

The Cathedral as a Centre of Unity

SUNDAR CLARKE*

Tension hovers low over our world today, in every aspect of life. Men are divided by ideology, social status and social function, power-blocks, nationality, economic development, language, class and caste. In our own national scene, while eternally in search of national unity, we cannot agree upon a national language. National consciousness is wrecked by narrow domestic provincialism and communalism, 'the bane (as Nehru remarked) of our politics'. The traditional family structures are disintegrating, with divorce and the 'generation gap' as its most obvious symptoms. If the Church has a role to play within this apparently divisive and fragmenting scene, has the Cathedral a role to play also? Can the Cathedral be a source and centre of unity not only within the Church, within the diocese, but also in society at large?

The Church of South India came into existence in 1947, and the Church of North India in 1970. There has been great jubilation over these acts of unity, which are concrete and specific. One cannot forget also the positive reaction of the Second Vatican Council, which has fostered a new era in inter-Christian relationships. The Churches are indeed moving closer together, not merely in spirit but in terms of practical co-operation.

That at least is the situation to all outward appearances; but a deeper study reveals a paradoxical situation. Though the Indian Churches appear to be drawing together, in other ways we see a vast increase in the number of foreign-sponsored sects and schismatic groups breaking away and attempting to establish themselves. Alongside these denominational splits and sectarian movements, there are other divisive factors, such as caste, class and community distinctions, which seem to be gaining ground. Caste distinction shows its ugly head on many occasions in the life of the Church; as does class superiority. There seems to be a diversity in our unity which raises serious questions about the validity of the Church's claim to be an integrating and uniting factor.

The Unity of the Cathedral Congregation

This may be examined under four headings; and on each of them it is difficult not to strike a negative note.

* The Rt. Rev. Sundar Clarke is Bishop in Madras, in the Church of South India. At the time at which this paper was written, he was Presbyterian in Charge of St Mark's Cathedral, Bangalore.

1. *Socio-economic Unity*: In a recent article in an Indian Christian periodical it was stated that 'The Cathedral in the public mind is only a church of the car-owning gentry, a centre of fashionable weddings. When we have banished princes and privy-purses which signified privilege, why create "class" on the basis of a building?' There is probably some truth in this remark, as many of our Cathedrals draw upon the elite bourgeois society. In some cases, it is difficult to find a member of the congregation earning less than Rs 400 per month. The Cathedral congregation is seldom an area of socio-economic unity; and the same is true when one looks at the educational background of its members. Most Cathedrals use English almost exclusively, and therefore draw upon the educated classes for membership.

2. *Cultural Unity*: There is little sign of cultural unity and integration in our Cathedrals. Their ethos is overwhelmingly Western, and in structure, modes of worship, music etc. They have more in common with London, New York or Brisbane than with a genuinely Indian model. The clergy still clothe themselves with the finery of Western vestments when our brothers are practically naked, rather than wear the simple cool garments suited to our climate and our culture. We are unthinking imitators of the Western churches in architecture, worship, forms of ministry—even candlesticks. It is perhaps not surprising that a simple average Indian feels ill at ease in our Cathedrals; but so acclimatised have we become to this fact that we have not taken seriously the question of contextualisation. While not advocating the entire abandonment of everything 'Western', it is certainly time that Cathedrals took a lead towards a healthy integration. If we have much to learn from the West, it is equally true that we have much to learn from India herself.

3. *Theological Unity*: Our Cathedrals, particularly in the larger cities, tend to be aligned towards a particular type of theology. This may vaguely be termed 'Liberal'. I am not averse to this, or allergic to it: but surely a Cathedral should be cultivating ground for different brands of theology. Cathedrals should try to maintain a unity and balance between different theological trends of the day, both 'Catholic' and 'Evangelical', 'Conservative' and 'Liberal'. There must be a proper balance of Sacrament and Word.

4. *Inter-Church and Inter-Faith Unity*: Very often the Cathedral is strategically situated, either centrally or in a down-town area; and this makes it a good meeting-place for the various Churches. I do not want to venture to advocate a father role or even a mother role of the Cathedral. The Cathedral should always be thought of as one among other churches, with a certain sense of uniqueness; the cathedral is only '*Primus inter pares*'. Without reservation we should try to bring together all denominations, and make an effort in trying to understand and bring together even the sects and sectarians. It should also offer opportunities for frequent meetings between Roman Catholics and non-Roman Catholics. The Cathedral in many ways has the advantage of fostering inter-church Unity. Cathedrals should work in trying to serve the whole of the city. The Cathedral belongs

to the city and therefore to the people of the city. The Cathedral has no walls and exists for the people. The Cathedral should also make attempts because of its central location to go beyond the barriers of creed. Too often we have existed for ourselves and for our community in a narrow sense. We have not thought of living for the whole community, which includes Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, atheists and communists. Our awareness of being citizens of the other world has sometimes deprived us of being citizens of this world as well. If we are truly citizens of this world we should look for opportunities of welcoming people of other faiths. Industrial service, community development, community organization, etc., offer openings for a more free mixing of people with other faiths. We need to include in our thinking and in our programmes, the city and the citizens, the city council and counsellors, the corporation and its workers, the police and its forces, the fire department and the firemen. The Cathedral should seek to meet the people in their various ministries. This may involve our joining hands with other faiths and even a preparedness to join them in their worship. A united service of thanksgiving could be organised each year for the city and its citizens, jointly sponsored by inter-faith authorities. The Cathedral therefore can serve as a great unifying force, bringing together people of various socio-economic backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, theological backgrounds, denominational backgrounds, and other religious backgrounds.

The Cathedral as a focus of Unity

We may look at this whole aspect from two angles. Firstly the Cathedral as a centre of unity within itself and secondly the Cathedral as a centre of unity for others.

1. *Centre of unity within:* The Cathedral as a centre of unity within should begin with unity in its own Parish life. Sometimes membership of a Cathedral is considered as a status symbol or a social requirement. We are in danger of making the Cathedral a social club with a religious bias. The result of this is seen sometimes in the attitude of people who worship in the Cathedral. Quite often we find that there is no feeling of belonging to each other; there is no real family feeling. People come in their Sunday best, get out of their cars, go through the worship service and no sooner is the final benediction said than they are all back in their cars and moving towards home. Some Cathedrals have a coffee hour after service patronised by a few who feel the need for it and by a smaller few who feel obliged to stay behind, because they are members of the Vestry or Pastorate Committee. The coffee hour has not really brought the people together, and must be shared by all. The Cathedral should begin to know itself. The people must know each other before they begin to minister to others.

Before the Cathedral becomes a centre of unity without and for others, there must be certain cohesiveness within the life of each

Cathedral. The Cathedral should be a centre of unity for its own ministries. Jesus Christ is the Head and also the Centre of the Church. Our varied ministries are drawn from the Centre, from the Core, from the Source, so that there is a basic loyalty to Jesus Christ in all our ministries. Our varied ministries are also to witness to the redemptive act of Jesus Christ, whether it be famine relief, drought relief, refugee relief, industrial teams, outreach programme etc. With our basic unity in Jesus Christ we draw all our resources from Him. Sometimes in our outreach programmes, we tend to be social clubs, carrying out programmes forgetting the basic purpose of taking Christ into the world. Our ministries are more than a piece of social service, more than humanitarian agencies. It is to love God and love our neighbour and this can be achieved only with a certain sense of unity within.

I sometimes fear that the emphasis of our other ministries in the Cathedral is rather weak and bleak. We have emphasised quite rightly the importance of worship and religious programmes, but many of our Cathedrals have not gone beyond this. The Cathedral as a centre of unity for its own ministries must seek ardently to bring about a great unity between the sacred and the secular.

2. *Centre of Unity without:* A Cathedral can serve as a focus of unity in relation to the Diocese and to the city in a number of ways. It may, for example, serve as a meeting-ground for the clergy, a centre of study, and a place of experiment in worship. At the 1968 Lambeth Conference concern was expressed with regard to fellowship amongst the clergy. There was a feeling that theological seminaries had become machines, mass-producing ordinands for ordination, while dioceses showed little concern for follow-up after ordination. The Cathedral may serve as a centre for bible-study, prayer-groups, retreats etc. An area in which clergy need help is in the preparation of sermons: it might be useful for each Cathedral to organise regular and systematic sermon preparation groups.

Likewise the Cathedral may serve as a centre of unity for bringing together various groups of professionals for the study of their vocation, and for common worship and prayer. In this way we may go even beyond the four walls of the Christian community; programmes for doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers, engineers and other professional groups may provide a 'bridge' to non-Christians who share the same problems and concerns.

The Cathedral has an international role, and provides the link between the diocese and the wider horizon, Cathedral staff should certainly be encouraged to spend time at other Cathedral centres, learning and sharing. This is a two-way process; and it is likely that clergy and staff from Cathedrals abroad may have much to learn from us in India. The Dean of one such Cathedral in the U.S.A. wrote recently, 'What do we have that you need (and it may not be dollars)? What do you have that we need? We need your simplicity, and spirituality and poverty. We need the zeal of your prayer and bible-study. We need to be taught anew what silence and meditation are, what

fasting is. I think that the East must teach us. You don't need our expensive bureaucratic institutions. Don't copy us'. In the past, Cathedrals have tended to be cosmopolitan places, and this is good: why cannot the Cathedrals in the larger cities run International Guest Houses which are true international meeting-places? Visitors from other countries need this service; many feel lost and lonely, and are treated by the official government-sponsored tourist agencies as impersonalised spectators and not as people who need to be loved, taken care of and understood in depth. This too is part of the 'international' vocation of the Cathedral.