and around us. But we do have also the Word of God at our disposal. This Word of God, as we have seen, is dynamic and creative, i.e., 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?

1. 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. Js. 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).

2. In order to be faithful to his prophetic ministry the priest should have a clear message to convey to the people. Some critics observe that people today are more and more tired of sophisticated preachers preaching meaningless answers to unintelligible questions. This may be an exaggeration, but there is some truth in it. The priest should listen to the

Word of God, ponder it in his heart like Mary and speak with conviction and with an urgency of sharing his joy with others so that his joy may be complete (cfr. 1 Jn, 1, 4).

3. Exercise of the prophetic ministry demands that the priest should be a watchman. He should be the first one to sense dangers, give warnings in time, denounce evil, invite the people to repentance and show the way that leads to the Kingdom of God.
4. Jesus took part in the prayers of the Synagogues and worship in the Temple. He spoke about Sabbath, temple, altar, offerings, etc.... He taught the people to keep the spirit, not the letter of the law. In our liturgical celebrations also the Word of God occupies a privileged place. According to the Second Vatican Council, the Word of God plays such an important role that without Bible there is no liturgy: "Sacred Scriptures is of the greatest importance in the liturgy. For it is from it the lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung. It is from the scripture that the prayers, collects and hymns draw their inspiration and their force and that actions and signs derive their meaning." (S.C. 24). Therefore the cultic actions performed by the priest should not end up with the valid and exact performance of the rites, and their consumption by the people. Due importance is to be given to the Word and the priest should explain the rites and lead the people to a meaningful and fruitful celebration, where the Word is not a message of the past, but a reality present here and now.
Meaningful celebration is one of the effective means of moulding the people and empowering them to carry out the mission entrusted to them.
5. Jesus Christ the prophet was crucified for bearing witness to the truth, Christ the priest offered himself as the victim on the cross; Christ the shepherd laid down his life for his sheep. So sacrifice is intimately related to the life and mission of Christ. For a fruitful exercise of the triple ministry the priest should be prepared to go through the tensions of the process of the messenger becoming the message, the priest becoming the sacrifice and the shepherd becoming the lamb.
6. Many priests easily become discouraged and frustrated when they have to face difficulties and oppositions. They should realize that an active involvement in the triple ministry is the most effective means of their own empowerment and sanctification. The challenges of this ministry are meant to help them to purify themselves and to strengthen their union with Christ. Through this active involvement in their triple ministry they not only share their God-experience with others, but they themselves are enriched by the rich God-experience of the people.
7. For a fruitful exercise of his pastoral office the priest should cultivate human qualities in himself. Like Jesus he should have a large heart to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.
8. The ministry of Jesus was not limited to the people of Israel, but was extended to all the people. Likewise the priest today should not be satisfied in serving the Catholics; all the people living within the boundary of his parish should find a place in the exercise of his triple ministry.
9. Jesus, although he was all-powerful, associated his disciples and all the people who believed in him, in his ministry. The priest today should come out of his mental setup

of assuming all the responsibilities upon himself. The whole community is called to bear witness to the Gospel and there are tremendous potentials in the people. The priest has to discover, encourage and recognize these various charisms scattered among the people of God. Instead of monopolizing, if he is able to coordinate these charisms, they will blossom into various lay ministries and will facilitate the fruitfulness of his triple ministry.

10. There is so much unbelief indifference, suspicion and opposition around us. The lack of faith that is tired, desperate, skeptical and aggressive will not let itself be overcome by teachings and arguments, but only by actions and examples. The priest must have the conviction, commitment and zeal when he is engaged in the exercise of this triple ministry. The Word of God is fire (cfr. Jer. 23, 29) powerful to inflame hearts (cfr. Lk. 24, 32) what is decisive is to have a heart full of burning love for Christ. A heart filled with love and ardour kindles others and conquers everything.

Conclusion

S.D. Gordon has a beautiful story about the ascension of Jesus into heaven. I would like to conclude this key-note address with this story which is familiar to most of us. When the grand welcome ceremony was over, the archangel Gabriel approached Jesus to clarify his doubts. He said, "I know that only very few in Palestine are aware of the great work of human salvation you have accomplished through your suffering, death and resurrection. But the whole world should know and appreciate it and become your disciples, acknowledging you as their Lord and Saviour. What is your plan of action?" Jesus answered: "I have told all my apostles to tell other people about me and preach my message through their lives. That's all". "Suppose they don't do that" Gabriel asked, "What is your plan B?" Jesus replied, "I have no other plan, I am counting them". Yes, Jesus has called us and entrusted us his triple ministry knowing very well our insignificance, shortcomings and the many shadow signs in and around us. We are weak, but he is strong. He invites us to abide in him and assures us that we will bear much fruit. (cfr. Jn 15, 4-5). He has no other plan to shed the light of the Gospel on our motherland. He is counting on each one of us to make him known, loved and accepted by all around us.

Thank you.