



Asian Journal of Religious Studies

May 2015

60/3

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Asian Journal of Religious Studies

Asian Journal of Religious Studies (formerly *AUC* or *Apostolic Union for Clergy*) is a pastoral journal for Christian leaders. It is a bimonthly published from the Papal Seminary, Pune 411014. Inspiring and short articles beneficial for Christian leaders are welcome.

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Printed at: Kunal Offset, Pune
 Typeset at: Papal Seminary Centenary Computer Centre

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Editorial

Religions in 2050

In a new report, "The Future of World Religions," the Pew Research Center has given an interesting outline of religions in the next forty years.

Because of the difficulty of anticipating world events far in the future, the report tracks projections through 2050, a span of time during which the world's population will increase from 6.9 to 9.3 billion. The findings are fascinating. Over the next few decades, the world's religious composition will shift dramatically, thanks primarily to "differences in fertility rates and the size of youth populations among the world's major religions." By 2050, for the first time in history, the percentage of the population that is Muslim (30%) will be nearly equal to the percentage that is Christian (31%). And while all the major religious groups except Buddhists will see an increase in absolute numbers, many, including the unaffiliated, will decline as a share of the global population.

The overall decline in the unaffiliated population speaks to the importance of geography in analyzing patterns of religious growth. Countries such as the United States and France will see a rise in people who identify as atheist, agnostic or other, helping to drive the total number of unaffiliated from 1.13 to 1.23 billion. In the U.S., they will grow from 16 to 26 percent of the population by midcentury, an increase that will have a significant impact on our political culture and legislative focus. In 40 years, for instance, we may not be battling for so-

called religious freedom bills in three states. We know that "nones" tend to be more politically liberal, more highly educated and younger than other religious groups.

Size and Projected Growth of Major Religious Groups

	2010 POPULATION	% OF WORLD POPULATION IN 2010	PROJECTED 2050 POPULATION	% OF WORLD POPULATION IN 2050	POPULATION GROWTH 2010-2050
Christians	2,168,330,000	31.1%	2,918,070,000	31.1%	749,740,000
Muslims	1,599,700,000	23.2	2,761,480,000	29.7	1,161,780,000
Unaffiliated	1,131,150,000	16.4	1,230,340,000	13.2	99,190,000
Hindus	1,032,210,000	15.0	1,384,360,000	14.9	352,140,000
Buddhists	481,760,000	7.1	488,270,000	5.2	1,490,000
Folk Religions	404,690,000	5.9	449,140,000	4.8	44,450,000
Other Religions	58,150,000	0.8	61,450,000	0.7	3,300,000
Jews	13,860,000	0.2	16,090,000	0.2	2,230,000
World total	6,895,850,000	100.0	9,307,190,000	100.0	2,411,340,000

Source: The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

But globally, their share of the population will fall. Religions with many adherents in developing countries—where birthrates are high, and infant mortality rates generally have been falling—are likely to grow quickly.

Youth and fertility rates help explain the huge projected increase in the Muslim population, which will grow by an astonishing 73 percent. Islam will spread faster than any other major religion, in part because Muslims have the highest fertility rate (3.1 children per women) and the youngest population (34 percent are under the age of 15).

"By 2050, the study projects India to be the country with the largest number of Muslims – more than 310 million – even though Hindus will continue to make up a solid majority of India's population (77%), while Muslims remain a minority (18%)," Pew Research Center said. "Indonesia will have the third-largest number of Muslims, with Pakistan ranking second," it said.

Kuruvilla Pandikattu SJ
Editor



Towards “A Church that Is for the Poor and with the Poor”

Job Kozhamthadam SJ
New Delhi

Soon after Pope Francis was elected the 266th Successor of Peter in March 2013, he took many a pandit by surprise by announcing that he wanted to see “a Church that is poor and for the poor.” Developments since then make it abundantly clear that this proclamation was not just a pious wish, but rather his definitive vision for the Church. He wanted the Church really to be poor and for the poor. He wanted the Church to identify itself with the poor and work for the poor to eliminate poverty or at least alleviate it.

In delineating this programme of action of his papacy, the Pope was not pushing his own personal agenda. Rather he was reaffirming what the Church always stood for, or, at least, expected to. There is an inseparable bond between the Church and Christian poverty. The Incarnation wherein God emptied himself to become a human person, the birth of the Son of God in an addressless manger, etc., were clear indicators of Christ’s choice of the nature of the Church.

Indeed, the Holy Family at Nazareth was a paradigm example of a life of Christian poverty. The Beatitudes, in which Christ presented his kingdom manifesto, opens its list proclaiming “Blessed are the poor, theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” So many scriptural passages are never tired of affirming the same theme. The Apostles preached and lived a life of Christian poverty. As we know, St. Peter prefaced the very first miracle performed in the Church by proclaiming a Church that is poor: “Gold and silver I do not have.” The Acts of the Apostle, particularly chapters 2 and 4, tell us that the early Christians gave an authentic example of the life of Christian poverty by sharing whatever they had and caring for each other. The history of the Catholic Church, especially of Religious Orders and Congregations, takes pride in having produced greats like Francis of Assisi who embraced “Lady Poverty,” and St. Ignatius Loyola who loved poverty “as a mother.”

However, this spirit of poverty began to erode with the Edict of the Emperor Constantine in the 4th century and consequent politicization of Church institution and leadership. The Church got trapped by the Feudalistic structures of Medieval Europe, with their overemphasis on an otherworldly spirituality, and their vulnerability to this-worldly perishable wealth and rigid formality. In some ways this unfortunate tradition has continued, and in some cases has become a source of scandal as was recently reported in the case of the Bishop of Limburg, Franz Peter Tebartz-van Elst, who was taken to task for squandering a whopping over Rs. 250 crores (€31m) on renovating his official residence. Pope Francis’ emphasis on building a Church that is poor and for the poor is a valiant and timely attempt to recapture the original authentic spirit of Christianity and to undo the terrible harm that has been done to the Church through past deviations from it.

It is very clear that Pope Francis wants caring to and sharing with the poor to be the distinguishing mark of the Catholic Church today. Two thousand years ago Christ gave his clear statement on the distinguishing mark of a Christian: “By this shall people know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” For Francis in our contemporary world this Christian love becomes concrete primarily in our love and service of the poor and the underprivileged.

Building up a Church that is poor and for the poor means getting rid of all forms of worldliness because, as Pope Francis affirmed in his address at Assisi, worldliness is an “idol” that seeks happiness “in objects rather than in relationship with God and others, “by allowing patterns of materialism “to captivate our lives and distort our humanity.”

Being a Church that is poor means adopting a life of simplicity. Mahatma Gandhi has said: “The world has enough to meet the need of humans, but not enough to meet their greed.” We are called upon to say a sincere yes to genuine needs and an emphatic no to all forms of greed. It also means joyfully placing ourselves at the service of our brothers and sisters, after the example of Jesus who came to serve, not to be served. In early January 2014, while announcing the names of the 19 new Cardinals, the Pope reminded the “princes of the Church” of this uniquely Christian understanding of authority as service. “The cardinalship does not imply promotion,” he wrote. “It is neither an honor nor a decoration; it is simply a service that requires you to broaden your gaze and open your hearts. They were asked to be on guard against “any expression of worldliness or any form of celebration contrary to the evangelical spirit of austerity, sobriety and poverty.”

Forming a Church that is poor also implies taking a humble and non-authoritarian attitude. The “We have it all, we know it all,” attitude is alien to this Church. On the other hand, it will be a participatory Church which encourages a “bottom up” strategy rather than a “top down” one while taking serious decisions that affect the whole community.

Again according to the Pope, creating a Church that is poor and for the poor involves liberating ourselves from the three false cultures: liberation from the culture of comfort that confines us to our own comfort zone, totally unconcerned with the needs and concerns of our brothers and sisters; liberation from the culture of waste that enslaves us to material things for our own selfish pleasure; and finally liberation from the culture of indifference that desensitizes us to the pains and sufferings of our brothers and sisters around.

At the same time it is important to keep in mind that the creation of a Church that is poor involves no romanticization of poverty. It does not advocate destitution or deprivation of necessary material things. In fact, such deprivation of basic needs is an evil the Church wants to liberate people from. It respects genuine human material needs. Recently many eyebrows were raised when the Pope had a meeting with the president of the World Bank, Mr. Jim Yom Kia, to explore ways in which the highly resourceful World Bank could play a role in bettering the lot of the poor and the marginalized. Christian poverty is not against genuine material need, but against greed. As St. James and St. John in their Epistles have made very clear, our love and concern for the poor have to go beyond good will and kind words to concrete actions. The Pope also has the same advice to give. He himself took the initiative along this direction when he advised friends not to come for his installation as Bishop of Rome and instead give the

price of the travel as a gift to the poor. Again, he advised religious communities to make their unused institutions and facilities available to the homeless. It is reported that plans are afoot to convert the palatial mansion of the Bishop of Limburg into a refugee centre.

Embracing Christian poverty is not a sign of weakness, but of strength. It often works wonders. It produces very tangible successful results. The Pope's emphasis on embracing Christian poverty and his personal example are already having positive results. Very encouraging reports are coming from various parts of the globe. For instance, Great Britain reports that, thanks to the "Francis Effect," Church attendance in recent times has gone up by 20%. Other countries, particularly in the West, have similar experiences to recount. Recently Timothy Cardinal Dolan of New York had the following good news to share of the "Francis Effect in his highly influential archdiocese: "Crowds at Sunday masses are up, the confessional lines are longer, ... even the [Sunday] collections are going up."

All these developments are bringing a welcome wave of hope and optimism, and we can rejoice and thank the Good Lord for them. But this happy turn of events is challenging us in India to become part of this new vision or revision of our Church, institutionally and individually. The Church in India has always had a laudable record of being at the service of the poor and the marginalized. Our medical and educational institutions have been offering outstanding service nation-wide. Our social service centres, social-awareness and human rights centres, etc., have been rendering heroic service, despite stiff oppositions and threats, often at the heavy cost of severe suffering and even painful death. All these need to continue in our effort to bear authentic witness to our mission to be true followers of

Christ who sacrificed his own life at the altar of selfless service. At the same time, in recent times clearly audible murmurs are heard in some corners of our Church concerning certain deviations from the Gospel path for the sake of money and other momentary gains. The special message and example Pope Francis is placing before us as our leader should challenge us to take an honest look at our own life style and practices and to take effective steps to set aright any form of deviation from the Gospel path. This will be a good way to make the "Francis effect" more and more visible in own country and homes. 🌱



Living without Limits

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Can we think of a time on earth without death? Using our technological advancements, can we make another species? How does our human future really look like? These are some of the questions this article addresses.

This article is the follow up of a very inspiring and mind-boggling article published a few months ago in the Financial Chronicle on “Life, death and everything else.” The lead line is “Science begins where spiritualism ends in the karmic dance of life and death.” The interview with Aubrey David Nicholas Jasper de Grey, an English gerontologist and co-author of “Ending Aging,” was both promising and fascinating: promising for his claim to eliminate physical death and fascinating by his enthusiastic future vision.

The author, Shubhrangshu Roy, Editor-in-Chief, Financial Chronicle, has shown exceptional brilliance in bringing insights from Buddhism (Dalai Lama and Tibetan Book of the Dead), Hinduism and Western thoughts. The interview with de Grey brings out brilliantly his “transhumanist vision.”

The questions raised and the answers attempted go beyond the classical understanding of death. It takes technology seriously and at the same time critically. That’s heartening for all of us. As one who has been exploring this area of physical immortality, I welcome this idea wholeheartedly. It is a noble task to reverse the aging process and to eliminate physical death.

Aristotle the Father of Western thinking proclaimed just before his death: “Death is a cure.” As against him, Eric Drexler, the father of Transhumanism and author of “Engines of Creation” broadly affirms: “Death is a disease. Cure it”

It is true that the traditional society looked upon death as a great leveler and got used to it. So Martin Heidegger claimed that humans are “being-unto-death,” right at the moment they are born. Mitch Albom, the author of best-seller “Tuesdays with Morrie,” asserts paradoxically: “When you learn how to die, you learn how to live.” Thus the meaning and authenticity of human life are intimately intertwined with that of death.

On the other hand today some of the eminent technologists like Ray Kurzweil, Nick Bostrom want to hasten the overcoming of death. The futurist Kurzweil hints at the arrival of “technological singularity,” which will eliminate physical death as we know it. The transhumanist philosopher Bostrom presupposes the end of death in the immediate future and chalks out the strategies of reaching superintelligence.

One thing is certain. Through the synergetic working together of techniques like cryonics, nanotechnology, human genome project, enzyme (telomeres), tremendous growth will take place in the area of reversal of aging and extension of life. Whether we will finally be able to

overcome death, I am not sure. The cynical remark applies here: only one thing that can be sure about predictions about the future is that future will be very different from the predictions.

The interview with de Grey has raised numerous philosophical and moral questions on the meaning of life and death. His attempts at eliminating death has to be welcomed. As a society, we need to consider that even if physical death is overcome, it is eliminating one aspect of human limitation: temporal limitedness.

There are other more significant areas where human beings need to progress. The emotional, aesthetic, moral and spiritual growth of human beings are even more important than the temporal growth. The usual argument is that the more one has time to grow, the more one become mature emotionally, aesthetically, morally and spiritually. But that is not necessarily borne out of facts.

So together with the noble task of searching for physical immortality, we need to invest our time, energy and technology to advance the other human areas of development, leading to wisdom, self-actualisation and collective integration. Along with our technological prowess and developments, can we make our own lives more meaningful, significant and fulfilling? Can we develop ourselves emotionally, aesthetically and spiritually so that we can speak of total or integrated development? More than at any other time, today we possess the resources to achieve such a holistic growth.

Two insights of Albert Einstein are relevant here. “All our lauded technological progress – our very civilization – is like the axe in the hand of the pathological criminal.”

Despite our tremendous technological advancement, we behave like the “pathological criminal.” Again Einstein affirms: “The release of atomic energy has not created a new problem. It has merely made more urgent the necessity of solving an existing one.”

The existing problem, that Einstein refers to, is learning to live with each other. As individuals and communities if we cannot respectfully deal with each other, then our technological growth can be our own downfall. If we cannot find feel at home with ourselves, with our fellow human beings and with the world, we will be doing a terrible disservice to ourselves. In fact, Martin Luther King Jr. is right: “We must learn to live like brothers or Perish like fools”

In this context John F. Kennedy’s warning is pertinent: “Ours could be the best or last generation.” With the incredible technological prowess at our disposal we can truly make ours the best generation. Does our moral and spiritual growth match with our technological growth? If not we can put an end to ourselves.

We do possess today the technological capability for both these choices of eliminating physical death or total life! Do we have the moral and spiritual integrity and capability to choose for life?

If not, the worst scenario could befall us. The same technological progress, about which we can rightly be proud of, may lead to our own self-annihilation! Thus technological search for physical immortality is to be welcomed by all means! Simultaneously, we need to foster the human quest for the emotional, aesthetic, moral and spiritual development, without which the technological growth may annihilate us!

We need to recognise the healthy limits demanded of us. In order to achieve anything – including spiritual progress –

we need to encircle ourselves within some fixed – though not rigidly – markers, which gives us orientation and direction. Only through such markers can we grow. Only within such broad framework can we progress.

Will we sing to the dance of death and life or death over life? We can live the dance of death and life leading to deeper life. Maybe we can also learn the dance of spiritualism and science! That could be a mutually enriching venture! 🌱

First Published in *The Financial Chronicle*

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For details, please visit: www.papalseminary.in



The Star of Bethlehem and the ‘Ray of that Truth Which Enlightens All Humans’: Reflections on the 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*

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Only a few days after his election as bishop of Rome in 2013, the new Pope, going by the name of Francis, went to a youth prison to celebrate the liturgy of Holy Thursday with incarcerated youngsters. Among conservative circles in the church this led to some consternation when he washed the feet of 12 of these youths. This reaction focused less on the fact that among the youths were two Muslims. The real focus of attention was the previously unheard of washing of the feet of two women.¹ Some people seemed to think that a pope washing the feet of women was the first step to a –presumably terrible – ordination of women to the priesthood. The outrage went so far that the official press officer of the Vatican, Federico Lombardi, had to issue a statement clarifying that the washing of feet did not have the status of a sacrament of the

1 For an example see <http://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2013/03/the-official-end-of-reform-of-reform-by.html> (visited on 22nd April 2013).

church.²

Possibly this event and the reactions to it illustrate well which points in the now 50 years of the reception of the Vatican Council have become particularly contentious. There is no doubt that the implementation of the council is still incomplete. Furthermore, there is further evidence that in some circles the Vatican Council is viewed with some subsequent suspicion and in some cases with regret. The brotherhood of Pius X under Archbishop Lefebvre and the vacillation over its excommunication and subsequent revocation of the excommunication are just one symbol of this. Another example is the recent reform of the liturgical texts in the English language, which through clumsy Latinisms, antiquated vocabulary and complete rejection of gender inclusive language tries to give the illusion of a prayerful authenticity which gives the lie to *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and its vision of an intelligent and inspired people of God participating in the celebration of the sacramental mysteries.

Therefore it is all the more surprising, that in other regards the Council has been received with much enthusiasm and success. Some of the visions of the Council have given the church a completely changed face. The fundamental appreciation of human rights in *Gaudium and Spes* has led to the foundation of justice and peace conferences, and the church has become a leader in confronting the abuses of human rights the world over. In some countries they are the only remaining advocates for freedom and humanitarian rights. The enormous effort poured into the church's activities helping and supporting migrants or the poor is hardly imaginable without the Council. And with *Unitatis Redintegratio* a previously unknown

ecumenical dialogue began that has helped to draw the various churches closer together in a unity that is understood as God's command. Pope John Paul II in 1995 could talk about ecumenism as one of the anchors in the heart of the church in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*. And finally one should mention *Nostra Aetate*, this small document with a large history, perhaps the most prophetic of the Council's documents.³ It did not just change the church's view of other religions; it put traditional views on their head. The most obvious success of this document lies in the change of attitude towards Judaism. This reflects the original intention of the first drafts. But aside from this, the Assisi meetings introduced by John Paul II and the much-admired visit of Benedict XVI in the Hagia Sophia bear witness to the lasting influence of *Nostra Aetate*.

But returning to Pope Francis and the washing of the feet: The reactions to this even, perhaps somewhat exaggerated by the media, nevertheless highlight in an analogous way what seems to have become the fate of the Council's documents. The internal issues of the church seem to lead to controversy and conflict, to disappointment and insecurities. Topics like the ordination of women, the prohibition for remarried divorced or those living in same sex unions to participate sacramentally in the life of the church, the question of priestly celibacy perturb the church to the limits of her resilience and unity. But the transformation of the church in the way it relates to external issues is admired and quite successful. If the pope washes the feet of women, it is a sign of breaking with the tradition, if he washes the feet of Muslims it is a sign of the openness of the church. This openness toward other religions, however, is a matter that did not suggest itself when *Nostra Aetate* was originally put on the table of the council fathers.

2 See <http://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2013-03/fusswaschung-franziskus-frauen> (visited on 22nd April 2013).

3 The reception history is detailed in Roman Siebenrock, "Theologischer Kommentar zur Erklärung über die Haltung der Kirche zu den nichtchristlichen Religionen *Nostra Aetate*," in *Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil Band 3*, ed. Peter Hünermann and Bernd Hilberath, (Freiburg: Herder, 2005): 591–693.

How *Nostra Aetate* became a Council Document

During the third period of the Council the document that was to evolve into *Nostra Aetate* was for the first time put on the agenda of the council.⁴ At the end of September 1964 this document was a short paper concerning Jews and non-Christians. Cardinal Bea introduced it, referring to a specific mandate of Pope John XXIII. Pope John had been acutely touched by the Jewish question during the Second World War and was a personal friend of the Jewish historian Jules Isaac. Furthermore, the then rector of the Biblicum, Ernst Vogt SJ, had presented a petition to the preparatory commission of the Council asking for the treatment of the question of Anti-Semitism. Pope John had asked Cardinal Bea already in 1960 to prepare a document *de Ioudaeis*, concerning the Jews. Bea finished work on that document in 1961. But rumors were spread about the document, and it finally reached the public, sparking a storm of outrage and protest among the Arab countries. They feared that the document would lead to the official recognition of the state of Israel by the Vatican. Even the bishops of the region spoke against the document. Internal debates within the church touched mainly on the question of the Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus. However, it was precisely Bea's intention to do away once and forever with the thesis of total Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion. Other questions touched on the prayer of the Good Friday prayer for the conversion of the Jews⁵ and the ongoing

4 For the history of the document see John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

5 This prayer was reformulated after the council, but in 2007 it was reintroduced when the Pope approved the Tridentine rite for use in extraordinary circumstances. Even though Benedict XVI approved an emendated version of the controversial prayer, the official Vatican print of the Missal

validity of God's promises to the people of Israel. All these issues led to the document being shelved.

Particularly the pressure of the Arab states led Bea to include passages about other religions as well. The document presented in 1964 dealt mainly with Judaism, and it included one sentence each for Islam and other world religions. the reaction of the council fathers was generally positive. The text was viewed as important, but still an enormous amount of changes was suggested. Some even suggested to remove the text in its entirety. Bea and Pope Paul VI were not in agreement, either. But Bea insisted on "our responsibility for truth and justice, our duty to gratitude towards God, our duty to faithfully and closely follow our Lord Jesus Christ, as did his apostles Peter and Paul."

The discussion went on for two days, and nine more days later Paul VI personally sent a message to the Council that he was disbanding the preparatory commission and that the text should not be a document in its own right but should be incorporated into *Lumen Gentium*. The names proposed by Paul for a new commission were almost entirely those of opponents of Bea's text. Media pounced on the events, conspiracy theories were proposed, and the Council fathers were consternated by this usurpation of the Council's authority and freedom. Paul's actions were perhaps the greatest crisis of the Council in all the years it was in session.

Bea wrote a personal letter to the Pope, and some Council fathers did likewise, among them Cardinal König of Vienna. They warned the Pope to set aside the procedures of the Council in such a delicate matter and to appoint people who did not have the backing of the Council as a whole. the Pope relented and restored the state of affairs previous to his intervention, but he left a bitter aftertaste of willfulness, unclear responsibilities and failed communications.

did not include Benedict's correction but reverted to the more traditional prayer for the conversion of the Jews.

On November 20th, 1964, the document was conditionally approved. The rewriting began, and finally in October 1965 it was approved in its current form. Cardinal Willebrands and Duprey personally visited the Arab ambassadors to hand over the document and assure the Arab nations that it did not include political ramifications. This was certainly a moment of intense personal satisfaction for Cardinal Bea, and it was his personal effort that made this document possible. It is of high symbolic significance that he did so being a German.

Theological Questions

Nostra Aetate is first and foremost a document that tries to formulate the church's relation to Judaism, and only external and political pressure made certain that also reference was made to other religions. The Council did not deal so much with the question how other religions are to be judged in and by themselves. Rather, the document exhibits a perspective that looks inward. The church is asking herself about which position she is to take with regard to religious phenomena outside of herself (NA 1). The document begins with the creation of all humankind in the image of God (NA 1). It searches what all peoples and religions have in common since they share a common origin in the creation of God. This common origin is reflected in a search for unity and love that unites all humans. In the reflection on God's creative power *Nostra Aetate* speaks of a certain "ray of that Truth which enlightens all humans" (*radium illius Veritatis*). It should be noted that "Truth" is capitalized in the original Latin text, implying that in these religions the one who is the Truth is being revealed.

Following the Council this participation of all religions in that ray of Truth became a major topic for theological discussion. Karl Rahner was perhaps the most famous one when he proposed his concept of "anonymous Christians". But of course the choice of words rather than the proposal itself

opened Rahner's theory to a lot of criticism. It suggests that in this theory Christianity appropriates other religions into its own religious system and posits itself as somewhat superior. While this may not have been what Rahner originally attempted to show, the theory has been largely rejected in today's interreligious dialogue. Behind Rahner's attempts lies of course also a christology which was assumed to be indispensable even by *Nostra Aetate*. But this raises of course the question how one can on the one hand believe that the highest possible form of revelation of God has taken place in the historical figure of Jesus, and on the other hand how one can then look at other religions without maintaining an inclusivist attitude.

It is precisely this question, which lies behind an early Christian text of Syriac origin called "The Revelation of the Magi."⁶ The text itself is a popular legend expanding on the story of the Magi in the Gospel of Matthew. It found a rather wide audience in Early Christianity and into the Middle Ages. The text is now only available in a manuscript copy from the 8th century which is kept in the Vatican library. But this copy itself bears witness to the book's popularity by its date. While the text bears some striking resemblance to the Matthean version of the story of the Magi it follows very different theological purposes.

The Magi in Mt 2

The story of the Magi from the East is one of the New Testament narratives which have met with an almost unqualified success. No manger is put under a Christmas tree without the three wise men or kings, they got their own

6 For the English translation of the text and a very informative commentary see Brent Landau, *Revelation of the Magi. The Lost Tale of the Three Wise Men's Journey to Bethlehem*, (New York: HarperOne, 2010). The comments on the text and its history here rely on Landau's analysis.

liturgical feast shortly after Christmas, and in Europe many children dressed up as the three kings come to Bethlehem make their rounds in villages and towns to collect money for charitable purposes, called “gifts for the holy child”. The Magi’s own presents of gold, frankincense, and myrrh is the foundation of the tradition of Christmas gifts.

And yet, Matthew’s story is somewhat odd. Matthew 2 tells of Magi from the East who follow a star which they lose from sight in Jerusalem. But on leaving Jerusalem they find the star again and follow it to Bethlehem where they worship the newborn child and open their treasures, before they leave secretly and on byroads not only the child but also the Gospel.⁷ The gaps in Matthew’s narrative are obvious: The Magi do not have a concrete place of origin; they do not have names or number. Later tradition fixes their number at three and invents names for them, even makes them kings. But even the title is somewhat irritating: Magi are usually unsavory people. Already Euripides and Sophocles connect them with witchcraft, magic, and deceit. The Acts of the Apostles know of Magi in a similar sense (Ac 8:1–25; 13:6.8). Matthew’s story is the single positive mention of such Magi in the whole Bible. The star is mysterious as well: first it appears to the Magi in the East, in Jerusalem it seems to disappear, and finally outside of Jerusalem it appears again only to come to rest over the birthplace of Jesus.⁸ We are never told how the

Magi know that they should follow the star, or how they know about the newborn king they seek. In the end it remains a mystery how the Magi arrive at the manger – which, in Matthew, is a house, after all.

Mysterious people, therefore, whose literary function in the Gospel is to form a contrast to a scheming king Herod and his unbelieving court of scribes and chief priests. Perhaps it is just the scarcity of information we have about the Magi that led already early Christianity to find names, numbers, to illustrate the story with camels and kings.⁹ More modern minds tried to find the precise combination of stars that would produce a natural phenomenon like the one described by Matthew’s star.¹⁰ One of these fanciful imaginations around the Magi is the legend of the “Revelation of the Magi” with its question about how one can know about God outside of Christian or indeed ecclesiastical structures. The work is somewhat verbose, beginning in the Garden of Eden and ending with the baptism of the Magi by the apostle Thomas. It is the most substantial work of early Christianity relating to the Magi. Even though today the work is mostly forgotten it seems to have enjoyed quite a run in antiquity. The very popular commentary on the Gospel of Matthew called the *Opus Imperfectum*, dating from the 5th century, must have known the story as a written source. The copy in the Vatican Library is a manuscript dating to the 8th century, found in the Turkish monastery of Zuqnin.

7 Still a good commentary on this story is Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah. A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, 2nd ed., ABRL, (New York: Doubleday, 1993): 165–201.

8 Birth narratives of famous people in antiquity were often connected with the appearance of a spectacular star; see Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 4 vols. vols., EKK, (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger Neukirchener Verlag, 1985–2002): I:119. However, the star in Mt 2 is less

connected to the birth of Jesus than it is to the guidance of the Magi.

9 See Thomas Holtmann, *Die Magier vom Osten und der Stern. Mt 2,1–12 im Kontext frühchristlicher Traditionen*, Marburger theologische Studien, vol. 87, (Marburg: Elwert, 2005).

10 As an example, see Simo Parpola, “The Magi and the Star. Babylonian Astronomy Dates Jesus’ Birth,” *BiRe* 17:6, (2001), 16–23, 52, 54.

The Dating of the Text of the “Revelation of the Magi”

It seems that the Syriac “Revelation of the Magi” is dating back to the 4th century. While the extant manuscript dates to the 8th century, and while the *Opus Imperfectum* from the 5th century knows the story, the text itself suggests that it is even earlier than that. One of the quirks of the Syriac language is that in its early form, the word for “Holy Spirit” is of female gender. This changes as Syriac develops, perhaps under the influence of Greek and Latin. By the end of the 4th century Syriac employs the masculine Gender for the Holy Spirit. Since in the main part the text uses the female words for the Holy Spirit it must have been written before the change took place. This means that the text probably existed by the beginning or middle of the 4th century.

Furthermore, the final chapters of the text relate the visit by the Apostle Thomas. These chapters now seem to rely heavily on the “Acts of Thomas” and other legends surrounding Thomas. The “Acts of Thomas” were written probably around the late 3rd or early 4th century. The chapters connected with the visit of Thomas have several peculiarities. Firstly, they use the masculine form for the Holy Spirit. Secondly, while the main body of the “Revelation of the Magi” is written in a first person narrative, the Thomas-chapters switch to the third person. The main text never speaks of Jesus or Jesus Christ, while the Thomas-chapters use the name more than 20 times. All this indicates that the final chapters about the visit of the Apostle Thomas are a later addition to the text. If one takes into account that the text of the “Revelation” needed some time for popularization in order to merit the addition of the Thomas-chapters, one can safely conclude that the main body of the text could have been in existence as early as the 3rd century.

The Content of the “Revelation of the Magi”

The text of the “Revelation of the Magi” is told mostly in the first person and relates the story of the Magi and their journey to the child of Bethlehem together with their return to their home country. The Magi are described as the members of a mystical order in the mythical land of Shir in the extreme East of the world, bordering the ocean that marks the end of the world. They are called Magi because they pray in silent meditation. Obviously the text refers to some form of play on the language, but the play does not work in any of the languages we know. On the other hand, this description helps to distinguish these Magi from magicians, wizards, astrologers, or Zoroastrians.

These silent prayerful people are the direct descendants of Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve. Seth gave his descendants a prophecy: A star of indescribable radiance would one day appear and announce the birth of God in human form. This star, so the Sethian prophecy, rested once in paradise above the tree of life and illuminated the whole Garden of Eden. But with the sin of Adam and Eve this star disappeared.

Over thousands of years the order of the Magi came together every month to await the arrival of the star, using ancient rituals known only to them. They climb the most holy mountain of their land Shir, the Mountain of Victories. There they pray silently at the mouth of the cave of the treasure of hidden mysteries. In the cave the books of Seth are kept and often read by the Magi. Should one of them die his son takes his place.

Now one day the star indeed does appear, and everything is like the old prophecies foretold: The star is so bright that the sun loses its glow in comparison. Since it is only the Magi who preserve the Sethian prophecies it is to them alone that the star appears. No one else can see it. The star comes down onto the mountain and invites the Magi to enter the cave. There the star slowly reveals a small, radiant child. This child

now reveals that he is the Son of God, yet he does not reveal his name, nor is his name mentioned in the following chapters.

The child instructs the Magi to follow him to Jerusalem to witness his birth and take part in the salvation God has prepared for the whole world. The vision disappears, and the Magi come down from the mountain and discover in their talks and discussions, that every one of them has seen the child, but that each one saw the child in a different form or figure. And everyone seems to have seen the child at a different stage of his development. But the joy and elation at this vision is the same for everyone. And everyone agrees that they have seen the same child, albeit in different forms.

The preparations for the journey take some time, but the journey itself meets no obstacles at all. The star removes all hindrances and difficulties, the travelers never tire, wild animals cannot harm the Magi, and at the end of the journey the travelers seem to have spent just a moment's time to cover the great distance between Shir and Jerusalem. During the journey the star transforms the packed food into a deeply spiritual nourishment that gives strength to body and soul. It is at the description of events in Jerusalem that the story actually has direct and literal connections with the story in Matthew's Gospel – the only time that the "Revelation of the Magi" directly depends on the Gospels at all. The inhabitants of Jerusalem cannot see the star. They only see the Magi looking into heaven searching for the lost star and assume that they are astrologers. Herod and his scribes and chief priests make their unsavory appearance, and upon hearing the prophecy of the Old Testament also quoted by Matthew the star appears to them again.

It leads them to a cave near Bethlehem. As it did on the Mountain of Victories, the star again enters the cave and invites the Magi to come in as well. The star now is miraculously transformed into a child and lauded and praised by unseen angels with songs and music. The child explains in

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a long speech that the promises of old are now fulfilled and declares the Magi to witnesses and messengers of this fulfillment in their home country. At this point it is interesting to note that the child is not actually born of Mary. The story does not speak of the messy details of childbirth but instead describes a morphing of the star into the child.

As the Magi leave the cave they come upon Mary and Joseph. Mary begins to berate the Magi for the attempt to steal her child. But the Magi calm Mary down and explain to her that the child is indeed the redeemer of the whole world who can be in many places at the same time and thus cannot be stolen at all.

The Magi begin their homeward journey to Shir. Again the power of the star makes the journey miraculous. The light of the star again transforms the provisions for the travel, and as the Magi eat from the star-food, they begin to see their companions in very different forms and appearances, transformed into goodness and beauty. At Shir's border relatives and friends are already waiting and wonder at the health and good looks of the Magi after their long travels. The Magi tell of their adventures with the star, and they assure those who had been left home that they, too, can partake in the miracles and presence of the star-child because he is present in the whole world. As the Magi now produce the provisions of the star and invite the people to eat, all people see visions of the divine and human redeemer, yet each one in a different and individual appearance. Many in the land of Shir come to believe in the star-child proclaimed by the Magi.

This would be a very happy ending for the story, and indeed, for a while it seems to have been that. Yet later on the chapters concerning the apostle Thomas were added. In these Thomas chances upon Shir during his travels many years later. The Magi share their experiences with the star and the child. Thomas recognizes that they indeed did have contact with Jesus Christ, and he begins to share his own experiences with Jesus. The Magi are exceedingly happy when they hear Thomas' witness and ask him to be taken into the Christian

community. On a Sunday morning Thomas baptizes the Magi. At this moment the heavenly Christ descends from heaven and shares the eucharist among Thomas and the newly baptized, thus sealing the new communion between Thomas and the Magi. Thomas then missions the Magi to preach the Gospel throughout the whole world, and the Magi begin to preach and to perform miracles.

The Message of the “Revelation of the Magi”

As has been mentioned already, one of the most prominent features of the text is the complete avoidance of the name of Jesus Christ except in the Thomas-chapters. This is surprising in the light of the way the text describes the individual visions of the star or the child. Throughout one notices how these descriptions are informed by biblical texts of both Old and New Testament. One description is of an unsightly person who takes upon himself the sin of the world – a clear allusion to the servant songs of Isaiah. One finds the image of a lamb being lifted up onto the tree of life – the Gospel of John is in the background here. The pillar of fire from Exodus makes an appearance, and the frequent mention of the nourishment changed by the star seems to be full of eucharistic overtones – an allusion that is made explicit in the Thomas-chapters. Thus it is not an exaggeration to say that the story of the legend lives by biblical imagery, to the extent that it often is a re-reading and re-telling of biblical texts. The interpretations of the star and the child are informed by christologies found in the New Testament. If the name of the child is never mentioned one has to draw the conclusion that the text wants to suggest the Magi and the inhabitants of Shir have a revelation of Christ without knowing Christ. The text raises the possibility of the Son of God revealing himself to many people, in very different forms and appearances, without ever revealing himself as Jesus Christ. It precisely at this point that the diffuseness of differentiation between the star and the

child becomes important. This constant shape shifting of the appearance suggests that the reality of what appears cannot be tied to a specific form, be it star or child. And for that reason the text insists that everyone who has an apparition of the heavenly appearance sees something different. The text thus emphasizes the individuality and experiential nature of the appearance, while at the same time acknowledging that behind this individuality of revelation there is a commonality that lets the Magi and their friends to recognize in their various apparitions a sameness that points to the redeemer of the world.

This impression gains support from the things that the heavenly star-child says to the Magi. First of all, it tells the Magi that it is appearing to them in a manner consonant with their traditional religion. At the same time, however, it is appearing to others in accord with their traditional religions. The appearance to the Magi is just one apparition among many others, because the child “is sent to fulfill all that has been said about me in the whole world and in every country” (13:10). The Magi accept this without reservation, and when in Jerusalem they tell Herod: “We have seen a sign of heavenly glory in our land as it was foretold by our fathers, that a King, a Messiah, a Lifegiver and Redeemer, who gives himself over to death for the salvation of the whole world, is born here... And he ordered us in a great vision to come into this land and worship him, because he has worshippers in every country” (17:5–6). And addressing themselves to Mary the Magi say: “His modes of appearance are seen in every country, because he was sent from His Majesty for the salvation and redemption of every single human person” (23,4).

The fundamental message of the “Revelation of the Magi” begins with the sending of Jesus for the salvation of the whole world, a message that is quite common in early Christianity. But the message of the Magi goes on to draw conclusions from this, which go far beyond early Christian thought. The revelation of Jesus is, so the text, the source of every religious

faith and praxis, independent of the actual confession of Jesus Christ as the savior. When the Magi speak of the fulfillment of their ancient promises founded on the teachings of Adam and Seth, it is for them, as they say, “only a drop of the salvation of the house of the Majesty” (15,1). It is a limited instance of the universal and salvific revelation of Jesus Christ that realizes itself in endless possibilities. The most prominent example of this is the appearance of the child in the cave on the Mountain of Victories: Here the child appears even before he is born in Bethlehem. Another quotation may illustrate this point further:

And I am everywhere, because I am a ray of light, whose light shone into this whole world from the majesty of my father who sent me to fulfill all that has been said about me in the whole world and in every land in inexpressible mysteries, and to do the commandment of my glorious father who through the prophets proclaimed me to a quarreling house, in the same way as was revealed to you about me, just as it is fitting according to your faith (13:10).

One conclusion from this is that the “Revelation of the Magi” has a much more positive image of non-Christian religions than other texts of this time. The rather strange encounter between the Magi and Mary seems to reflect on this when Mary tries to protect her child from theft by the Magi, while the Magi have to teach her that the child is everywhere. While even in early Christianity there was occasionally room for the idea that famous people like Socrates or Plato had some inkling of divine revelation, such inspirations were usually considered inadequate or downright misleading in the light of the revelation of Jesus Christ. The vast majority of the Christians of the time would probably have viewed other religions and other gods as illusions or even demonic. The “Revelation” seems to indicate quite differently that such religions have their own revelation of God, quite independent of Christianity. However, the divine aspect of salvation and redemption is the bond between Christianity as perhaps

represented by Mary and the other religions represented by the Magi.

A second conclusion can be drawn from the text. If non-Christian religions indeed contain their own and appropriate revelation, then an active mission in order to convert people of other faith traditions seems quite beside the point, even counter-productive. The conviction that Christ missioned his disciples to proclaim his message is not necessarily excluded by such a statement. But firstly the Magi seem to be convinced that Christ himself is the revealer who searches for his disciples and sends them out. This is most immediately not a mission within religious or ecclesiastical structures, but it is an invitation to witness to the revelation. Thus the Magi are missionaries in the sense that they proclaim the star-child, but they do not proclaim a faith-based church. Or in other words, the mission of the Magi is a mission to help people discover the revelation inherent in their respective religious belief systems. The text does not question the conviction that the message of the revelation should be carried into the world to all peoples, but it very much questions an ecclesiastically organized, supervised, and structured mission.

The Thomas-Chapters

At this point it becomes perhaps clearer why some subsequent readers might have found it necessary to append the chapters of Thomas’ visit in Shir. The original ending of the “Revelation” describes the Magi’s experience of Christ as complete and inimitable. It describes an experience of the abiding presence of the star-child quite apart from an ecclesiastical structure. The Thomas-chapters now settle this experiential theology into a framework in which the Magi and their families are baptized and receive the Eucharist, and where they are explicitly sent not only by the star-child, but now also by an apostle, a representative of a structured church. One could argue that in these chapters the Magi are ecclesiastically domesticated.

But it seems to me that the Thomas-chapters have an indirect and secondary function as well. After all, in these chapters it is the Magi themselves who ask for baptism, and long before the baptism Thomas recognizes that they experienced with the star-child what Thomas then calls a Christ-revelation. Thomas acknowledges that “the grace of our Lord has been poured out over them in richest measure” (29:4). Thus the chapters not only celebrate the final unity of Magi and church in baptism, Eucharist, and mission. They celebrate also the truth of the theology before these chapters. While the Magi are baptized, once again the heavens open, and once again the star-child appears and proclaims: “Peace be with you, children of my mysteries. Behold, now all visions and revelations given to you from the first day are fulfilled in your birth” (31:1). And Thomas responds with equal magnanimity:

We praise your sweet majesty, your unity in many persons, your magnificent images which you have shown us, and the cloths you have worn for our profit so that we might be clothed with your glorious majesty. And despite the many names by which you are called you are not in any one of these, because you alone know your great name and your majesty, and your exalted father, and nobody else (31:3–4).

Final Reflections

This paper cannot make a judgment how *Nostra Aetate* has to be interpreted, or what the importance of the “Revelation of the Magi” with regard to the interreligious dialogue should be, although I have to admit that I find the text of immediate appeal to my own theological convictions. But I should like to point out two areas of discussion in which the “Revelation of the Magi” can be of assistance.

The first of these concerns the priority of Christology asked for by the Council. If it is true that the non-Christian religions on the one hand contain in some measure truth and salvation, but on the other hand contain only a ray of the truth whose

fullness comes to fruition in Christianity, or perhaps even more precisely in the Catholic church, then this is an approach to the question of the phenomenon of many religions which tries to defend the superiority of Christianity over other religions with the help of Christological arguments. Indeed, it is perfectly possible, and even customary, to follow such an approach.

The “Revelation of the Magi” seems to oppose such an approach by maintaining in this beautiful image of the star becoming child and the child becoming star that the content of that “ray of truth” is not some abstract idea but Christ himself. This certainly is the message of the Thomas-chapters whose goal it is to make the story ecclesiastically palatable. Yet it ought to be noted that the story before that does not need to name the child, even if the allusions are clearly to Jesus. Furthermore, even the incarnation, while referred to as a birth of the Son of God, assumes the form of a very strange shape-shifting of the star, and it takes place not only in Bethlehem but also long before that on the Mountain of Victories. Thus while for Christian eyes the star and the child are clearly to be identified with Jesus Christ, the Magi do not make this connection, and the story implies that they do not need this identification either. This accords well with the repeated assertion that the star and the child appear in many lands to many people according to their own traditions. One might, from a Christian perspective, speak of Christ as a symbol that is correlated to other symbols in other religions.¹¹

Such a language dissolves any claims of Christian superiority, but at the same time it maintains the Christological priority the council asked for. It seems to me that the Council documents themselves can well be read in this way. When *Nostra Aetate* speaks of the *radium illius Veritatis*, it capitalizes – and thus personalizes – the Truth inherent in other religions. This is borne out by crossreading into *Gaudium et Spes* 22: “It is not

11 Controversial but important in this context is Roger Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999).

surprising, then, that in Him all the aforementioned truths find their root and attain their crown,” or into *Lumen Gentium* 67 where Christ himself is the source of all truth.

If one takes this personal approach to this “ray of truth” seriously, then any claim to Christian superiority forbids itself immediately. Instead, Christianity has to meet other religions on a level of equality. While theology does not always catch up with this approach, it seems to me that the Assisi-meetings inaugurated by John Paul II point at least symbolically into this direction.¹²

A second area for reflection suggests itself. While the interreligious dialogue in Europe is first and foremost a theoretical enterprise, the need for such dialogue presents itself much more forcefully in countries with a vibrant presence of many religious traditions. In such contexts the questions raised do not just concern reflection on an intellectual level but demand practical and concrete dialogue. This tends to be often much less clear-cut and more messy than theoretical deliberations. Yet it is in these regions where interreligious dialogue is not just an academic enterprise but a demand of life that the most fruitful results of such a dialogue are to be expected. Thus it may not surprise that it is precisely in the field of Indian Christology where the dialogue with other religious traditions leads to new and often unexpected formulations of the Christ¹³ who is the ray of truth illuminating all religions. ☸

12 These meetings began in 1986 as prayer meetings at the instigation of John Paul II. The Pope faced afterwards allegations of syncretism and relativism. At the forth and so far last meeting in 2011 Pope Benedict XVI intended to use the meeting to proclaim the contents of his encyclical *Dominus Iesus* and thus forestall any suspicion of relativizing the Catholic faith.

13 Let me name but three more recent examples from India: Joseph Gilbert Reginald Lobo, *Towards a Metaphorical*

Nostra aetate (Latin: In our Time) is the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions of the Second Vatican Council. Passed by a vote of 2,221 to 88 of the assembled bishops, this declaration was promulgated on October 28, 1965, by Pope Paul VI.

The Declaration begins by describing the unity of the origin of all people, and the fact that they all return to God; hence their final goal is also one. It describes the eternal questions which have dogged men since the beginning, and how the various religious traditions have tried to answer them.

It mentions some of the answers that some Hindus, Buddhists, and members of other faiths have suggested for such philosophical questions. It notes the willingness of the Catholic Church to accept some truths present in other religions in so much as they reflect Catholic teaching and may lead souls to the Christ.

Part three goes on to say that the Catholic Church regards the Muslims with esteem, and then continues by describing some of the things Islam has in common with Christianity and Catholicism: worship of One God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, Merciful and Omnipotent, Who has spoken to men; the Muslims' respect for Abraham and Mary, and the great respect they have for Jesus, whom they consider to be a Prophet and not God. The synod urged all Catholics and Muslims to forget the hostilities and differences of the past and to work together for mutual understanding and benefit.

Part four speaks of the bond that ties the people of the 'New Covenant' (Christians) to Abraham's stock (Jews). It states that even though some Jewish authorities and those who followed them called for Jesus' death, the blame for this cannot be laid at the door of all those Jews present at that time, nor can the Jews in our time be held as guilty, thus repudiating an indiscriminate charge of Jewish deicide; 'the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God'. The Declaration also decries all displays of antisemitism made at any time by anyone. (From Wikipedia)

Christological Discourse in India: An Alternative Way of Doing Christology in a Cry-For-Life Situation Based on the Writings of Georg M. Soares-Prabhu, (Bangalore: ATC Publications, 2005); Richard Lopes, *Indian Christology of the Way*, ITS 86, (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2011); John Pudota, *Indian Faces of Jesus*, (Gujarat: Anand, 2012).



Homily Notes

May 3, 2015: V Sunday of Easter

Acts 9: 26-31; 1John 3:18-24; John 15: 1-8

Yielding Good Fruits

Today's scripture lessons emphasize the need for the Christians to abide in Christ as a condition to produce fruits of kindness, mercy, charity and holiness. The first reading from the Acts of the Apostles testifies to the abundance of spiritual fruit yielded by the apostles because of their bond with the Lord. It tells us how the Lord had pruned away former Saul, Saul who had persecuted the Church to produce a fruit producing branch called Paul and how Paul was entirely dedicated to the proclamation of the Gospel. Even Paul's forced return to Tarsus is an example of God pruning the vine to bring forth a greater harvest: the mission to the Gentiles. In his first letter John explains that only if we remain united to Christ, drawing strength from him, will we be able to obey God's commandment, especially the commandment of love.

John describes God as the vine grower who has planted a vine, Jesus. The Father removes every branch that bears no fruit and prunes the other branches so they may bear more fruit.

Jesus tells his apostles that they have already been pruned by the words he spoke to them. He refers to the announcement that he would soon be leaving them by his death on the cross. The apostles will not feel the full impact of this "pruning" until Jesus is actually taken away from them in death. Eventually they will be pruned of all attachment to the things of this world so that they may be ready to attach themselves to the things of heaven

We are pruned by our total identification with everything that Jesus stands for and by cutting out of our lives everything that is contrary to the spirit of Jesus. In our personal and corporate lives, there is ample evidence of the need for pruning. What will you choose to prune? This involves a kind of asceticism, a certain denial or controlling of our natural appetites, setting aside those non-Christ-like things gladly and willingly. Many unchristian things are weighing us down and, as branches of Christ the vine, we are at the risk of breakage from the weight. Lord prune us so that we may yield good fruits. -

Sibin Francis

May 10: VI Sunday of Easter

Acts 10: 25-26, 34-35, 44-48; I Jn 4: 7-10; John 15: 9-17

Laying Down One's Life

Jesus in today's Gospel explains precisely how the disciples are to remain bonded to him as branches to a vine. They have to obey his commandment of love just as he has done his heavenly Father's will by obeying His commandments and remained inseparably bonded with his Father. Jesus leaves us in no doubt about how much he loves us, and how we ought to love one another. He calls us friends, he tells us that he has chosen us, and, if we use his name, we can ask the Father for anything. In the first reading, Peter clarifies how God loves every one, both the Jews and the gentiles and wants every one to be saved through His son Jesus. Today's psalm also directs

our attention toward God's marvelous love and kindness in offering salvation to the whole world. In the second reading John defines God as love and explains how He expressed His love for mankind by sending His son to die for us humans "*as expiation for our sins.*"

Let us cultivate an abiding and loving friendship with Jesus: The qualities we normally expect from our friends are trust, faithfulness, equality, forgiveness, joy and sacrifice. Jesus invites us to have all these qualities in our friendship with him. i) Trust: Jesus trusted us by sharing with us everything that he has heard from his Father. All we have to do is trust in him as a friend by listening to him through the bible and talking to him by prayer. ii) Faithfulness: Just like a friend, we know that Christ will be always faithful to us. Let us return this fidelity by being faithful to him. iii) Equality: Christ has called us his friends, and therefore his equals. We are no longer his creatures, but his equals. Let us be proud of it and lead our lives worthy of our unique status. iv) Forgiveness: As an understanding friend he is ready to forgive us time and time again. v) Joy: As a friend, Christ has told us everything so that our joy might be complete in him. vi) Sacrifice: As he said in this passage: there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for a friend. He did it for us. -**Johnson S**

May 17, 2015: The Feast of Ascension of Our Lord

Act 1:1-11; Eph 1:17-23; Mk 16: 15-20

To Be Proclaimers of the Good News

"I am with you always; yes, to the end of time." Far from having left us on our own when he ascended into heaven, Jesus is closer to us now. He is with us at all times and in all places, releasing a new energy upon the earth, the energy of the Holy Spirit to preach his Good News of salvation by

bearing witness to him. The readings for the Feast of the Ascension remind us of this fact.

Today's first reading from the Acts describes the experience of the Ascension, the feast celebrating Jesus' ascent to the Father. It is not so much a change of location but a change of state of Jesus. From being on the earth with human beings he now is with his Father in heaven. Today's psalm, "*God is king of all the earth,*" celebrates God's universal kingship. In the second reading (Eph 1: 17-23), St. Paul exhorts the disciples to live in a manner worthy of their calling and mission. Our greatest witness to the presence of Jesus in our midst is our unity with God seen in our living with one another in peace and harmony.

In today's Gospel Jesus gives his final message, his final instructions, his final promise, and his final blessing to his apostles. Jesus gives his mission to all the believers: "Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature. This mission is not given to a select few but to all believers. To be a Christian is to be a proclaimer and an evangelizer. There is a difference between preaching and proclaiming. "*We preach with words but we proclaim with our lives.*" We are also reminded that Christianity is not for an elite group but is for everyone. No one is excluded and all are welcome. We are also reminded that while the Lord gives the mission to all, he does not expect us to rely only on our own resources to fulfill that mission. The mission is accompanied with the power that is given to all those called upon to fulfill that mission. -**Vanathu Antony**

May 24, 2015 Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-11; I Cor 12:3-7, 12-13; John 20:19-23

Walking by the Spirit

Along with the Feast of the Passover and the Feast of the Tabernacles, Pentecost was one of the major feasts of the Jews. During these three great Jewish festivals, every adult

male Jew living within twenty miles of Jerusalem was legally bound to go to Jerusalem and participate in the feast. The word Pentecost literally means “Fiftieth,” because it was celebrated fifty days after the Feast of the Passover.

The first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, describes in detail, the miraculous transformation that took place during the first Pentecost. The disciples experienced the power of the Holy Spirit as it flooded them like parted tongues of fire. As a result of this experience, the frightened apostles were transformed into brave witnesses of Jesus, powerfully proclaiming Him as the promised Messiah-- the Lord and Savior of all mankind. In the second reading, St. Paul explains how the sharing of the various gifts of the Holy Spirit enriched the Church. Today’s Gospel relates how the resurrected Jesus conferred the Holy Spirit on His apostles by breathing on them, and how he gave them the power and authority to forgive sins.

Let us allow the Holy Spirit to direct our lives.

i) By constantly remembering and appreciating his Holy Presence within us, especially through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. ii) By fortifying ourselves, with the help of the Spirit, against all types of temptations. iii) By seeking the assistance of the Spirit in our thoughts, words, and deeds; and in breaking our evil habits. iv) By listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to us through the Bible and through the good counsel of others. v) By fervently praying for the gifts, fruits and charisms of the Holy Spirit. vi) By renewing our lives through the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

Life in the Holy Spirit is a life of commitment, sacrifice and joy. It is a call to love as Jesus loved, not counting the cost. As Saint Paul exhorts us, “*Walk by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit*” (Galatians 5:16, 25). **Arun Vincent**

May 31, The Most Holy Trinity

Dt 4: 32-34, 39-40; Rom 8: 14-17; Mt 28: 16-20

Model for Christian Families

The first reading tells us that God is deeply involved in the world from its beginning, showing Father-like care for His people, setting an example that summons us to imitation. In the second reading, Paul describes the role of the Holy Spirit in making us true children of God the Father and brothers and sisters of God the Son, Jesus. Today’s Gospel describes Jesus’ final apparition to his apostles just before his ascension into heaven, commissioning them to make disciples of all nations. He instructs them that they should baptize those who believe in the name of each person of the Holy Trinity, namely, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

The solemnity of the Holy Trinity is one of the most important feasts in the Church. The doctrine of the Trinity underlies all major Christian feasts, including Christmas, the Epiphany, Good Friday, Easter, the Ascension and the Pentecost. All the official prayers of the Church, including the Holy Mass and the sacraments, begin with an address to the Holy Trinity: “*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*” We are baptized, absolved of our sins and anointed in the name of the Blessed Trinity. Throughout the world, church bells ring three times a day inviting Christians to pray to God the Father (the provider); God the Son (the savior); and God the Holy Spirit (the sanctifier). We bless ourselves with the sign of the cross, invoking the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and we conclude our prayers by saying: “*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.*”

The Trinity is the model for Christian families: We are created in love -- to be a community of loving persons, just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are united in love. Since the day we were baptised, we belong to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. How privileged we are to grow up in such a

beautiful family. Hence let us turn to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in prayer every day. We belong to His family, the family of the triune God. The love, unity and joy in the relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit should be the supreme model of our relationship in our Christian families. Our families become truly Christian when we live in a relationship of love with the triune God and with others. -Dino Varghese

**June 7, 2015: The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ
(Corpus Christi)**

Ex. 24: 3-8, Heb 9: 11-15, Mk: 14:12-16, 22-26

Strengthening Unity and Love

Today, we celebrate the solemn feast of Corpus Christi. It is a doctrinal feast established for three purposes: 1) to give God collective thanks for Christ's abiding presence with us in the Eucharist and to honor him 2) to instruct the people in the mystery, faith and devotion surrounding the Eucharist, and 3) to appreciate and make use of the great gift of the Holy Eucharist, both as a sacrament and as a sacrifice.

The sacrament and the sacrifice: Jesus instituted the Holy Eucharist during the Last Supper as a sacramental banquet and a sacrificial offering. As a sacrament, it is a visible sign that gives grace. The Eucharistic Meal is a great mystery because during the Eucharistic celebration the substance of bread and wine are converted into Jesus' body, while their appearances (or 'accidents') remain. We believe in this transformation of bread and wine (called Transubstantiation) because Jesus unequivocally taught it and authorized his apostles to repeat it.

As a sacrament, the Holy Eucharist imparts to us Jesus' abiding presence in our souls. We share in His divine life, which is an assurance of eternal life and the conviction that we are children of God the Father. God shares His life with Jesus

and with all other people. In this sacrament, Jesus gives his own Body, broken for us on the cross and his precious Blood poured out for us in order that our sins might be forgiven. Thus, the Holy Eucharist is a sacrifice as well as a sacrament. By means of signs, symbols and prayers, it is the bloodless repetition of Christ's death. It is a reenactment of His sacrifice on the cross, and a memorial repeated at every Mass. It assures us of Jesus' love for us, and His forgiveness of our sins. Besides, it is the sacrament of our union with Him. Through this sacrifice, the risen Jesus becomes present on the altar, offering himself to the Father through the ministry of the priest.

The Eucharist, (the body and blood of Christ) teaches us the importance of community, the bond of love that results from this sacrifice. Just as numerous grains of wheat are pounded together to make the host, and many grapes are crushed together to make the wine, so we become unified in this sacrifice. Our Lord chose these elements in order to show us that we ought to be united with one another in sharing, sacrificial love and to transform ourselves into Our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is the head and we are the body. Together we are one. That which unites us is our willingness to sacrifice our time and talents for our fellow members in Christ's mystical body. This is symbolized by our sharing in the same bread and the same cup. Hence, Holy Communion strengthens our sense of unity and love. -Arun Vincent

June 14, 2015: Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Ez 17:22-24; 2Cor 5:6-10; Mk 4:26-34

Surrendering Ourselves to Jesus

Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is the second popular catholic devotion, the first being the rosary. The infinite love and mercy of God is shown in many different metaphors and symbols. First of all, his undeserved mercy is shown in the fact of the Incarnation: God so loved the world that he gave

his only Son who became one of us. The primitive Church expressed the love of Christ in the symbol of the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep. The symbols of this love vary from age to age. The Medieval Period used the symbol of the crucifix which showed the tortured body of Jesus. In the seventeenth Century, the symbol of the Sacred Heart of Jesus began to be used. The Sunday after Easter has been designated by Pope John Paul II as Divine Mercy Sunday: This commemorates the lavish and undeserved love of God.

An invitation for heart transplantation

Our hearts become stony and insensitive by our daily exposure to acts of cruelty, terrorism, injustice and impurity. Hence God prescribes a change of heart through His prophet Ezekiel (Ez 11:19-20) to make our hearts soft, elastic. Large and sensitive:” *I will give them a new heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the stony heart from their bodies, and replace it with a natural heart, so that they will live according to my statutes, and observe and carry out my ordinances; thus they shall be my people and I will be their God.*” The sacred heart of Jesus should be the ideal heart for this medical procedure. “Learn from me I am meek and humble of heart.” Let us have the heart of Jesus.

An invitation to love

Sacred Heart of Jesus challenges us to love others as Jesus loved: selflessly, unconditionally and sacrificially and expressed as humble and loving service done to others. We are invited to return the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the same coin, by imitating his life, by doing reparation for sins and by consecrating and surrendering our lives to Jesus.

Vibin Varghese

June 21, 2015: XII Sunday of the Year

Job 38: 1, 8-11; II Cor 5: 14-17; Mk 4: 35-41

The Boat of Our Life

The role of God in calming the storms of life is the central theme of the readings for this *Storm Sunday*. The first reading tells us how the Lord speaks to Job whose life was devastated by storms of illness, death of the dear ones and total loss of possessions. “*Out of the storm*” God reminds him that He is in control. Today’s responsorial psalm picks up the storm theme and tells us how the Lord saves the sailors caught up in the high waves of a tempest by “*hushing the storm to a gentle breeze.*” “*They who sailed the sea in ships...saw the works of the Lord and His wonders in the abyss.*” The second reading explains how Jesus died for us to make us a “*new creation*” and so we have to respond to his love by living for him in all situations of our lives. Today’s Gospel reminds us to keep Jesus in our life’s boat and to seek his help in the storms of life.

Accommodate Jesus in the boat of your life. All of us are making a journey across the sea of time to the shore of eternity. Hence it is natural that occasionally we all experience different types of violent storms in our lives: physical storms, emotional storms, and spiritual storms. We face storms of sorrow, doubts, anxiety, worries, temptations and passion. The storms we encounter in life are often what makes us or what breaks us. These storms can either bring us closer to God and one another or alienate us from God and others. But only Jesus can still these storms. Jesus can give us real peace in the storm of sorrow. When we are totally depressed with sorrow Jesus assures us of the glory of the life to come. Jesus consoles us at the loss of our dear ones with the assurance of eternal life for our loved one in the heavenly home of God the Father where we too will reach one day. When the storms of doubt seek to uproot the very foundations of the faith, Jesus is there to still that storm revealing to us his divinity and the authority behind the words of the Holy

Scripture. Jesus gives us peace in a tempest of doubt and tension and uncertainty provided we humbly submit to Jesus' guidance. He gives us peace in the storms of anxiety and worries about ourselves, about the unknown future and about those we love. Jesus calms the storms of passion in people who have hot hearts and the blazing temper. **-Jesuraja**

Fernando

June 28, 2014: XIII Sunday of the Year

Wis 1: 13-15, 2: 23-24; I Cor 8: 7, 9, 13-15; Mk 5: 21-24, 35-43

Call to Health, Wholeness and Holiness

The healings in today's Gospel reveal Jesus as a person who willed that human beings should live life fully. These healings also demonstrate the kindness and compassion of Jesus. The Gospel describes two of our Lord's miracles, the healing of a chronic disease and the revival of a young girl who was dead. They also give us further proof of the divine power and the infinite mercy of our Savior. In the second reading, St. Paul asks the Corinthian Christian community to show the same kindness and compassion to their Jewish brothers and sisters by raising a fund for them. The first reading suggests that such acts of loving kindness will help us to share the eternal life God has prepared for us.

Let us all accept God's call to health, wholeness and holiness. All of us, in some way or another, are constantly in need of God's healing. "Healing," "health," "wholeness," and "holiness" are linked words in English. We pray for healing which will give us health in every aspect of our lives-- not just in our bodies, enabling us to function in perfect harmony with people around and with the environment. Part of our healing depends also on the wholeness of our communities, a wholeness which is based on truth, love, compassion and a deep sense of justice for all. Let us pray to Jesus as Lord of life and ask him to help us reach that level of health, wholeness and holiness to which he is calling us.

Have trusting faith in the mercy and divine power of Jesus:

The primary condition for the effectiveness of our prayer is our faith in the goodness and mercy of God. Such a faith is possible only if we remain related to God through prayer, the sacraments, and meditative study of the Bible. Every day we should say a fervent prayer of thanksgiving to God for the gift of active faith. Let us keep in mind this wise piece of advice given by St. Ignatius of Loyola: "We must work as if everything depends on us, but we must pray as if everything depends on God." **-Arun Chakkalackal**

(Due to lack of space, the regular Book Review Section is regrettably omitted in this issue)