

Syro-Malankara Catholic Youth in America

My dear young friends,

1. Introduction

I am very happy to address you this evening as the proud and committed young leaders of our Church in America. First of all I want to thank you sincerely for what you are to our Church in this great continent. I thank God for your love for the Lord, I thank God for your love for His Church. I thank God for your commitment to the Christian values and for the leadership you give to your brothers and sisters in our Church. The last two days you have been reflecting before the Lord and with one another how to deepen this love for the Lord and this commitment to His Church. I congratulate you for having taken three precious days out of your usual schedule for the sake of the Church. Let me share with you a few stray thoughts of mine on how greatly the Church estimates your presence in the Church and your potential to enrich the Church.

2. Our Context: America

Let me start with my very limited assessment of the strength and weakness of the culture in which we are called to realize our mission as Syro-Malankara Catholic youth. My assessment of the American culture is basically from the perspective of a Christian believer.

i) Positively:

As we know, the American culture is one of the most popular cultures of the modern time. One of the most outstanding characteristics of this culture is the sense of freedom that this culture embodies. America can be said to be the freest society in the world. This culture upholds supremely the value of human freedom.

I think this is the main strength of this culture. In philosophy we study that one of the most important factors that makes the human person distinct from all other creatures is freedom. Man is created in divine image means that he is created with a knowing intellect and a free will. With the intellect he knows and the ultimate strive of the intellect is to know the unlimited intelligible, namely God. “My soul is restless until it reaches you”, St. Augustine. With the will man chooses: choosing is identical with loving. The ultimate strive of the human will is for that which is supremely lovable, namely, God. Therefore, man devoid of freedom is not worthy of being called a human person. As genuine Christian youth in this culture, it is our duty and right to promote human freedom which this culture so painstakingly safeguards.

There are many other human values that this culture respects and promotes, such as honesty, hard work, faithfulness to one's duty, efficiency, a very enlightened social sense, sensitivity to the feelings and needs of other people, respect for laws and rules, respect for other persons' individuality and rights, etc.. This culture respects the equality of human beings. No discrimination, be it in the name of color, caste, religion, sex, etc. is tolerated. All have equal dignity and equal rights. Again, this culture promotes respect for nature, sensitivity to nature, consequently, a healthy environment, cleanliness, etc.. There is a heightened awareness about all these in the society. This is something very positive about this culture. All these are genuinely Christian values and as Christian youth in this culture we must be proud of this and it is our duty to integrate these values into our life and to promote them. (freedom from, freedom for)

ii) Negatively:

This culture suffers from certain weaknesses also.

Unfortunately, the sense of human individuality and freedom in this culture has sometimes assumed unrealistic dimensions to the extent that it has given rise to certain evils in this society. One such evil is the tendency to over secularization, leading to a type of selfish pragmatism. The tendency to measure and judge everything in terms of the standards of the world, totally forgetting the transcendental dimension of life, deprives human life of its true worth and meaning. In the onslaught of secularism and materialism and egoistic technological developments, God is sadly eclipsed and religion is pushed to a very insignificant and private corner of the social life. Consequently the society suffers from a loss of perspective in life. This, according to me is the biggest malady of this culture. True human dignity derives from man's relation to God. A culture in which God is subordinated or set aside, true human dignity cannot be safeguarded and the meaning of life cannot be substantiated.

One of the obvious results of this phenomenon is the erosion of traditional values such as family, marriage, etc. and the loss of respect for life leading to unscrupulous promotion of abortion, mercy killing, same-sex union, etc.. A culture that fails to uphold the value of marriage and family is heading to self-destruction. A culture that hesitates to give rise to children and raise them as God's precious gift to humanity has absolutely no future. A society that fails to respect life in every stage of its growth is bound to lose respect for life altogether. A culture that undermines human relation to God and relationship within the family, promotes disgusting egoism. In such a culture, values like sacrifice, suffering, sharing, forgiveness, etc. have no place.

These unfortunate aspects of the culture in which we live are precisely our specific challenge as Christian youth. How are we called to live our faith and Christian identity as Malankara Catholic youth in such a complex culture?

3. The Role of the Malankara Catholic Youth

I wish to highlight the importance of every word of this expression, namely the Malankara Catholic Youth.

i) Youth

Youth can be said to be the most important period in one's life. It is the most creative period, when one's basic values of life are being formed. This is the most critical time. It is the time when the traditional beliefs and values are shaken and questioned. Many of the things which we have been doing for many years and many of the things which we have believed for many years are called into question and their relevance sought. Certain values are rejected, certain others are confirmed with conviction.

Secondly, youth is the most energetic and dynamic period of life, a period in life that throbs with enthusiasm and idealism. If this energy is properly channelized, it can be very constructive, if not, destructive. Given the right motivation and impetus, the youth will yield enormous good fruit. Therefore proper discernment and guidance are required.

In such a period of life, the ambience in which one grows and goes through the process of value formation is very important. The ambience must be such that it can give the young person the required impulses, inspiration for the proper assimilation of the values. Here the family, the peer group, the believing community (in the Christian context, the parish), etc. have a crucial role to play. As youth is the most tangible period in life, powerful inspiration will have a lasting effect on the person's life. Hence the importance of 'role models'. Depending on the impulse, the person can be swayed in any direction.

ii) Christian Youth

But we are not just youth, but we are Christian youth. We have a master, namely Jesus Christ. He is our Role Model par excellence. Therefore our value formation has a very fundamental dimension, namely, our values have to be Christian values. Religion has to play a very important role here. Religion has to assist the young person in shaping his/her value system in such a way that the person is enabled to lay the foundation for a constructive, positive Christian approach to life. The primacy of God in one's life has to be brought home to our youth. All other systems, philosophies or ideologies that do not acknowledge the primacy of God are bound to be defective and deceptive. Again, this is not an easy take in a culture in which God is so sadly sidelined, religion is confined to one of the least important and private corners of one's life and faith in God is at the most just tolerated.

iii) Catholic Youth

We are not just non-denominational youth, attracted merely by the values of a great man of history. We are a Church, we receive our faith as it were, in a community, we live our faith in the context of a community, and our faith always demands from us this fundamental community-relatedness. This community is the Church. Therefore the Church is the context of our faith. The Church is the source of meaning for our faith. We are privileged to be part of a universal communion of believers, who profess and live their faith in the Risen Lord.

The youth must consider the Church to be their home and as far as the Church is considered, the youth is the source of its hope. The primary emphasis of our Church has to be on the faith formation and faith life of our youth. Without them, the Church has no future. Their faith, their commitment to the Christian values and their belongingness to the Church is of crucial importance. The elder generation has to be part of history sooner or later. But the responsibility of taking the mission of Christ forward is on the shoulders of our youth. If they do not feel at home in our ecclesial fellowship, the Church has no future. Therefore every means must be resorted to in order to generate this sense of belonging in our youth to the Church and to keep them close to the heart of the Church.

For this, the youth must be trusted, taken into confidence, their feelings and aspirations must be seriously addressed, they must be given responsibilities. And at the same time, they have to be given constant guidance. As a Church, we have to understand the specific cultural milieu in which you live and grow and respond creatively to your needs.

iv) Malankara Catholic Youth

But we belong to an ecclesial community that has a very specific identity and mission. In our attempt to form our fundamental value system, in our attempt to transform the society in which we live by our Christian youthfulness, the values of this tradition have to play a major role. That is the relevance of being Malankara Catholics in this multi-cultural, multi-religious context.

In our context the term 'Malankara' connotes two things, namely, an ecclesial community whose cultural patrimony is Indian and whose spiritual patrimony is eastern, antiochean. Values of both these traditions have to be assimilated, maintained, promoted and lived wherever we are.

As Malankara youth we must be proud of our Indian heritage. The term 'Indian' should not evoke in us just the concepts of poverty, underdevelopment, lack of cleanliness, etc.. Our culture has been one of the pioneering cultures of the world. Our culture has always upheld some of the perennial values of humanity, such as the fundamental human orientation to God. Our culture is known for its basic religiosity and spiritual orientation. Our culture promotes the value of prayers. Family and family relations are held high in our tradition. Sacrifice is a fundamental value in our culture. Hospitality is considered to be a spiritual value in our culture. We are taught

to respect the elders, to be hospitable to all, including strangers, to consider our guests in the place of God. Our fore-fathers instructed us to be generous, to be ready to share what we have with others, to be genuinely concerned about others, etc..

Secondly our spiritual heritage is the Eastern Antiochean. It is in and through this spirituality that we live and celebrate our faith and express our religiosity. We are privileged to be the inheritors of one of the most ancient and profound Christian spiritualities of the world. This spirituality is rooted in a culture of prayer, rigorous practice of penance, abstinence and fasting, joyful, celebrative and communitarian mode of worship, habits of almsgiving and Christian charity, strong family bond and habitual family prayer, a deep sense of belonging to the Church and to the parish community, the readiness to take sacrifices for one's faith, feeling of intimacy with the spiritual fathers, etc.. Special mention must be made about this Malankara value of belongingness to the Church. Our Church is what it is today primarily due to the fact that thousands of our fore-fathers took pride in belonging to the Church, in suffering for the Church and made the Church their home. Therefore we have to strengthen our parish communities to make our own spirituality healthy and sustainable. A parish community that lives and celebrates the faith meaningfully in a unity of heart and mind of all its members is the most powerful means of evangelization and the most conspicuous expression of the Kingdom of God.

As Malankara Catholic youth in America it is our specific mission to witness to these values through our life and thereby enrich the culture in which we live and which is badly in need of these values.

4. The strength of our Youth in America

The Malankara Catholic Youth in America is characteristically a different group. As someone who had his whole hitherto priestly experience outside India, I could clearly feel this distinction in you. We are privileged to have a wonderful young section in our Church here. The strength of this group is their authenticity, sincerity, love of God and respect for human values and the excellent educational standards that they are privileged to acquire.

Primarily you are distinguished by your genuineness. You have come across to me as a group of Christians who are earnest about their faith and about living it relevantly. Your love for Jesus is genuine and your ecclesial belongingness is serious. This prompts me to say that you are the real strength of our Church in America. You are a highly educated, well equipped and resourceful group and you are well placed in the society. With your genuineness of faith and academic qualifications, you can make tremendous contributions to our Church here. It will be really unfortunate, if the Church in some way happens to miss this. You are called to place all these God-given goodness and gifts in you at the service of the Church and for the spread of the Kingdom of God.

At the same time, we realize that you have your struggles in your own families and in your parish communities to cope up with another generation that another set of values, which often appear to you as counter-values. Still we appreciate that you do a lot of accommodation and toleration. We understand that you have your anxieties about your future, about the future of your children as to how they will fit into this special framework, how this ecclesial culture will be relevant to them. But the solution to all these is a serious and relevant living of the ecclesial patrimony we have been blessed with.

5. What does the Church expect of our Youth in America?

- i) First of all, what is required is an authentication of the values of our faith and culture through your personal life. What is primary is your personal love and commitment to Jesus Christ. As a youth leader you need to have undergone a personal conversion in favor of the values of the Gospel. This way, you can be the yeast that leavens our whole Church in America. E.g., the small experience of our Exarchial assembly. The way the small group of our youth behaved there, the conviction you shared, the ecclesial sense you displayed, the hope you reflected, was a deeply moving experience for the whole group, including me. You can transform the Church. You can be true inspirers. You can give the Church the direction it needs to take.
- ii) Secondly, the unity and fellowship that you care to create in your family is of crucial importance. In spite of all odds and discrepancies that one may have to face in one's own family, the family must be held as a fundamental value. Family relations must be considered sacred and they must be sustained and safeguarded at all expense. The best way to face the generation and cultural gap that we experience in the family is not to distance oneself from the family, but to transform and enrich the family by our loving presence and dedication. Our parents may belong to another generation. But they are our parents. It was out of their love for you and to assure a secure future for you, that they left their homeland and their dear ones and migrated to a country that had all the adversities of life in store for them. We are what we are today, we are able to think and act the way we do today because of the untold sufferings that they have taken upon themselves for us. The moment the family relations become weak, faith in the family members will suffer.
- iii) Thirdly, your assimilation in the parish community. As Christians, we have a faith to live and a God-given mission to fulfill in this world. The basic context in which we are called to live this faith and to fulfill this mission is our own parish community. You are called to express your love for Jesus and your belongingness to the Church by your commitment and dedication to your parish community. Just as in one's own family, there could be many unfavorable elements in a parish community, which we may find it difficult to digest. In any human fellowship there are bound to be such things. But we have to love our parish community with all its limitations. Staying away from the parish community

does no good. Instead, we have to heal, strengthen and transform our parish communities by our presence, by our involvement and through our sacrifices for the community.

- iv) Fourthly, genuine faith always demands sacrifices. The sign of a Christian is the cross of the Lord. The cross is not just an ornament or an object of decoration for the Christian. It is the Christian's very life style. Cross or suffering is the price we pay for love. God the Father had to pay a price for loving us, the humanity. He had to give away his only Son for that. "God so loved the world that He gave away his only Son" (Jn. 3). Jesus had to die on the cross for his love for the Church (Phil. 2). Love always demands suffering. Love and suffering are two sides of the same coin. We suffer only for that which we love. And we love only that for which we suffer. This is very true of our relation to the Church. As genuine youth of the Church, you must be able to suffer for the Church joyfully, to take up real sacrifice in your life for the Church. You must be prepared to sacrifice your precious time for the Church, spare your talents for the Church, spend your energy for the Church, give away your money for the Church. True discipleship is a call to deny one's whole life for Christ. Love is authenticated only in suffering. You and I must be prepared to spare even our dear life, if our faith demands it. And I can assure you, it is worth doing it.

- v) Fifthly, youth are the prime missionaries of the Church. In a world that is being invaded by the impact of secularism and Godlessness, our youth have a very specific mission. Being absorbed by the love of Jesus and being driven by the values of the Gospel, they must be able to transform the surroundings where they study, work and gather together. Everything about their life has a missionary value. In the refectory of the seminary where I studied, there was this saying written on the wall: "Be careful how you live, you may be the only Bible some people will ever read". Our youth are called to associate with people who may be ignorant of God, contemptuous of religion, scornful of religious practices and religious people. The life witness of our youth is very important in such contexts.

- vi) Sixthly, the Malankara Catholic Church in America wishes to extend its missionary involvement to all possible dimensions. As an Ecclesial community with a specific identity, we need to be open to new missionary openings. For example, a Malankara Catholic Spanish mission could be one of our future possibilities, as a large number of our Spanish speaking brothers and sisters are sadly ending up in extreme pentacostal groups. For this we need to start training sufficient personnel from among our youth. As an inalienable dimension of our mission we need to venture into various fields of authentic Christian witnessing such as the social, educational and health care apostolates as concrete acts of Christian charity. In the American context, this can be hoped to realize only with the help, expertise and experience of our own youth here. Finally, the pastoral leadership of our Church has to be borne by the generation that is born and brought up in

the American culture, namely the present youth. Therefore we need to promote more vocations to priesthood and religious life from among our youth in America.

These are some of my personal dreams about our youth in America. As youth leaders of our Church in America, I would very much wish that you be true inspirers to your own brothers and sisters in all these respects.

Again, I feel proud that the Church has a youth of your conviction, caliber and commitment. I thank you once again for your love for the Church. The most painful experience of the Church in America would be to lose any of its youth. Let us strive together to realize our specific ecclesial mission in this great continent. May God bless all of you abundantly.