

“Only the Best Are Good Enough:” Interview with Missiologist Fr Julian Saldhana SJ

AJRS: For more than 40 years, you have been involved in missionary research and deliberations. You have been able to form many seminarians, who contribute to a dynamic Indian Church. What are your reflections on the contemporary needs with regards to mission in India.

Julian Saldhana: One cannot lay down an exact blue-print for India as a whole, because of the immense variety of situations and contexts. Besides, evangelization itself is a broad concept which embraces many elements (Cf. EN 17). Furthermore, the evangelizer is limited by his own abilities and resources. There is no single manner of mission which is applicable everywhere. It calls for much originality and initiative on the part of the evangelizer, to decide how to go about in the concrete context. What is important is to have a vision of evangelization. No wonder, that J. Shütte, late Superior General of the SVDs once remarked: “For the missions only the best are good enough!”

In areas where there are many priests and religious, these should consider offering their services for life or for a limited period, in areas where the need is greater. Likewise, in areas where vocations are plentiful, bishops should consider establishing “mission houses” as recruiting centres

for areas of greater need. The example of Mangalore diocese, which started the Bidar mission (now the diocese of Gulbarga) and is currently helping in East Africa, is worth emulating.

AJRS: The Church is essentially missionary. How do we proclaim Gospel values in contemporary India, without projecting ourselves as triumphalistic and superior?

JS: It was Archbishop Angelo Fernandes of Delhi, who said in an intervention in the Bishops' Synod of 1974: "We must bear in mind, that the Church is not God's sole agent of evangelization." Many non-Christians unwittingly further gospel values. Collaborating with all people of good will in promoting what is truly human and truly Christian is what he termed 'macro-evangelization'. This will often be for us a humbling, rather than a triumphalistic experience.

AJRS: From your long experiences in missionary fields, what are some of the lessons you have learnt, which you would like to share with the readers of Asian Journal of Religious Studies?

JS: Here in Asia, particularly in India, human relations are very important; the *dialogue of life* is much more important than theological dialogue. The FABC explained it so: "being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God's Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word". As Paul told the first Christians: "Whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all ..." (Gal 6:10).

The missionary ideal is well summarized in the phrase coined by Charles de Foucauld: "**universal brother**". One

can hardly explain it better than does John Paul II: the missionary “bears in himself the Church’s spirit, her openness to and interest in all peoples and individuals, especially the least and poorest of his brethren. As such, he overcomes barriers and divisions of race, caste, or ideology. He is a sign of God’s love in the world - a love without exclusion or partiality” (RM 89). This ideal is particularly relevant in India.

AJRS: Given the concrete Indian situation, what is your advice to priests, pastors and missionaries?

JS: We communicate more by what we are than by what we do. Holiness of life is a prime requirement in a priest or missionary: “It is not enough to update pastoral techniques, organize and coordinate ecclesial resources, or delve more deeply into the biblical and theological foundations of faith” (RM 90).

Here in India, the witness of life is valued immensely more than doctrines and dogmas. This is linked with the conviction, that concerning the ultimate Reality we cannot grasp what it is, but only what it is not. Whatever be the doctrines held, one looks for the transformation wrought in the life of the witness: personal experience and detachment. Not infrequently, one is asked, “What is your experience (‘*anubhava*’) of Christ?” Or: “Do you really believe what you are proclaiming? Do you live what you believe? Do you really preach what you live?” (EN76).

AJRS: Thanks for your book, “Exploring Frontiers.” What are some of the salient insights that you want to communicate through your book?

JS: My book covers a wide variety of topics. It shows that a genuine renewal of theology and the Church must be based on historical facts on the one hand, and on the very principles which the Church professes.

AJRS: How do you see the Indian Church of the future?

JS: We need to focus resolutely and courageously on the vision which Vatican II discerned for us: “*Particular traditions, together with the individual patrimony of each family of nations ... can be taken up into Catholic unity. Finally, the individual young Churches, adorned with their own traditions, will have their own place in the ecclesiastical communion ...*” (AG 22). The comprehensive inculturation called for by John Paul II (EA 20-22) needs to be fostered. This requires bold and imaginative steps, whose outcome will be the emergence of new Rites within the Church.

AJRS: What is the impact of Pope Francis on today’s mission theology?

JS: Pope Francis has reminded us of our pastoral priorities. In our preaching and catechesis, we should not place the communication of doctrines ahead of or above transmission of the *experience* that, “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you. And now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you” (Ev.Gaud. 164).

AJRS: Thank you very much. May God accompany you in all your ventures!

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