

# The Confessions of a Spokesperson

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In this brief article I wish to share the agony and ecstasy that was mine as the spokesperson of the Syro-Malabar Church for the last 15 years. On a day in 2000, Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil, the major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Synod of bishops, called me to his room and said, “You are elected by the Synod to be its spokesperson. Tell always the truth, but not necessarily all the truth.” He also told me to tell the truth without dwelling on the facts. I was further told (a) not to issue a press release on every failure in the church, because, as in a home, there many of the short comings and failures of the Church that are to be swept under the carpet, and (b) when asked about something happening within the church, I have to be truthful, taking care to stick to the truth *of the fact* without going to the details.

## 1. Truth and Language

Truth is not a fact, if we go by its Thomistic definition *adaquatio rei cum intellectu*” (correspondence of fact with thought) or “Supremacy of fact over thought ” as A.N. Whitehead would define it. Humans dwell measuring facts, things and others. As far as the church is concerned, Christ is the measure of everything. Truth has human value addition. I prefer Heidegger’s description of truth: “Language is the house of the truth of Being.” Truth has to be unconcealed or revealed in language. The temple of truth is language. But,

unfortunately, my language in the media was not one of dialogue or polyphony involving multiple tongues.

I am aware that Michael Bahktin and George Lucacs argued that truth is a human construct involving poly-lingual dialogue as opposed to the mono-logical. As far as I know, neither the church nor the secular world represented in channel discussions expect a dialogical discourse where the anchor and the panelists are marching towards the truth. What really happens there is, each presenting his or her point of view or position and defending it. What we hear in channel discussions is what Heidegger calls “language speaks as the peals of stillness”, meaning that language is speaking in different voices. In short, a channel discussion is a Tower of Babel where God descends to destroy the tyranny of monologue, creating polyphony.

I follow the methodology of discourse, depending on the media which generally are of three categories. 1. The letter press, where written response is the safest 2. The Radio, where voice is the medium and language plays the lead role. 3. The TV or the visual medium, where body becomes the language; language is of course the extension of the body.

Now let us consider questions put to you by journalists. First of all, you need to put the question in the right perspective and context with regard to its implications in the Church, in politics, in communal co-existence etc. As a journalist, you are not supposed to know everything. But you must know people who know, experts whom you can call and consult. Then think and make up your mind on the stand of the church, discuss the stand you have taken with a church leader, preferably a bishop. Articulate the stand in clear language. If you cannot convince yourself, you cannot convince others. The truth you want to reveal is a linguistic

act; truth takes the shape of language. What you are going to say is the truth from the point of the Church. You take a stand and defend your truth accordingly in the medium. The rest is your argumentation, where I am watchful about not falling into the fallacy of *ad hominem* argumentation, which is often used by shallow politicians and communalists by attacking people and not their ideas.

## **2. The Truth of the Scandals**

We, Catholics, are very disturbed by scandals; but Christ was indeed a scandal to the Jews and folly to the gentiles. Remember Christ has said: “Scandals are necessary, but woe to the man who gives it” (Mt. 18:7). What happens within the church are very often public sins or open value denials of scandalous nature and failures in sex life, misappropriation and mismanagement of money and property, nuns leaving of convents, priests and religious marrying or indulging in paedophilia, decisions of church leaders which backfire, court cases involving bishops, priests and religious. These are for us bad news; we wish to live in a world bereft of bad news. That is not possible on this earth, but, perhaps, in the Kingdom of Heaven. We are in this world of death and decay. As long we are here, there will be failures, because there will be people who aspire to high values and lofty lives. Failures are simply signs of super human attempts to accomplishments and adventures. We are a church where men and women seek after transcendental and spiritual values and motivations. Failures are bound to happen. That is why we are also a confessing church. A priest eloping with a nun is hot news, and I hope that it always remains hot news. It will cease to be so only when majority of priests and nuns become unfaithful and nobody bothers about it. A failure tells the general public that the values we aspire are difficult and we are not practicing celibacy or virginity with potions

or substitutes. Moreover, we confess our failures every day. Even the Bible is replete with bad events of sin and crimes, and still we call it Good News! Don't we? Even the suicide of Judas is reported as Good News; what is the Good News in a suicide or in the scandal of nun or priest committing adultery in public? Kindly see the 21 chapter of St. John where the apostasy of Peter is reported as a great lesson on the *leap of faith* by the contrite Peter. On a subject of public scandal, this is what I said to the crowded media: "I am sorry, brothers and sisters, as a Catholic it humiliates me and the church, it is painful but it is true. All that I can say is this: Without prayer and self-discipline this will happen to me, to you and to my sister and you sisters and brothers. But I do not condemn the fallen one, for God's grace is still open for her to return to God." I am here as spokesperson of the confessing church.

### **3. Death of the Author**

I am a person dead by 66 years, but I am 'prevented from dying by death itself' as Mauris Blanchot puts it. I am speaking on my Instants of death. When I am in a channel discussion, I am in the dock - in the box of the defendant who is facing a firing squad - which are two as far as I am concerned, the panellists and the anchor who represent the secular public, but there is a third unseen but real firing squad, which is the Church members who want to see and hear how I defend the Church. The spokesperson has to defend the Church of Christ, which is not an institution competing with other institutions in the world.

Why am I there in the dock? Was Paul Ricour right when he says, "nothing more fragile to wound than an existence that is at the mercy of a belief." I am there simply because I

represent a group of men and women who claim to hold on to high values and virtues.

I stand there as a person representing the Church, I defend the faith and the morals of the Church. Therefore, my ego as well as my individual self has no voice there; I am not speaking in my personal capacity.

In fact, I was in agony on two accounts: 1. My face happens to represent the church, which problems have rendered unattractive. I often wondered why they did not find a little more handsome person whose appearance could be more appealing. I wasted tons of Cuticura powder, especially on my face, I broke many mirrors. Finally I took comfort thinking that my face is truly representative of today's Syro-Malabar Church!

2. Once I was called to the Asianet channel for a recorded discussion, which was telecast more than once. Celibacy came up as one of the points in the discussion. One young man raised his hands and said, "Celibacy is impossible and those who claim to practice it are crooks." I was called to respond, in a humorous way I said, "The brother who raises the question thinks it is impossible to practise celibacy. Because it could be true about him, he claims that I and all others like me are crooks. Whatever argument I may make here to counter him will only prove his point that I am a crook. So I keep quiet and request him to see the lives of those him he called crooks." This is a typical example of certain predicaments which beg for answers and reduce you to a witness. When I speak as a spokesperson, I am always aware that I am standing in the witness box, defenceless against worldly dialectics, and so allow silence to speak of the truth that exists in one's flesh and blood. St. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, spoke of *facere veritatem* (make your

truth). These are instances of death of your ego and the self. I am a spokesperson of Christ whose tragic dimension of life cannot be erased and denied to defend the church, which, if done will be a betrayal.

I had to die to myself and become filled with the spirit of the Church –the Holy Spirit. May I quote St Augustine who wrote, “*si fallor sum*” (if I fail or fall I am), which is the ur-form of Cartesian *Cogito*, but has a different meaning. If I fail, I am; but, if I don’t fail, I am not, but Christ’s spirit speaks thorough me.

Much of what I have written is about agonizing instants. But when I spoke of Mother Theresa, Sts Chavara, Euprasia, Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil, those were ecstatic moments of power and glory for the church. But, often the media is interested in exceptions than in the regular life of sanity and sanctity, which happily is very common.

#### **4. Self-Constancy and Self-Criticism**

If the instances of my media intervention were my instants of death, then and only then I have succeeded in my work as a spokesperson. I stay always on the path of deconstruction and examination of conscience, both as an individual and as a Church. On certain occasions I had the confusion of Baudelino of Umberto Eco: “I confuse between what I see with what I wish to see.” The stories that are, are being haunted by the stories that could be. When I studied the stories where Church was accused, I have found innocent and upright men and women of the Church accused and made scapegoats of either of mimetic rivalry by certain vested interests or of the scandal mongering media. I also have found cases where Christians in the Church were betraying Christ to save the Church. The same temptation of the Cardinal in

Ivan Karamazov's short story *The Grand Inquisitor* in Dostoevsky's *Karamazov Brothers*. I quote as Slavoj Zizek the Slovenian, who studied the reasons of the fall of communism, gave his book this title *For they know not what they do*. The only reason he finds for the fall of communism is what G.K. Chesterton has told us years back when he studied detective stories: "morality is the most dark and daring of conspiracies." With profuse caveats I may dare to say that the fall of communism or the fall of Christianity are two sides of the same coin.

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We can lose our jobs, families, houses, money, health and even life itself. But often we forget one thing that whatever trouble or crisis affects us there is a God who understands our situations better than we ourselves. Our heavenly Father knows exactly what is happening to us. The next time when fear catch holds of our lives, let us not forget to remember that being faithful to Christ in this life is much more important than the fear of rejection and loss. Also let us take a moment to recall some of the great promises of our God. Let us also remind ourselves that God cares for us and we are His dearest children! **-J Rino**

## SOME TALK THE TALK, BUT MAY STUMBLE WALKING THE TALK

A man was being tailgated by a stressed-out woman on a busy boulevard. Suddenly, the light turned yellow, just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection.

The tailgating woman hit the roof, and the horn, screaming in frustration as she missed her chance to get through the intersection with him. As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer.

The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a cell.

After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

He said, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping the guy off in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do' bumper sticker, the 'Follow Me to Sunday School' bumper sticker and the chrome-plated fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car."

Author Unknown