

Fish, fuel and coal — what next?

By I. P. C. Mendis

All Christians, be they Roman Catholics or others, are enjoined to adhere to the Will of God. Christ was not an insurgent, although the High Priests at the time manoeuvred to have Him crucified as He was a threat, inter alia, to their distortion of the scriptures and exploitation of the poor. Commercialisation of the Church through the open presence of vendors inside the Temple drew an angry response from Jesus Christ who overturned the tables of the money changers and chased them away — "My house shall be called a house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves" (Math. 21 - 12 & 13).

"Old habits die hard", they say. Concepts, attitudes, and approaches have hardly changed since then in the institutionalised Church, notwithstanding Christ. In given situations, there is spontaneous or calculated defence for the maintenance of the status quo ante vociferously safeguarding and protecting privilege, position and vested interests mustering 'human shields', to wit — the poor. The Roman Church thought at one time that their followers should not read the Bible, however intelligent they may be. They may read it now, but the interpretation still is a clerical prerogative jealously safeguarded, even though one may have a degree in Divinity. Interpreters themselves have been indoctrinated and conditioned to a particular way of thinking and directed to a well-defined goal. In fact, readings and liturgy were at one time in an alien dead language (Latin) which the masses did not understand. Indeed, regimentation was well in place for the faithful, particularly the poor to respond without question.

The first successful break-through came with the Reformation which in the final analysis benefited certain privileged social sectors. Yet, for long years the hierarchy and the elite even in the non-Roman churches ruled the roost. On the whole, the institutionalised Church whether Roman or non-Roman became a 'safe house' for the exploiter and the oppressor. One could hardly see a difference from the scenario in Jesus's time.

The more recent break-through came within the Roman Church with the consecration of John 23rd, as Pope, who had the fore-sight and commitment to open the 'doors' of the Roman Church through Vatican II. There was an upsurge of views and a vast dialogue was made possible. It was as if "caged birds" were let free. But that was generally in-so-far-as the intelligentsia and the educated middle class went. The vast mass of the poor and the poorest of the poor remained and they still linger under the tutelage, guidance and direction of

some so-called "Shepherds" who are incapable in most instances of discerning between charity and social justice (indeed, there have been and there are a few notable exceptions). The poor suffer their fate in the false belief conveyed in a once popular hymn:

*"The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them high or lowly,
And ordered their estate"!*

What brazen sacrilege was it, and what rank rubbish in the name of Christianity! Can Karl Marx be faulted for concluding that "the Church is the hand maid of the capitalist class"? Archbishop Helder Camera of Latin America himself put the sordid picture in a nutshell — "When I give food to the people they call me a Saint: When I ask why the people have no food they call me a Communist!"

Social justice and equity

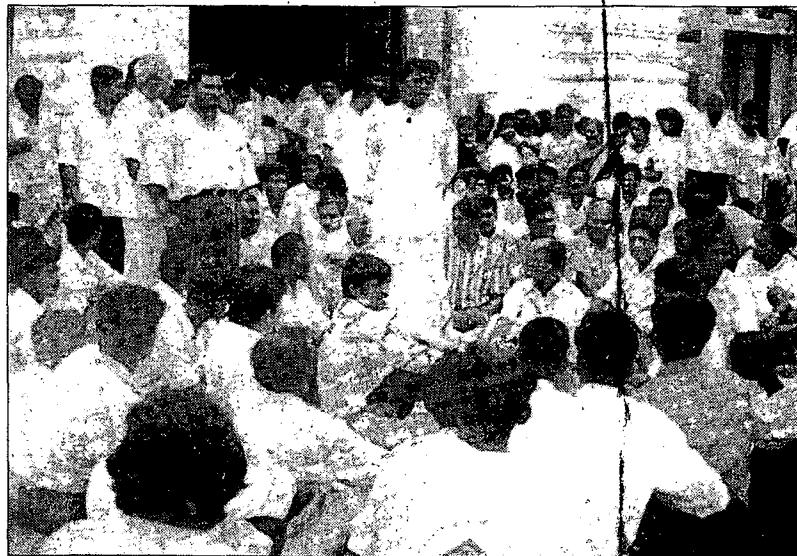
"Contentment" is the key word on which unsuspecting faithful are restrained effectively from clamouring and agitating for social justice and equity (a theme which was closest to the heart of the divine mentor, Jesus Christ).

That concept of contentment seems to be restricted to matters ecclesiastical or dependent on which side of the political divide the institutionalised Church is. Christ did not envisage doling out crumbs in the form of charity encouraging the poor to resign to their fate or accident of birth, nor did He use or misuse the collective strength of His followers to under-mine the State or Rulers of His time. "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God which is God's" was His teaching (Luke 20:25). Yet, His lone tirade against social injustice and inequity through His preaching and practice reverberated so much among the Rulers and High Priests that the impending exposure of their fraudulent conduct had to be thwarted by them through goons gathered outside the walls of Pontius Pilate demanding His crucifixion in preference to that of a convicted rebel and murderer.

The schools take-over

The demonstrations during the schools take-over in 1962 was reminiscent of this scenario. There was open defiance of the Rule of Law spearheaded by the Roman Catholic Church until wiser counsel prevailed with the personal intervention of Cardinal Gracias. Despite the endorsement of the policy by the then Anglican Bishop of Kurunegala, Rt. Rev. Lakdasa de Mel, some sections of the Anglican Church and its elite preferred passive resistance. In its anxiety to maintain power, control and privilege over their schools, the majority of which were languishing behind in facilities and instruction, the Roman Catholic Church missed the wood for the trees. The poor and the

poorest of the poor who were to benefit mostly through the measure were harnessed and misled into believing that the take-over was an anti-Christian move. The elite who had privileges through reputed schools were firmly behind the scene but opted not to mingle with the less-fortunate congregation within barbed wires. Unwittingly or covertly they became tools of the UNP Opposition at the time which was itself waiting with bated breath to even hang on to a straw to overthrow the government or cause embarrassment. The schools take-over did have a favourable impact on the education of the poor although much more remains to be done. The bias in the institutionalised Church generally in favour of capitalist — oriented regimes need not be laboured on. The discrimination in service within it, whether Roman or non-Roman, is quite discernible. Suffice it to say that the political bias was so transparent that direct canvassing from pul-



Protest against Norachchalai Coal Power Project

pits had to be prohibited by law in the post 1956 period. Yet, the more enlightened followers had a break with tradition and regimentation, got attuned to their conscience and wrested freedom of thought and action. No more were they prepared to be led or misled.

Incitement

Not so the poorest of the poor and those masses who foully look up to "Swamies" for inspiration and guidance. To them, what they impart is the "Gospel". Some clergy give vent to feelings and sometimes hidden agendas seizing opportunities pregnant with emotion. When emotion gets the better of reason, possibilities are indeed real. Incitement by politicians and politically-motivated groups is bad enough but incitement or agitation which tantamount to incitement when indulged in by those who by religious edict are enjoined to preach and practise the Word of God in its true meaning and spirit tend to do otherwise (while quoting

chapter and verse from the Bible to suppress any disquieting moves within the establishment), and take to the streets in an attempt to kindle the fire, particularly at a time when the country is facing an economic crisis, a crisis of power and above all a civil war of crisis proportion, the government and the discerning onlooker is entitled to ask the spiritual leaders spear-heading demonstrations or backing them — be it Norochchalai Coal Power Project, or fuel price-Rt. Reverends and Rev. Fathers-QUO VADIS?

Fuel price

In the case of the fuel price hike, would it not have been fair, just and more reasonable to have found out whether common fisher-folk and the consumer or not being exploited by fish mudalalies and middle-men just as much as rural cultivators are?

Is it not a fact that fish sold by mechanised boat and trawler-owners fix their rates much above costs and, if such cost

encroachment of the Negombo lagoon by mudalalies and the elite, to the dumping of sewage and garbage and the resultant pollution of the lagoon which adversely affect the environment, health and livelihood of ordinary poor fishermen who totally depend on the lagoon? The Sunday Times of 4th April 1999 described this lagoon as a "Bloody, smelling, kunuwalak". If naked pollution in the heart of "Little Rome" amidst the sanctity of a cluster of churches can be blatantly condoned, it does not take much intelligence to decide on which side of the social fence the Church is perched on. The living conditions of the forty odd families at Norochchalai; have to be seen to be believed. They live in the most despicable and sad conditions — no regular employment, underemployment, poorly thatched houses, sandy floors, 'al fresco' ablutions, bottle-lamps with danger lurking, vagaries of the weather, sea erosion etc. etc. The offer of improved living conditions and regular employment face rejections through enforced resistance in a bid to safeguarding vested interests at all costs. Human Shields" again!

For somebody's pig-headedness and distortions, they have to stay put whether they like it or not, in the poor man's estate, ostensibly, for their benefit. The reasons adduced are the possibilities of health hazards through coal dust, the unlikely event of St. Anne's, Talawila which is 12 km away being washed away and terrorist activity. All these have been amply debated through the Press and elsewhere for quite some time and so many eminent and qualified personnel have proved that the arguments are untenable with due regard to precautions that will invariably be taken. As for reasons of security, it has been adequately demonstrated by the LTTE that the entire country is now a virtual security zone. There are vital installations which are as vulnerable and more important.

The more plausible explanation seems to be the expected loss of cheap labour which services the elitist community around and "churchy" land-owners. It is a case of distorted divine inspiration versus professionalism! There was hardly a whimper when for hundreds of years the British and their local obedient servants operated coal-powered trains all over the country and through residential areas with coal dumps located in various places including the Port of Colombo, adversely affecting students/teachers at St. Thomas' College, then in Mutwal, the Anglican Cathedral then in Mutwal and of course, the people around. There were coal power houses in places such as Polgahawela and certain estates. There was no opposition. Whatever the British did was acceptable. The fact that other countries do have coal power projects

does not come into the equation. The numerous garbage dumps which is big business in mosquito coils is another matter. It does not seem to qualify for street-demonstrations.

Electricity tariffs

The more important aspect is the harm and damage this kind of opposition and blackmail does to the economy and citizens of this country. This is a small poor developing country of only 25,000 square miles and at the rate some sections, including environmentalists and vested interests protest and demonstrate, there can be hardly any development. What the government has to ensure is that any risk of pollution are made minimal through adequate technical safeguards. Democracy constitutes the art of governance for the greater good of the greater majority while of course, ensuring minority rights. It does not mean that the whole country should be held to ransom and be made to pay a colossal price affecting generations to come for the idiosyncrasies and hidden agendas of vested interests which choose to pay lip-service in their concern for the poor, when in fact the modern operandi could be different, and their record for emancipation of the poor through social justice is questionable.

There is now a need to increase electricity tariffs. A fuel surcharge has been already imposed due to the increased use of thermal power. Each day of postponement of the installation of cheaper alternate sources of energy is an addition of a colossal sum to the debit side of the economy which the country cannot bear.

That apparently is not a matter of concern for vested and selfish interests. Jesus crisis did not have such interests. He had no presences either. In-as-much as the High Priests at that time were behind his crucifixion, the institutionalised Church seem to be nailing every move essential to sustain or improve the economy while simultaneously crying hoarse regarding rising costs. If prosecutions have taken place around the world and more particularly pronounced in Indonesia, India and Pakistan in recent times, and if there are ramblings of religious discord here on various grounds, a section of the institutionalised Church should, before it is too late, look itself in the mirror without treading on a potentially dangerous path.

The history of the infamous crusades and other holy wars cannot be easily erased, whatever apologies have been offered. Politicisation of the Church, and indeed any religion for that matter, should be resisted by laymen and progressive priests alike for religious unity, concord and concomitance. Persecution is blessed only if it is for righteousness sake (Math 5-10).