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THE ISSUE OF "RITES" IN THE INDIAN CHURCH:

A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Statement of the Sixteenth Annual Meeting of the Indian Theological Association.

Kristu Jyoti College, Bangalore–560 036

(April 20-23, 1993)

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I. Introduction

1. We, the members of the Indian Theological Association, have gathered together in Bangalore, to address ourselves to the issues connected with the existence of the three Catholic Individual Churches in India - Syro-Malabar, Latin and Syro-Malankara - especially in their interrelationship. We are not unaware of the existence of the other historical Churches in India, Eastern and Western, and the United Churches of recent times. Through these reflections we intend to offer a theological perspective, which we hope will enable the three Catholic Individual Churches to fulfill better their common mission in our land.

2. At the very outset, we would like to clarify two key terms which are all important for an understanding of this document.

By Individual Church, we mean a community proclaiming the Christ event *sui juris* with its own identity; whereas by Rite, we mean the liturgical, theological, spiritual and disciplinary patrimony, characterized by the culture and history of the people, through which an Individual Church expresses its faith and life. Rite, therefore, is distinguished from mere liturgical rites and rubrics.

3. To live in our world is to relate, one to the other. Community, in its most of authentic form, is made of persons who are aware of their self-identity and who choose in freedom to share their lives with one another. To relate belongs to the very fabric of human fulfillment, destiny and personhood. Relationship enables us to find support for our goals, guidance in the face of challenge, and reassurance in doubt. To relate implies an acceptance of plurality that can be mutually affirming and complementary. It is also an invitation to exercise our freedom, not only on our own behalf, but in the service of the other. Relationship presupposes harmony, wholeness and completion. Relating remains an ongoing experience for human persons who evolve in varied contexts and situations.

4. The Catholic Individual Churches in India are communities of persons, which express their faith in God's presence in the Christ event. They do this as they are called to a relationship of communion and collaboration, and in so doing, they give evidence to the reality of God's kingdom in the world. The Churches express their existence sacramentally, by the living out of their spirituality, and especially in the celebration of the sacraments.

5. Sacramental expression is the work of the Spirit and enables persons to realise their communion with God by experiencing communion among themselves. The different Individual Churches with their particular ritual celebrations, are God's gift to our land and represent the rich variety of God's saving presence in our midst. In pastoral practice, however, there has been a strained relationship between the Latin and the Oriental Churches in our land.

6. Various factors account for these strains, among which are the "accidents" of history and human frailty. However, since the sacramental expressions through rites, could not conceivably be the cause of these difficulties among the Churches, it would serve the purpose of all concerned to underline the theological underpinnings of these rites, which could then be seen for what they are : opportunities for inter-ecclesial collaboration and cooperation

7. Sacramental expressions in the rites are concrete ways in which persons are called to be Church, i.e. communities in which the kingdom values are discerned, fostered and lived out. These expressions are really the effect of God's Word present in the communities, a Word that is dynamic, transforming and fulfilling. An Individual Church comes about when people hear God's Word and gather together to live out its saving significance. Hence the Church should be considered, neither only as a structured organization, nor as a pure event of God distanced from the concrete community context. By their reality, Churches are called to express themselves in their rites so that the fuller witness to the Christ event shines forth for all the world to see.

8. In our times, events taking place on the national scene fill us with anxiety, since they threaten to break our pluriform unity, call into question our great history of openness and acceptance and deny the absolute worth of the human person. There is need for the Churches, in obedience to the Word of God, to proclaim in action, a harmony and unity which are the fruits of mutual acceptance and respect.

The Inter-Ritual Situation

9. Recent developments, such as the promulgation of the Latin and Oriental Codes, the restructuring of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, the emergence of the Syro-Malabar Church as an archiepiscopal Church, which have ushered in a new era of inter-ritual sharing and collaboration, have also given rise to many issues which are unsettling. At times, they have occasioned mutual recrimination, a spirit of rivalry and a sense of mistrust.

10. Often enough, the communities of the laity are the helpless spectators in a Church situation where human relationships tend to be politicized. Not infrequently, points of discipline have taken precedence over pastoral care. Often postures have been assumed by the leadership to safeguard their own interests, rather than to render service to the people, especially the poor and the marginalized. This

seems to suggest that in the name of the Gospel, other values are being prioritized. The outcome is a counter-witness to Christ and to what the Individual Catholic Churches should be proclaiming.

11. The problems or issues arising from the inter-ecclesial conflicts should lead us to a discerning understanding of what it means to be Church, help us to appreciate the context and function of rites in the Individual Churches, and above all, to discover how a successful mode of inter-ritual or inter-ecclesial cooperation can effectively offer service to the people of India.

II. The Image of the Church

The Church as a Communion of Churches

12. The Church understands itself as the People of God; however, a monolithic concept of catholicity had often replaced the understanding of the Church as a communion. Vatican II describes the universal Church as a communion of Churches both of the East and of the West, united in the same faith and sacraments under the supreme authority of the Roman Pontiff: "The Holy Catholic Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ, is made up of the faithful who are organically united in the Holy Spirit by the same faith, the same sacraments and the same government. They combine into different groups, which are held together by their hierarchy, and so form particular Churches or rites" (OE,2) This communion of Churches had its roots and foundation in the ecclesial communities which emerged in the apostolic period. The one Church of Christ made its appearance as many faith communities, each having its own specific characteristics with regard to government, worship and life-style. Thus we have the Church in Ephesus, in Jerusalem, in Corinth, each one an ecclesial community in communion with the others. The unity and catholicity were based on mutual recognition and communion, and not on the imposition of a common administrative or juridical structure. The existence of various Individual Churches in the Church is the best

expression of the Church of Christ which keeps alive the tradition of authentic catholicity and communion.

13. The structures of government and worship of these ecclesial communities emerged from within their life. These were authentic Churches, having within them, all that is necessary to constitute them into the Body of Christ. In course of time, they were less correctly called "rites", a term which in some sense diminished their ecclesial identity, and reduced them to mere groupings of Christians within a monolithic catholicity. Being authentic Churches, they developed their own particular ecclesial expressions, such as liturgical celebrations, administrative structures, popular devotions etc. These specific expressions of their faith were the manifestations of the vitality of the Holy Spirit operative within them. They were thus able to manifest the catholicity of the Church in a rich variety of expressions and through a deep communion of sharing among the various Churches.

14. The theological reflection of the Church was the result of the whole community living out its faith in a variety of cultural expressions, and sharing this faith in deep communion among themselves. Their entire Christian life became for them an articulation of their faith. Their liturgy celebrated their faith through symbols that unfolded its rich content; their spirituality emerged from their experience of such celebrations; their administrative system reflected the dynamism of their Christian relationship. They interpreted their faith not primarily through intellectual categories, but rather through a lived experience of it in their community. Thus the subject of theological reflection for them, was the community that lived its faith in its particular historical, cultural and social context.

The Apostolicity of the Individual Churches

15. The origin of the Church is Jesus' Gospel to the poor, continued by the apostolic ministry of the Word. The community came into existence by the power of the Good News (Rom. 1:16), to which the apostles bore witness in

the force of the Spirit (Acts. 1:8). The apostolicity of the Church does not rest so much on a community owing its origin to an individual apostle as on its awareness of sharing the apostolic community's faith experience as lived out in the New Testament era. This experience of the apostolic community has its ultimate source in the Risen, Christ and it is this experience that makes it competent to proclaim the Gospel. An apostle therefore, is a qualified witness who through his ministry, makes the Risen Christ present in the midst of the community, so that all those who accept his word become believers in Christ. Hence, to call the Church 'apostolic'', means to affirm that the community has an authentic experience of the Risen Christ, founded on the apostolic community, mediated by a person or persons, who have had in their turn an experience of the Risen Christ.

16. In order to make sure that the community continues to be authentic in its faith experience, it is necessary that there be a continuity with the original experience. The process by which this continuity is maintained is called 'tradition'. This is the result of a dynamic rootedness in the past which manifests itself in a constant movement towards the future. Tradition is like the rear mirror in a vehicle. Just as the driver is able to steer safely by looking into the mirror from time to time to know what is behind him, so too the Churches can witness authentically to the Christ event in today's world by making themselves aware of the past. But for past tradition to remain meaningful, it must be reinterpreted, not repeated, in the present. It is this reinterpretation that will ensure a life-enhancing movement towards the future. Hermeneutics plays an important role here, for it is only through an exercise of proper hermeneutics and not only through a historical exegesis of the past, that an authentic tradition is maintained and becomes operational.

The Church as Sacrament of Salvation

17. The faith experience that is kept alive through a dynamic tradition has to be sacramentalised, so that the Christian community becomes an authentic witness to the

Risen Christ in the contemporary situation. It is for this reason that Vatican II calls the Church, the sacrament of salvation. The Church makes Christ the redeemer become present in the midst of the world, proclaiming his message of salvation in the particular situation and historical context in which it lives and operates.

18. A sacrament is a transforming symbol, that is, it proclaims the reality that is signified, as well as challenges those for whom it is offered, because of its dynamic character. The Church's sacramental symbols of faith celebrate its own life as well as its prophetic witness; they do this by questioning critically the Church's own life of faith, and by challenging society at large. The three Catholic Individual Churches in India are sacramental expressions of the Church of Christ in this country. All of them therefore, are called to be authentic signs, namely to proclaim in an intelligible way, the saving presence of the Risen Lord in this country. Besides, in doing this, they must be such signs, so as to be capable of questioning all the ambiguous and sinful structures of human society, in which they are called to exercise their sacramental presence. While each of these three Churches has to do this in its own particular way, all of them should be discernible signs which courageously challenge all that is not in accordance with the Gospel principles. Only in so doing, can they justify their existence in this country as a specific ecclesial manifestation. In other words, the specific way in which an Individual Church manifests its sacramentality should have for its objective, not merely the revealing of its particular tradition(s), but the shaping of its energies which derive from its rootedness in the past, into a powerful force for the transformation of the society in which it lives.

Autonomous Self-Expression of the Church: Inculturation

19. For the Church to become dynamically sacramental in the world, it must be involved in the life of the people. This is the purpose of inculturation. Sacramentality becomes operative through a process of genuine incarnation, an

enfleshment of the Word in order to make it become a word that questions and challenges every human reality. All the three Catholic Individual Churches in India need to undergo this process. The effectiveness of their mission depends to a great extent on their ability to inculturate themselves in the milieu in which they exist and operate.

III. Autonomy and Communion within the Church of Christ

20. The Catholic Church in India is in reality a communion of three Individual Churches. Since an Individual Church is a moral person, and the Church in India a communion of Churches, it is imperative to appreciate and accept these Churches as 'persons' with equal dignity, rights and obligations. Such a Church is an autonomous Church. Autonomy is not something that one obtains from someone or somewhere, but it is a constitutive element in the very being of a person or a Church. It is an essential condition for both, a free and genuine self-expression and self-determination. It is the result of the action of the Spirit in a given community, and not a mere juridical concession made over by the hierarchy. God sends his Word and Spirit into the community in order that He may bring it into being and make it operative. "Autonomos" means to be operative according to a norm that is self-contained - not self produced - which is, in fact, the law of the Spirit. God sends his Word and gift to each person to build up the community.

21. On the other hand, the autonomy of the Individual Churches is to be understood in the context of the communion uniting Churches together. Like any interrelationship, this communion may call for mutual sacrifice in an attitude of kenotic love (1 Cor. 13:4-7). A sign of this communion is found in the Petrine ministry (Mt. 16:17-19) entrusted to the Roman Patriarch, whose role it is to foster the communion among the Churches and to function as a visible sign of unity, while at the same time, safeguarding the identity of the Individual Churches.

22. Autonomy should not be identified solely with that authority exercised by the official leaders of the Churches, which can often degenerate into ecclesiastical autocracy. It should be linked up with the larger base of the faithful which calls for lay participation. Hence the communitarian decision-making, as was practised in the ancient ecclesiastical tradition in India, must be revived.

23. Since the Individual Churches are autonomous, the domination of one Church over another is to be avoided. There cannot be an authentic communion of the Churches without an I-Thou relationship between the given Churches that ensures respect for the other's identity, recognises the other as equal and accepts the special nature of the other.

24. At present, all the three Catholic Individual Churches in India do not enjoy their legitimate autonomy because of the several regulations and sanctions which impose undue restrictions on their functioning. The Churches should certainly strive for and aim at achieving genuine autonomy. It is to be noted that the Catholic Oriental Churches in India are in the process of regaining their legitimate autonomy. At this juncture, unless the Latin Church too grows towards this, one cannot expect to have a genuine communion of Churches in this country.

25. It is true that the ultimate basis of autonomy is the Spirit in whom the Churches have their being. However, while the Individual Churches strive for legitimate autonomy, the communitarian and faith dimension should never be lost sight of.

Practical Ways of Implementing the Equality of the Churches

26. Though a theological restatement of ecclesiology is called for as a suitable background for establishing the equality of the Churches, that alone will not solve the problem at the existential level. A readiness in practice, to accept the equality of all the Churches, in spite of the present

problems and limitations, should be the starting point. It is not merely the law that will help in this process, but above all the spirit of love.

27. Elements that bring about a situation where one Church becomes a threat to another should be avoided. Every effort should be made to engender and foster mutual trust, confidence and cooperation. The fear of losing or sharing one's power and being threatened by the other are signs of insecurity and unwillingness to accept the other as equal. Here a listening to each other is essential. But this listening is possible only when different Churches accept one another as equals. No one Church should be treated as a subordinate to whom some concessions are granted.

28. We therefore suggest that all the three Catholic Individual Churches in the country be invited to work in all dioceses in collaboration with the local Ordinary; and at the same time, be given the right to establish their parishes or Churches as the case or need may be, on the basis of the equality of rights of the different Churches. Matters such as, why one Church considers the other a threat, and why one is afraid of the other, should be reflected upon together. These feelings of insecurity and fear can be gradually eliminated in and through this dialogue.

29. Since the Church is a mystery endowed with the variety and richness of the different Individual Churches, each Individual Church should see the other as a blessing and a complement to its own way of being and functioning. The communion of Churches is not to be seen as part of a super-institution or organization, but as a community at the service of the mission of Jesus.

30. The autonomy and individuality of the Churches thus being established, we consider it the duty of each Individual Church to evolve its own liturgical rites based on its traditions and the cultural context in which it finds itself.

31. It is also our wish that increasingly priests belonging to different rites live together in one parish taking care of

their respective faithful. In a spirit of genuine communion, the Churches should also work towards a gradual convergence on different aspects of the issues which confront them. Such a programme of action will certainly be appreciated by the faithful of all Churches.

32. With a view to furthering the communion of the Churches, we also envisage the possibility of evolving common Indian liturgies and anaphoras, drawing inspiration from any one or all the ecclesial traditions in India.

IV. The Churches and their Mission in India

33. The Church is missionary by its very nature. This fact has been emphasized in the documents of Vatican II. The missionary endeavour takes precedence over all other aspects of its functioning. The constitutive character of the evangelizing mission of the Church is common to all the Individual Churches: "(Individual Churches or rites) are consequently of equal dignity, so that none of them is superior to others by reason of rite. They enjoy the same rights and are under the same obligation, even with respect to preaching the Gospel to the whole world under the guidance of the Roman Pontiff" (OE 3). Restrictions of any sort, whether imposed by another Church, or caused by introvert preoccupation concerning the preservation of one's patrimony, should not in any way impede the fulfillment of the obligation to evangelize. The autonomy of the Individual Churches is linked to the missionary task of the Church. The Holy Spirit, the principle that vitalizes the presence and growth of the Church, is the chief agent of evangelization.

34. In so far as there are three Catholic Individual Churches in India with their members spread all through the country, and further, with vast territories where Christianity is absent, the evangelizing mission of the Church encounters a special situation. Here we distinguish between evangelizing the members of a Church and evangelizing society at large. The former would refer to ministering to the spiritual needs of the members of an Individual Church in their own ecclesial

tradition. "Therefore attention should everywhere be given to the preservation and growth of each individual Church. For this purpose parishes and special hierarchy should be established for each where the spiritual good of the faithful so demand' (OE 4). Evangelization in the latter sense would mean that each Individual Church be given the possibility and freedom to evangelize people everywhere, irrespective of particular jurisdictional claims, in mutual consultation.

35. Answers to the following questions could be of great service to solve the problems peculiar to India: 1) What precisely is meant by the evangelization of peoples in the Indian context? What form should it take? 2) What are the concrete ways in which the three Catholic Individual Churches in India can effectively and fruitfully fulfill the obligation of evangelization? In order to gain a contextual understanding of the mission we have to keep in mind the two aspects of the Indian reality, viz. the rich ancient and composite cultural and spiritual heritage of our country, and the great problems such as fundamentalism, exploitation, oppression, marginalization, discrimination against women, dalits, tribals etc. The mission of the Churches in India today has to be situated in this context.

36. Evangelization is the sharing of the Christ-experience of the community of the faithful. In our context of religious pluralism, this sharing should be done in a spirit of dialogue. Such dialogue will necessarily presuppose the readiness to accept the other as other on the one hand, and openneess to change on the other. Thus evangelization carried out in a dialogical atmosphere would lead to self-transformation. Considering the socio-economic and political situation of India, urgent attention is to be paid to bringing about peace, reconciliation, justice, equality and fullness of life in all its dimensions. This is fully consonant with the values of the reign of God proclaimed by the Church. It is also important that the Church show a readiness to collaborate with all people of good will to fight against every form of oppression and marginalization in society.

37. Care must be taken to avoid all forms of scandal that could arise from inter-Church rivalries in the course of exercising their mission. Keeping in mind the priorities of ecclesial existence, a *modus vivendi* and a *modus operandi* should be agreed upon. Among the three Individual Churches, there should be careful planning and effective cooperation so as to bring forth the best fruits, and avoid wastage of energy and personnel .Inter-ecclesial commissions should be set up to facilitate the work of evangelization in unity and charity. The birth and growth of new communities should be determined by the authentic heritage and genius of the people with whom the Gospel interacts in the process of evangelization. The evangelizers should also be able to relativize their own ecclesial heritage and not impose alien rites and traditions on the newly emerging communities. Further, an eschatological thrust should be given in understanding and shaping the ecclesial traditions and their identity.

38. In a true fraternal spirit, and respecting the charism of persons, everyone should be given the freedom to live and work in the Church of his/her choice. We could also envisage an interim period during which pastors are given faculties of "bi-ritualism" or "tri-ritualism" when and where pastoral needs warrant it. The different Individual Churches must also readily share places of worship instead of wasting their valuable resources in multiplying buildings. Further, there should be regular consultations and sharing of information and views in the fields of evangelization and pastoral care among the hierarchs of all the three Churches. Finally provision must be made so as to train the members of each Church in the traditions of the other Churches so that mutual recognition and appreciation can be fostered and the effectiveness of evangelization be safeguarded.

V. The Emerging Church

39. The Church, as we have seen, is a communion of all the Churches. This principle should go beyond all institutional aspects, because it is the people who make up the communion.

The different Churches, while being autonomous, cannot remain closed in on themselves, but should be open to one another. If each of the Churches were to be convinced of this, they would be in duty bound to cooperate with one another in fostering and furthering the growth of the Kingdom of God in our land. They would not do this under fear of threat, or loss of face or of dignity, but in true obedience to Christ as unworthy servants who do no more than what they are expected to.

40. However, today autonomy in the Indian Church is generally seen as the right of the hierarchy. It does not percolate to the level of the parishes and people of God. India has a centuries-old tradition of self-government. In fact, the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala were self-governing communities for several centuries. The Oriental Churches of the past were in fact people-centred communities; they were not autocratic. The ancient practice of Church Assemblies *(Palliyogam)* could be revitalized in such a way that the modern parish councils do not remain merely consultative bodies, but truly participate in building up the Body of Christ (LG 32,33).

41. This would mean that the Churches understand clearly the role of the laity and recognize their rightful place in the ongoing life and mission of the Church. Time and again we hear that the laity are in a better position to evangelize the world because they can freely mingle with the people of other faiths in the world. At times this is a subtle way of relegating them to works outside the Church, while the clergy reserve to themselves the spiritual ministry. Such a compartmentalization of the roles of the clergy and the laity is contrary to the spirit of the Gospel and Vatican II.

42. Lay people should be given adequate representation in the parish councils and in the management of the temporal affairs of the Church, since it is they who form almost the entire body of the Church in every place.

43. Both in the world outside and in the Church, women are denied their rightful share in every sphere. This is to ignore the fact that they have a greater role to play in the family and in the Church as a whole and not just in the formation and education of their children and in the fostering of vocations to the priestly and religious life.

44. The position of religious women is no better. Whereas it is their vocation to be sharers in the pastoral mission of the Church, their services are often exploited in ways not directly related to the pastoral/missionary needs of the Church. It would be a sin to waste all these talents and services without utilizing them in the service of the Word. Further, women, both lay and religious, should participate more actively in the decision-making and execution of the different services of the Church, especially among the poor and the deprived in whose midst they are more welome.

45. If the Churches were really interested in confronting the forces of fundamentalism, in finding just solutions to the problems of the marginalized, in recognising and giving due place to the laity, they should show this in concrete, by sharing responsibility with the laity, by working with them and other people of good will in redressing the evils committed against the poorer and weaker sections of society. This would also give meaning to the existence and mission of the Churches.

46. The encounter of the Gospel with the local culture may give rise to the creation of indigenous Indian "rites", which would be characteristic of a genuinely Indian Church. Evangelizers should also take elements from each other's liturgical, spiritual and ecclesial heritage as a sign of mutual appreciation and enrichment.

VI. Conclusion

47. Notwithstanding our failings as individuals and Churches, we are convinced that the power of the Holy Spirit is working in all the different Individual Churches. This

conviction gives us the strength to go forward in fulfilling our mission to the world. Encouraged by this realization, united in mind and heart and remaining faithful to the Word, the three Catholic Individual Churches would be in a much better position to address themselves to the pressing problems facing our country today.