



An Opportunity to Reform the Church: An Interview with Prof Felix Wilfred

As you know the Church in India is going through some major crises. Before coming to that, can you elaborate on your general impression of the Church in India?

FW: One great thing about the Indian Church is that it has a lot of resources – human, spiritual, intellectual and financial. Most remarkable is the rich human resources we have with persons twenty-four hours on duty with dedication. Unfortunately, the Church has not maximised the potential, especially of its human resources which are often simply wasted. That is really a pity. There are a lot of expectations from the Church, but the delivery does not correspond. It is often only in dribs and drabs.

We, as a Church, lack a more enlightened approach to the issues and questions concerning our nation, and matters in the Church. The Church seems to operate with a hierarchical and feudal mindset. The decisions are made ad hoc and often according to the likes and dislikes of some individuals, thanks to the strong clericalization of the Indian Church. Ministers and Church-leaders often appear to judge matters on the basis of their impressions, rather than following an enlightened and studied approach to pastoral issues and national questions. So proper, balanced and healthy leadership is lacking in the Church. We need more discussions and exchange within the Church on issues that affect the lives of the people.

It is an irony that today the secular world is teaching the Church about human dignity and human rights, about the need for transparency and accountability in the Church. In fact, we should have taken the initiative and have been a model for the secular world in terms of human rights, transparency, etc.

Since we operate from a feudal paradigm, we think that what applies to the society, does not apply to the Church. This feeling of exceptionalism is very dangerous and has serious consequences. We have seen these in a couple of very sensational cases in terms of corruption in the management of Church-properties and sexual issues that have rocked the Church and shocked the society in recent times. The Church-leadership is afraid of being questioned. Why should one fear public scrutiny when things are in order. In fact this will contribute greatly to the credibility of the Church.

In the face of the challenges to the life of the people, it is high time to cultivate adult faith in the Church. This is what underlies the great document of *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II. Pastoral presence of the Church in the world would presuppose that the Christian believers are inspired by an adult faith that feels responsibility to engage in the world to bring the Good News. On the contrary, maintaining the Christian communities in infantile faith will make the people to be satisfied with some routine ritual practices and get bogged down in activities in and around the Church. The Church in India, with its vast resources and potentials, needs to realise that we are part of the larger society and we need to become torch-bearers, salt and leaven

I wish I am wrong, but I tend to think that since early 1980's the energy of the Indian Catholic Church has been greatly sapped by many duplications and triplications in the row among the three rites with the result that the internal matters of securing of rights of each Church, jurisdiction, and

preserving its identity and tradition have dominated over the call to respond to the signs of the times with synergy. As a result, today we have a Church by and large bent on itself - *ecclesia incurvata in se*.

It may be noted that during the struggle for Independence, there were lively debates in the Church regarding what is happening in the country. If we analyse the Catholic journals from the middle of nineteenth century till the time of Independence – as one of my doctoral students has done – we will note how much discussion within the Catholic community took place. There was no one opinion about national issues which could be characterized as common to all Catholics. No, there were diversity of views and perceptions. But the important thing to note is that there was a healthy debate and interaction. This is wanting today. Catholics do not discuss in general about national issues and questions. We are on the defensive, extremely worried only about minority rights. Such a piecemeal and shrunken approach to the problems of the nation falls far short of the high expectations from the Church.

In this context, you are aware of the scandals and difficulties that the Church in India face today. How do you look at the crisis in sexual morality in the Indian Church?

FW: Curiously, we seem to have inherited the Victorian sexual morality, for which speaking of sex is a taboo. Some streaks of traditional Indian culture seem to gel with it. But the sexual revolution of 1960's has changed it in the West where sex became an issue of public concern and discussion. Therefore, they seem to approach issues of sexuality with frankness and honesty. That is why when the sexual abuse exploded, people were appalled that Church-leaders could hush up things to protect the clerics involved. It is a case of lopsided priority. It may have worked in the Medieval times. People of this age are not ready to buy the logic behind such

protection at the expense of the dignity and rights of the victims. Since a lot of inhibition continues in our country and in the Church, it is likely that Church leaders do not address such issues, and may tend to do what the West is learning by bitter experience not to do. The suffering of and injustice done to the victims are brushed aside to protect those in sacred orders. We cannot any more pretend that we do not have issues of sexuality in the Church here in India, and that it is only a Western problem. That would be a blissful ignorance of the ground-reality. There is no more room for lethargy. It is high time that we have in the Church clear guidelines for the protection of women and children. We would expect that in this matter all the three rites act in synergy. We need to recognise the problem in every diocese and take sufficient and reasonable measures to prevent explosion of scandals which can affect seriously the Church and its Gospel-mission. We should have been in the forefront with regard to protection of women and children from sexual abuse. In our schools and institutions, we should have taken adequate measures long ago and thus be a living witness to the others in the country. Instead we are being suspected today and are on the defensive now, and it sends out wrong signals. The Church ministers and leaders should remember that money, property and sex are corrupting, and that they are closely connected. As the Letter to Timothy says, “love of money is the root cause of all evil” (I Tim. 6:10). This is too evident in the contemporary world. The Church should not fall victim to this temptation. In fact, the same letter to Timothy adds, “it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs”.

The active participation of all the faithful is important, so that the Church could become vigilant and feel responsible and accountable. It is unfortunate that in the Catholic Church, the legislative, executive and judicial powers are concentrated

in the same person, who could become fearsome by misuse of such an absolute form of power. If the lawgiver, executive and judge are the same person, then the offender and the judge may also become the same person. That is not at all healthy, and can encourage some of them to become autocrats. The present codes of canon law need to be thoroughly revised so as to remove this anomaly, and make all the faithful co-responsible in the mission of the Church. There is no foundation for such an absolutisation of power in the Bible.

The Church in *Lumen Gentium* (L.G. 10) recognised that through baptism we share in the teaching, sanctifying and governing mission of Jesus Christ. We all share a common priesthood in the service of which is to be understood the ministerial priesthood, according to Vatican II. But when it comes to the power of governing, the Canon Law does not give any power to the lay faithful. According to canon 129, power of governance or jurisdiction can be exercised only by those constituted in sacred order; the lay faithful have only the role of cooperation. If through baptism all the faithful share in the three ministerial roles of Jesus, it is not understandable, why one of the roles, namely the duty of governance should be reserved only to the ordained ministers, and the lay faithful be excluded. I mean to say, at bottom, a participatory Church in which responsibility rests on all the faithful could help prevent the dangers that could be caused by exclusive clerical exercise of power.

What do you say about the lack of attendance in the church? Are you concerned of it?

FW: I do not think it is a big concern for the Indian Church at the moment. Secularization is a phenomenon in the West coming out of its own history, and it is to be seen wherever established religions are at work as in the case of the West. The thesis that with modernization, secularization will set in,

is being proved wrong. On the contrary, as can be seen in our Indian middle class, religiosity and attendance of religious rituals and going on pilgrimage are on the increase. In a world of competition, unpredictability, volatility and insecurity, the divine becomes the sure point of reference. After all, to be concerned about wealth (*artha*) is an integral part of our Indian culture. No wonder that goddess Lakshmi is so much welcomed! Further, there is a difference in understanding what religion is. This is such a vast issue into which I cannot go here. Indian Christians, it seems to me, live their religiosity closer to its Indian/Asian roots of religiosity than with a Western understanding of it. Hence, I surmise that religious expressions may abound in the Church rather than diminish.

Similarly, what do you say about the decline in the number of vocation to priesthood and religious life?

There could be some indicators of slight decline in vocation to priesthood and religious life. But this is far from being alarming, and nothing to compare with what the West is going through. It will take some years for India to deal with this problem. At the same time we should ask ourselves: Should the clerics run all the institutors? Should they do all the bureaucratic and administrative work? In Europe one has made a virtue out of necessity. The dearth of vocation to ordained ministry has led them to realize the role of the laity and their ministry more and more. We need not wait until such crisis situation visits us. Let us welcome seriously already now the role of the community of the faithful.

You agree that we are going through a crisis. Still I am sure that the Church has a message to deliver. The Church in India can bear witness to Jesus and His good news. Your suggestion for a credible church

FW: I like to see a church involved deeply in the concerns of the people. I think it was Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, the Mahatma of Africa, who said, "A church which does not care for us, we do not care for it." We need an extrovert Church, a Church that does not wait others to come to it, rather reaches out to the others wherever they are.

The great mission the Church could do in these times when human life and the environment are threatened by neoliberal economy and the values of competition and self-seeking it promotes, is to bear witness to another set of values that truly transform the life of human beings and society, and make nature integral part of human existence. St Augustine in his classical work "*City of God*" contrasts city of God with the human city. It is not a dualistic view or an alienating vision projecting an otherworldly reality. He meant that the city of God as those who live here on earth with values that derive from the experience of the divine, in contrast to a city of evils, egoism and violence. This is indeed a great challenge and mission for the Church to transform the earth, the society into a reflection of divine presence, of the Kingdom of God. A Church infected by casteism and divisions, money and corruptions, cannot truly bear witness to the city of God and what it represents. If we interpret the city of God today it would be a city of justice, equality, a city of care and compassion for the poor, the marginalized, the discriminated and the suffering. If we read deeply into the Gospels we will find that Jesus was concerned more about human suffering rather than about sin which he was always ready to forgive and condone. He addressed the issue of human suffering drawing power from above.

It remains an important challenge for the Indian Church to respond to the political, economic, social and cultural conditions in the country. These dimensions of life reveal the root of suffering and deprivations today.

The great message which the Indian Church could bring to the people is to make alive the Sermon on the Mount. This Sermon is something which is not meant for Christians alone, but for all human beings. In fact, the Sermon on the Mount is the grammar of being human at the depth of which one discovers the divine mystery. The Sermon shows the way for a transformed humanity, and therefore brings message of hope for humanity. Hence the Indian Church needs to invest its energy and resources to actualize it in daily life. That is a huge challenge, also because it involves a challenge for the Church to transform itself in the light of this universal message of Jesus.

Another great thing the Indian Church could do is to nurture adult faith, which is different from infantile faith. We have the great model in the faith of Jesus in the Father and in human beings. This was the anchor of his life. Adult faith distinguishes itself from faith that enters into, so to say, a commercial relationship with God and saints, namely to entreat God and saints for favours, and promise to do some religious practices in return. The magical consciousness of the infantile faith characterized by commercial type of relations needs to give way to mature faith which will be light to one's life in the darkest of abyss and valleys and will confer strength and vitality to one's life. All this calls us to rethink the current faith-formation in the Church. The Church, on its part, should learn to deal with the faithful as adults and not go about with paternalism as if the faithful were children.

I would like to see a humble Indian Church which is open to learn from the voice of God speaking to us every moment through the many events and signs. It is a Church which places its trust not in its power and its means but in the power of God and of the Spirit. As Dionysius Areopagite, an ancient Christian writer said, "God's centre is everywhere; God's

circumference is nowhere!”. A self-satisfied Church is a Church which refuses to learn before teaching and refuses to identify the many centres of divine presence.

Thanks for your deep involvement with the issues concerning the Church and the nation. We know that you have the good of the Church at heart. Your suggestions on the role of theology, especially public theology, in the life of the church and of Christians.

FW: Theologians have a very important role in the Church. But in order to play their historical role today, they need to have both their feet on the rough ground of reality around. They need to respond to the real problems of the people, at the ground level. They must be abreast with the development of the world, especially the contemporary economic, politic and cultural advancements. In other words, their theology must be closely related to the reality of the word.

Theologians must be persons of passion and of commitment. It is remarkable that Pastor Martin Luther King Jr., Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, Bishop Carlos Belo of East Timor, and Mother Teresa were awarded Nobel Prize for Peace. They were recognized by such an honour not because they were the best preachers of Christianity, but for what they did to the humankind cutting across all kinds of boundaries. Their deep humanism made them as well great Christians. What was at work in them was a public theology in action. They represent contemporary models for ideal Christian life and engagement.

Theology could open up to individual spiritual adventures in the daily lives of the people which need to be recognized, appreciated, and promoted as a learning experience. This could be a very exciting and refreshing process in faith formation, different from the traditional one. Such a faith-formation will

motivate the Christian faithful to be agents of transformation in the society.

Coming to another side, we know that you have been very much involved in the universal church, contributing significant theological insights. What could be some of contrition of the Indian Church could make to the global church.

FW: Since Asian civilizational vision cares to see the entire reality as interconnected, interdependent, and as unified whole, the Indian Church could be a messenger of integral vision that harmoniously blends together the human, the nature and the divine. This integral vision is necessary to overcome the numerous fragmentations our world suffers. In that sense, the Indian Church could point out the direction of the future mission of the global Church. We are encouraged to do this, thanks to the stimulating encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*. Another possible contribution flows from this, namely, bringing the religions and religious experience of our neighbours within this grand integral vision of unity. It offers a different theology of religions than the one which has alienated us from brothers and sisters of other faiths.

Another great contribution Indian Christians could make is to draw from our tradition and culture in which life is seen as a continuous journey – *yatra*. It can help the global Church to live faith as journey in which we continue to listen to the voice of God and the Spirit and respond to it sensitively as we move along. Taking Christian life as journey provides a model of life in the Spirit and according to the promptings of the Spirit. It will be full of surprises, and not repetition of the old and stereotypes. In this sense, Indian Christianity could bring the freshness of the Spirit to global Christianity.

Can you say something about *Concilium*, the prestigious Catholic Journal, you are very much part of?

FW: The International Journal of *Concilium* was started at the close of Vatican II, in 1965 by some of the stalwarts of twentieth century theology – Karl Rahner, Johann Baptist Metz, Edward Schillebeeckx, Yves Congar, and others. In fact, the initiative came from a layperson, Mr Paul Brand, a publisher in The Netherlands. He suggested to the theologians to start a journal, in order to interpret the teachings of Vatican II and bring theological vision of the Council to the doorsteps of the faithful.

Today *Concilium* is published in six European language editions (English, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Croatian) five times a year. It is a lot of work. I had the privilege of being part of the editing of this journal for the past twenty three years, of which eleven years as its president, had the responsibility of directing it. We have twenty members of the editorial board representing different continents and experiences.

Now we have about 7000 first rate articles from some of the most distinguished Catholic theologians of twentieth and twenty-first century, several of them associated with Vatican II. It a great treasure and legacy of our journal *Concilium* from which many Catholics continue to draw inspiration. We are happy that our journal continues to animate the faith of thousands of Christians and inspire their Christian engagement in all the continents of the world.

Concilium does not hesitate to take up new and critical questions, like non-ordination of women, homosexuality, reform of the roman curia, revision of the code, betrayal of trust in the Church referring to lack of transparency in matters of sexual abuse, eco-theology, Christianity and Consumerism,

and so on. Concilium by its vocation tends to explore unanswered questions in the Church and awaken it to think anew and explore new areas of engagement and ministry. Since we wanted to support Pope Francis in his efforts to reform the Roman Curia – a very difficult and challenging task he is facing - we sent to him Italian and Spanish copies of the special issue we brought out on that question with contributions from eminent scholars.

In this connection, can you elaborate on the significance of your newly started initiative, International Journal of Asian Christianity (IJAC). What are your dreams of it?

FW: Many Europeans and Americans think that in Asia, Latin America and Africa, we can only do third rate theology. They cannot accept that non-Westerners can do serious research on Christianity. IJAC offers to bring to the international audience the researches we Asians do. The journal wants to bring to the global readership the questions and issues Asian Christianity is grappling with, and wants to do this in an inter-disciplinary way. Our researches and insights could be of service to the global Church, and hence the need to make these known widely. The journal is published by one of the most prestigious academic publishers in the world, Brill, in publishing business for the past 350 years. That adds a lot of weight to our journal, and hence we are able to reach Asian researches to the global academia.

Thank you for sharing with us the challenges the Church faces and the need for reform within. Finally, what are the signs of hope for the Indian Church today?

FW: True, we are going through a crisis. But I hope it will make people begin to reflect well, and think critically and constructively, and be concerned about the Church and the Gospel-mission. In Chinese, as it is said, the word “crisis”

means both danger and opportunity. I think the present crisis of the Indian Church is a great opportunity for its renewal and hope for a spring time for the flourishing of the Gospel-message among our people.

There are very deeply committed Christians working at the grassroots and do not count the cost. They allow themselves and their ministry inspired by the Gospel. They are surely signs of hope for the Indian Church of tomorrow. We need to give a platform to the younger generation to discuss issues of the Church and of the society from faith-perspectives . They could act as catalysts for reform of the Church and the transformation of the society. They will be our hope for the future.

Thank you very much Prof Felix Wilfred for your leaborate and insightful interview.

Prof Felix Wilfred is one of the best known theologians of India today.