

## Interview with His Grace Archbishop Anil Couto

(Conducted by Francis Gonsalves, SJ)

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*Dear Archbishop Anil-ji, thank you for giving so much of your precious time for this interview. Let me begin ... Your request for prayer for India has become a 'political issue' blown out of proportion. What do you think of this issue?*

My request for prayer for India was not meant to be a political issue. Certain vested interests deliberately made it into a political issue through the media. I was only echoing the sentiments of a large number of clergy, religious and laity of the Archdiocese of Delhi who had requested me for such a prayer campaign to be organized in our Archdiocese for a year before the general elections. This was also intended to coincide with the anniversary of the apparitions of Our Blessed Mother Mary at Fatima, i.e., May 13, 2018 to May 13, 2019. However, let me reiterate that I firmly believe that the entire Christian community and all Christians—and I, as bishop within the Church—are citizens of India. We have the constitutionally guaranteed right to express our views and to pray for our nation and its leaders. Nobody can suppress this fundamental right as long as it doesn't violate the Law of the land.

*What is the political and social role of the Church in nation building, especially in the context of present-day India?*

Through her singular service to human society in so many fields—the most well-known among them being education and health care—the Church in India has been engaged in the task of nation building for the past nearly 2000 years or so. Undoubtedly, nobody can deny this fact. Nothing that pertains to the human

person as created “in the image and likeness of God” (Gen 1:26-27) is outside the realm of the mission of the Church.

Imbued with the vision of the ‘Kingdom of God’ or ‘Reign of God’ as preached and practised by Our Lord Jesus Christ and rooted in his Gospel, the Church, His Mystical Body, has to be in the forefront of building up a society where there is justice, equality, peace, where human rights are respected and nobody feels exploited and oppressed. The Church has been doing this since centuries. But, we must humbly admit that we, as Church, have also failed at times, especially when we have not been able to eradicate unjust systems like the caste system but have fallen prey to it. The struggle for a new society is inevitably a political struggle (much as it is a religious, social, moral and ethical one); and the Church has to be fully involved in it. However, the ordained ministers of the Church cannot be involved in partisan politics. It is the task of the lay faithful who are very adept at handling such matters and are very experienced in their own fields of involvement in national life.

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*Do you think that the Church—especially the church leaders—are sufficiently equipped to face the challenges posed by forces which are inimical to Indian Christians and to Christianity?*

No, I don’t think that we are sufficiently enlightened and equipped to face the challenges posed to the secular and democratic structure of our Constitution. All of us, Christians—and, especially the leaders of the church and laity in responsible positions—need to know the Constitution of India more thoroughly. We really must be fully aware of the forces that are working insidiously to change the Constitution. The danger is not only to Christianity but to the nation as such and to the very idea of our nation as laid down in our Constitution.

*What is your suggestion for priests and Christian leaders in India?*

All of us, priests, Christian leaders, and all Christians all over the world, have a 'prophetic role' to play by virtue of our baptism and our Christian calling. We should always be conscious of our prophetic role and make other Christians aware of it, as well. We can play this prophetic role with the help of the Holy Spirit given to all of us through the sacraments. Hence, besides animating the liturgy and celebrating the sacraments, we should all be 'conscientizers' and 'awareness builders' in society, at large.

*What is your advice to young seminarians, especially during their formation time?*

Seminarians should realize that the time of their formation is a precious gift of God to them. This time of seminary formation is a once-in-lifetime opportunity to develop the many gifts and talents that God has given them. The document 'Ratio Fundamentalís' speaks of the 'Gift' of priestly vocation and has four areas of growth, namely, spiritual, human, intellectual and pastoral. Each of these is very important. It could happen that one only studies in order to score high marks but is not interested in prayer life and pastoral activity. Or, someone else could aspire to excel in music, sports, public speaking, etc., but only to boost his ego. A good seminarian and priest is one who strives to be 'another Christ'. Thus, all seminarians must develop their God-given gifts in view of their future ministry. They must pray to the Holy Spirit for the grace to be conformed to the Eternal High Priest in his three-fold ministry of being shepherd, priest and prophet.

*You are in a privileged place, being in New Delhi, the capital of India. How would you evaluate the general political and cultural situation of India?*

Delhi is definitely a "privileged" place because it is the national capital and the political 'nerve centre' of the country.

Whatever happens in Delhi becomes news immediately. On the one hand, because of its unique position, Delhi can boast of some of the best institutions in the country; e.g. AIIMS for medical care; JNU and St. Stephen's College, for education; Centre for Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and Institute for Economic Growth (IEG), for social issues, besides, of course other legal, political, cultural establishments. But, on the other hand, Delhi is also "not so privileged" as it is the most polluted city in the country and one of the most polluted in the world. Moreover, it is also regarded as the "crime capital of India". Worse still, the political situation in our country, as somebody has mentioned, is not only "turbulent" but "frightening" if we go by some of the events and happenings in our country during the last four years. The trend towards mono-culturalism poses a danger to our Constitution.

*How can we be messengers of Peace and Joy, as Pope Francis has been exhorting us, in our times—and, especially in an inter-faith context like ours?*

Christ is the "prince of peace" and the "herald of good news". Our Lord has taught us how to bring peace and joy to the world by his word in Scripture and by his whole lifestyle, death and resurrection. To be messengers of peace and joy is the mission of not only individual Christians, but of the whole Church, collectively. If we remain faithful to Jesus and his Gospel of love, justice and peace, then joy will automatically flow in overwhelming torrents in this world. In the fulfillment of her mission the Church is called upon to join hands with all people of goodwill who seek the truth and in whose hearts the Holy Spirit is also at work to bring God's plan to fulfillment in our world.

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*Thanks, so much, for your words of wisdom, dear Archbishop Anil!*