

HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE CHURCH

BY FR. TISSA BALASURIYA*

Increasingly human rights in the Asian churches is becoming an issue that needs to be dealt with for its own sake as well as for the life of the Church and for her witness to the faith in Jesus Christ. We are in a rapidly changing situation within the Church and in the world. Mentalities of people are evolving with strong differences in theological and spiritual orientations and somewhat markedly among the generations. The mind-sets of Vatican I and Vatican II are lived side in the Church, with the authority being more inclined towards the Vatican I approach.

The Church being an association of free persons should necessarily have an authority that can lead it towards its set objectives. The issue of human rights in the church arises when the exercise of authority is not according to the principles and the goals for which the church has been founded. The church is a society with an authority pattern that has or claims control over certain areas of human life and can limit the freedom of its members. This control may be exercised by its teaching, and its juridical, administrative, moral, organizational and financial power. Moral power can even be instilled in the members through fear concerning their eternal salvation or acceptance in the community. The authority may deny membership, position or the rites and rituals of the church to those whose views and actions it disapproves of.

The rights of Christians in the Church include all human rights that are generally recognized in civil society, as well as rights that belong to Christians as members of the Church. Thus the right to the unhindered access to the sacraments is a right of Christians as such. The basic consensus on human rights in general found expression in the "Declaration of Human Rights of 10th December 1948", and in the "United Nations Human Rights Convention of 16th December 1966" with its two conventions on civil and political rights and on economic, social and cultural rights.

The interpretation of human rights in the West has been in favour of *individualistic human rights*. This has favoured the growth of capitalism. The right to private property was emphasized next to the right to freedom. There has been a neglect of the rights of the poor and oppressed. Social justice is not given a priority.

Since World War II the Western Churches have insisted on the rights of the individual, partly as a protest against the totalitarian Marxist regimes of Eastern and Central Europe. This could in effect be support of the national and international capitalistic regimes. The development of the concept of social

* Director, Centre for Society and Religion, Colombo, Sri Lanka.