

Celebrating the Life of Vandana Mataji rscj

On 13th September 2024, we celebrate the centenary year of the birth of Sr. Gool Mary Dhalla, a religious of the Society of the Sacred Heart. She is better known as Vandana, a name she took as she embarked on her long and intense journey fired by the desire to see the Indian Church embodying the Indian Christ in His Cosmic Presence. For Vandana Mataji, the failure of Indian Christians to incarnate the Indian body of Christ in our country, was to have failed in the mission entrusted to us by Jesus, who sent his Spirit, on the day of Pentecost, speaking the Good News in the tongues of diverse peoples through the apostles. The various churches of early believers took root in the local cultures with the gift of the Spirit.

Vandana clearly stands in line with earlier prophets seeking to enculturate the Christian presence in the living spiritual expressions of our land. Mataji learnt from many dedicated lives e.g., the fiery Christian-Hindu, Brahmabandhav Upadhyay (1861-1907) who played a key role in the struggle for independence while integrating his dual God experience, Raimundo Panikkar, Fr. Prasanna Bhai CMI, Fr. Samarakone OMI, Fr. Ishanand Vempenny S.J., Fr. Michael Amaladoss S.J., Fr. Amalorpavadass to mention a few. These open minded seekers embraced the golden threads of spirituality which endured for centuries and still inspire the lives of numerous Indian sages and common people of this land. The existing spirituality they found in India, compelled them to discover in contextual terms, the already present Christ.

It will not be an exaggeration to say that Mataji dared to immerse herself fully as Christian, and Indian both intellectually and physically in the dual milieu, without fear or compromise. As the late Fr. George Gispert-Sauch S.J. said of her: “When theologians were busy discovering the implications of Vatican II for interfaith dialogue, and discussing about its nature, its possibility and its limits, she courageously responded to the divine call...plunged into a living dialogue in Rishikesh.”

Mataji intuited the Christ's presence in the scriptures and the deep personal God-experiences of persons she encountered. Some of these were Vinobha Bhave famous disciple of Gandhi, Maa Anandamayee mystic at Khankal, Sw. Ved Bharati -scholar and disciple of Sw. Rama of the Himalayan tradition, Chandra Swami the silent sage near Dehra Dun; disciples of Sw. Sivanand of the Divine Life Society- Rishikesh -Sw. Krishananand and H.H Sw. Chidanand. It was the latter who became her *guru*, guiding her to *Advaita* (One without a second) on the dual Christian-Hindu path. Such encounters coupled with a life of renunciation, opened the doors to further encounters, which today still need to be fathomed by a thoroughly Indian Church, as the foundational experiences of the Spirit, in our country.

Vandana's faith in the Spirit of Jesus expanded in heartfelt loving humility, silent receptivity and intellectual awe stemming from her study and growing communion with Hindus at various levels. She found that the Christ Mystery already present there, awaited its articulation and form, in a renewed Indian Christian Church. Convinced of her role in this renewal, she treaded barefoot before the flaming “Tree of Life” allowing it, to reveal itself to both Hindu and Christian alike, in an ever-deepening experience of God's truth.

Vandana, realized that there was no turning back because the Spirit of Jesus, was moving over the Indian waters of diversity and chaos, bringing it to an *Advaitik* experience. The experience she captured in what she called “Waters of Fire”. Mata ji experienced the two opposites as a unity which regenerated and informed all things, making “all things new”(Rev.21:5)(4). Her constancy in contemplating the rich spiritual insights of the Hindu “*darshanas*” and *Sashtras* and dialogue at various levels of faith, with understanding and practice, brought her depths of seeing, listening, and touching the Person of the “Son of Man” in the Indian context. The flowing “Waters of Fire” enveloped both herself and her Hindu counterparts in a revelation beyond understanding. Ultimately faith is not just dwelling on formulas previously enunciated, but living encounters with the living God who is “all and in all”.(1Cor 15:28) Mata ji, insisted that the spirituality of an Indian Church must be able to translate the Upanishadic vision of ‘the same Self in all things and all things in the Self’ (Isha. Up.6) into the Biblical truth of “I and the Father are One”.(Jn 10:30) For, **Saccidananda** – (Sat- Father, Chit-Son and Ananda-Spirit) of the Upanishads the highest epithet for the Divine, is surely the Christian experience of Jesus in the Trinity, in which we are one (BrhadaranyakaUpanisad 1:4) (Jn7:13ff). Will true oneness in the Divine radiate through the Indian Church and speak the language of the Spirit?

Returning to the person of Mataji, we see that she was being prepared, for her future life in the Spirit, from a very early age. Not only was she enflamed by the God of Fire in her childhood Zoroastrian tradition, having been born into a Parsi family, but she also tasted the sweetness of other faiths in the company of her theosophist elder sister. In that openness to other faiths, she met the Divine of the Hindu tradition and sang soul- stirring bhajans with them in their gatherings. Next, in her early teens, she met the attractive, unconventional and dynamic Jesus of the Christians. This Jesus, who led the Old into the New, was to be her one concern in the years to come. Taking root in the cultural and religious soil of her early years, at which depth she drank the fresh waters of the Spirit, she took wing.

After some years as a lecturer at Sophia College Bombay (now Mumbai), during which years her pioneering spirit did not rest; she enthused the students with things Indian, started the *Bharatiya Sanskritik Parishad* and the Indian Liturgical Club in the college. She encouraged some to study Indian music. Then came the strong gust of the Spirit in the Roman Church. With- Vatican II, the Ecumenical Council initiated by Pope John XXIII, Vandana found a burst of new life tying up with her deep desire to work for the transformation of the Indian Church. Her one aim was to see the Indian “Rupa” of the incarnate Lord. Her first contribution was an interfaith music book for the Church. She had the good fortune to have great musicians, well known vocalists Laxman Prasad Jaipurewale and his son and the famous Govind Prasad and Ustad Latafat Hussain Khan as her teachers when she took music as her *sadhana*. In 1969 Vandana was named Mistress of Novices for the Indian Province of the Society. Her first move was to allow the essential winds of spirituality and culture into the Novitiate under the guidance of Dr Klaus Klostermaier, an Indologist and scholar. While the Lord remained her central focus, the texts of other faiths were systematically introduced with the intention of integrating the spiritual insights of the aspirants to religious life. It made them less fearful, aware of their limitedness and open to the spiritual treasures of other lands and faiths in which the Spirit

of Jesus, as in the Acts, was at work. Inspired by Dag Hammarskjöld's imagery of wind and light she put to music his words, which said much "In Thy wind in thy light, how insignificant is everything else, how small we are, and how happy in That which alone is great." Humility was to be the precondition and **the** virtue of an Indian Church.

Vandana's desire for an Indian Church was not an audacious invitation to its members. There was a method in her madness. She taught by example, beginning as a pilgrim on this narrow road fraught with unknowns, to numerous Hindu ashrams, sacred places, saints, and ascetics all over India. She sought with *ekagrata of faith for Bhrama vidya* (knowledge of God) alone, sure that the treasures she was pursuing would be hers, and so it was. She met persons whose lives were obviously God-centred and spontaneously bonded with them. Their authenticity, meekness and compassion towards others and to all of creation deeply impacted her. Their activities an overflow of their intimacy with the Divine; drew people from all walks of life to their presence for nourishment on their personal journeys. She also found that most of these towering personalities were in their own way personally influenced by the Gospel, had read the lives of Christian saints, mystics, Fathers of the Church and laying claim to the Person and teaching of Christ; taught the same to their followers. They made a distinction between Christianity and what they called "Churchianity"- meaning an organisation that held its rules and activities as evidence of being followers of the Lord, but failed to exude Divine compassion and universal love.

For a better understanding of Christians, Matha ji was quick to clarify what personal God-centeredness entailed. She spoke of the *Yama-Niyama* of the Patanjali *Yoga Sutras* as the "Ethical foundation for meditation". **Yama**: Five social disciplines: *ahimsa* - nonviolence(love); *Satya*-truth; *Asteya*-unnecessary possessions; *Brahmacharya*-self-control(celebracy); *Aparigraha*- accumulation for future use. **Niyama**: Five individual disciplines: *Saucha*-purity (body, mind, heart); *Tapas*-asceticism/self-discipline; *Santosh*-contentment with what has and is; *Svadhya*-study of oneself and the Scriptures; *Eeshwarpranidhan*- surrender of self to God. She also clarified misconceptions regarding the discipline of Yoga, showing that *Hatha* exercises led to Raj Yoga- meditation and that to the summit - Samadhi i.e. permanent union with God/ unceasing God-consciousness. All of this being totally compatible with the Christian faith. In this ambience, Vandana embraced Sannyasa-renunciation. It implies the consumption of -worldly pursuits, desire for progeny, name and fame, while offering *Abhaya* and *Shanti* to all, for the benefit of the world.

Soon friends abroad desired her presence and teachings which she responded to with equal zeal. Her pioneering spirit was in search for a place where she could live out her experiences in an open community where all were welcome. She got permission from the then Anglican Bishop Robinson of Bombay, to re-open the Christa Prema Ashram started by an Anglican Pastor in Pune. This was both ecumenical as well as an interfaith ashram at Sivajinagar Pune. Fr/Lederle S.J was a close associate of this ashram. At this time, she also bore the responsibility of the Provincial of the Indian Province of the Society of the Sacred Heart. It was at CPS Ashram that the presence of Sw. Abhishiktananda and H.H. Sw Chidanand (called the Francis of Assisi of Rishikesh) impressed on her the need to

move North, to the Hindu heartland. She chose Rishikesh, since she already revered H. H. Sw. Chidanand.

After years of ashram living in Pune, Vandana journeyed to Rishikesh where H. H. Sw. Chidanand head of the reputed Sivanand Ashram- of the Divine Life Society, welcomed her and her companion Sr. Ishpriya. Here she spent four fruitful years of study, meditation, and life under the guidance of H.H. Sw. Chidanand. She continued dwelling into Christian and Hindu scriptures with total commitment. Swami Chidanand ji on seeing her sincerity assisted her in obtaining a small piece of land to materialize her longing for an ashram. Thus, Jeevandhara Sadhana Kutir -Rishikesh was born; a place of inter-faith communion, and a haven for spiritual practice so essential to an Indian Church in her witness to Christ. After a while of welcoming seekers at this place, Vandana received at her request, from the Bishop of Bijnor, in 1984, a more spacious property where the ashram Jeevandhara Ashram -Jharikhal took shape. Here she spent 12 fruitful years of sadhana, teaching, writing, valuing silence and prayer, study and *satsang*, for an Indian Christian spirituality.

Vandana lived with compassionate ease an “inter-religious” life in our pluralistic context. In the area of Inter-faith outreach, she called the Church to firstly be present to others without hidden agendas or masks, to listen at the level of the *antaryamin* (inner being where God is), to cultivate inner silence for receptivity of the Father’s word, to empty the inner space that opens to transformation according to the will of God. To be like Jesus ready to minister” to “the other flock”, apart from our “chosen people. Or, as the apostles did for the ‘pagans’ under the influence of the Spirit of Jesus recorded in the book of the Acts.

People of all faiths were welcomed at her ashram. Listening, silence and feminine passive receptivity were the key words for entry into our deeply spiritual culture. These qualities, were to characterize the Indian Church. Compassion in the wide sense of how God sends rain and sun on all his beloved ones; not only a “compassion” for the less privileged, but a **com-compassion** with all who sought oneness in the One, by paths blessed by the same Divine Spirit “for who has known the mind of God or who has been His counsellor?” (Rom11:34-36/ Is. 40 :13). Or as Jesus said, “the hour is coming when you shall worship the Father, neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. God is Spirit and those worship God must worship in spirit and truth” (Jn4:22-24).

Vandana wrote many books and numerous articles on Inter-faith relations, to reach many. One called **Shabda Shakti Sangam** is Edited and published by her. The book has a blessing by Swami Chitananad. The book is an Upside-Down Book to be savoured not just read for a scholarly purpose. We may say it is the climax of her effort to convey the true essence of communion with the two faiths Hindu and Christian. (A list of her books is given below).

Matha ji’s interest in art is also visible in the ashrams. On her visit to Masaurhi, in Bihar, Matha ji saw the Indian style *murtis* of the Christ of the *Satyug*, (*era of truth, ruled by God and characterised by virtue*) *Mary* and the Last Supper scene, which Sr. Tureeya had directed Shri Bannerjee of the Design Center -Patna, to make execute in an Indian art form,

for the village chapel there. Later the opportunity came, for Mata ji to be introduced to the artist and all the statues in Rishikesh and Jaiharikhal, were made by him with much devotion and love.

Church liturgy was what she desired would be transformed to ensure the openness of Jesus walking the streets of Palestine, speaking in the local language, using images that spoke of the heart of God. She welcomed the Indian rite for the Eucharist and was disappointed that the Indian Church could not be trusted with the task of adapting, refining, and making it suitable for acceptance in the universal celebration of the Eucharist.

Today we acknowledge that Vandana took the spirit of Vat II to heart, accepting the value and role of every faith expression as emphasised by the Council. A Christ with an 'Indian' face, certainly not of the dominating or colonizing West was her quest. Her oft quoted saying surely sums up her spirit: "Find your roots and take wing." This, she recommended to all. For her the mission imperative was, of a humble and pastoral Church, to deflect the gaze from herself to the Cosmic Christ and to shepherd all to Oneness in God. This was being the salt of the earth, the leaven in the dough, the actual catalyst of the Spirit, for the promised Revelation of the New Creation.

Perhaps, Pope Francis's call for a Synodal Church is another universal move the Church must undergo for itself, before it arrives at the point when especially like Vandana and others, with humble surrender, the whole Church will have the meekness of the Spirit, to be truly One and inclusive. Mata ji's contribution spans more than fifty years. It was a tireless pursuit, founded on her love for the Church which she saw as the body of Christ. Christ waiting to be seen in us by our brothers and sisters as His *rupa*.

We pray the hymn attributed to 9th century German monk, teacher, archbishop Rabanus Maurus: **Veni Creator Spiritus** come "font of life and fire of love" those "waters of fire" from which Vandana drank so deeply. We pray also with Pope Francis guiding the Church saying: "the synod is about synodality and not about this or that theme..The important thing is **how** the reflection is done.' In a synodal way....may be a unified yet differentiated path..broadening the experiences of synodality to grow as a synodal Church..as well as Christians of different denominations and peoples of different religions; to collect and transmit testimonies and best practices... He goes on to say: "synodality calls for listening together, discerning together, praying together. The word "together" is very important in a culture of exclusion."

The Synod envisions a church where there is space for all. Within the universal church, every nation has a say from its context. The image of the Samaritan Woman at the well taken by some as symbol of the synod spirituality. This was the heart of Vandana's spirituality, on her pilgrimage she walked together, all peoples and all sections everywhere were to be involved study, sharing, discernment, the way; not this or that theme but what the spirit brings to our awareness from all the realities we live with. We are privileged stewards of the Gospel but we must remember that we are pilgrims as everyone else the only way is to rely on the spirit.

It is fitting that the Synod calls upon all the church people to lend their voice for the renewal of the Church. This could be a fitting as a preparation of our own people, so that we learn the way of the openness in the Spirit. The way of interfaith communion widens the inclusive dimension. It ensures that the Spirit which blows where it wills will become the meeting point for surrender and bring intuition to the path opening for all in a new creation. Is the Church then, better fitted as recipient of the Revelation to see it as her duty to call to call for a “synod” of all faiths in preparation for a new creation ? May the Spirit speak to this Church today! Finally, Vandana was a true daughter of our foundress- St. Madeleine Sophie Barat who said: “If it were given to me to live a second life, it would be spent only in obeying the Holy Spirit and in acting for Hime alone.” It would be Mata ji’s delight to see the Church respond to the Spirit in the Indian context , she would smile in her own unique way!

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NB: Hindi speaking belt Mataji*simply an address of respect for older women some of whom may be sanyasinis! “ji” is used as respect for all persons**