

The Grace of Experiencing Nature —

One Way of Looking at Fr Thani Nayagam's Life

As a student of the Gospels, trying to get to know Jesus of Nazareth, I have found that a great part of a person's life remains hidden. Of that which is manifest, there is what we generally describe as one's public life, and one's private life. But even of these knowable forms of life, one just has a few glimpses, since for the most part, the real quality of even public and private life remains pretty hidden. From a few encounters and episodes and sayings, one tries to reconstruct as best as one can the life of even those who have been close to us.

I knew Fr Thani Nayagam for well over thirty years—during the time so to speak of his public ministry. As a friend, I knew something also of his private life. In every area into which he entered, he demonstrated a certain thoroughness and intensity. His teaching, writing and ministering focussed principally on three realities that were close to his heart: **the Catholic Church** or the experience of the saving God in Christ; **Tamil culture** or the experience of nature and human nature; and **General Education** or the communication to posterity of values that cannot be biologically transmitted.

Catholic Priest

Coming from a Catholic family, and having had his theological studies in Rome, he has always been a man of deep Christian faith. Right to the end of his days, he would doubt, question, argue about various aspects of this faith in order to deepen and purify his own experience of it, and to bring that faith ever closer to what Jesus communicated in his ministry, passion, death and resurrection. Every time I met him, he showed an unflagging interest in getting deeper and deeper into the mystery of Christ. He would share his doubts in a way that it often became a prayer experience of a man struggling to fathom the depths of Christian being.

During his years in Rome, he devoted himself specially to Patristic studies, and there particularly to one of the early Church Fathers, St Cyprian. His doctoral dissertation related to the notion of Christian priesthood in St Cyprian's thought. In the context of the recent discussions relating to the nature of the Catholic priesthood, he kept alive this interest, and would constantly come up with various questions, showing that he had not given up his search in understanding what it is really to be a priest of God.

All the demythologization, de-ritualization, de-clericalization, de-romanization and the like of recent times, while disturbing him, also helped him to understand in new ways myth, rite, priesthood and Roman values.

I have met him over the years in various contexts both in Sri Lanka and abroad. Whatever the audience or milieu or occasion, his identity as a Catholic priest and a

follower of Christ came through in discreet but very real ways. It may be a dinner in a grand restaurant in Naples or a humble meal in a simple village in Sri Lanka, it may be a solemn gathering to honor a Hindu swami or an international conference on Tamil culture, there was always the same gentleness, calmness and simplicity of a wise man.

Chequered Life-Story

In spite of the road-blocks that certain short-sighted 'religious' authorities erected along the way—already at St Bernard's Seminary (they found it strange that he wanted to study Greek and Hebrew), and later right through his career as a priest and scholar, he kept on steadily in spite of non-acceptance. Even after he had been acclaimed in other countries as a great scholar of Dravidian culture, the local religious leadership in Jaffna never came to fully appreciate and acknowledge his achievements—if at all they were aware of them.

Sri Lanka has to be grateful to the South Indian Bishops who welcomed him, promoted him and encouraged him along the path he had chosen to witness to Christ. The path he had chosen was to show the reflections of God's presence in the culture of his own people.

In Italy, India, Malaysia and Sri Lanka, in various ways, at the highest levels of learning and research, he showed through his lectures, writings and above all his way of life the particular sensitivity of Tamil culture to all that is beautiful and good in nature, human life and religious experience.

Service to the Tamils in the Diaspora

Being out of the Tamil Country for the last three decades, a decade in Europe, a decade in Kandy and a decade in North America, one way in which I was able to keep in touch with my culture and people was by reading some of the Tamil classics like the *Tirukural* of Tiruvalluvar, *Tirumantiram* of Tirumular, and other literature I could lay hands on. An easier way of entering into the riches of Tamil literature was to read the works of Fr Thani Nayagam, specially his works entitled *Landscape and Poetry* (Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1966), and *Tamil Culture and Civilization* (ibid. 1970), where he shows the basic thrust of Tamil literature as the revelation of the human emotions of a people who lived in intimate relationship and communion with nature. The international Review on Tamil Culture that he edited, as also the International Conferences on Tamil language and culture that he organized, helped those of us who for various reasons find ourselves outside our homeland and country to keep in touch with the mind-beat and heart-beat of our people.

In the context of the machine-oriented industrial culture of the West, Fr Thani Nayagam's reflections on Tamil culture always came as a healing element, inviting one to commune more deeply with nature which is always there. Trees and flowers, birds and beasts, mountains and valleys, deserts and seashores and pasture lands, the variety of seasons, sunshine and rain, all these are presented not merely as background to life, but as **sympathetic** background to **human** life. At some point, communion with nature blossoms forth as human communion with one another, based on duty and kindness.

In Tamil literature, nature takes on special beauty and resonance according to the goodness of the people and their rulers. It is not difficult to see how pollution, acid rain, fall-out, depletion of resources, wastage, piling up of garbage, nuclear threat and the like, reflect for us today, nature's resonances to a particular type of rulers! Or closer home, how emergencies, bloodbaths, race riots, terrorism, disrespect of others' basic rights, reflect human nature's resonances to a particular form of political rule.

Love-life in all its manifestations of yearning, meeting, union, separation, misconduct and return are treated by Fr Thani Nayagam in a way that one begins to understand better both nature and human nature. At some points, particularly in later Tamil poetry like the *Paripadal*, he shows how we begin to prepare ourselves for the revelation of the numinous right within the natural and the human.

Corresponding to *Aham*-poetry of love-life, there was the *Puram*-poetry which related to the secular pursuits specially of war and peace. Here too he shows how nature is used as the real milieu of human life—though neither form of poetry, specially *Puram*-poetry, could be limited by the natural landscape. There is the deeper, inner landscape (or inscape) rooted in *arul* (grace) and *bhakti* (fervent devotion).

Heart of Tamil Culture

The point of great significance in all this that Fr Thani has repeatedly underlined is that unlike Vedic literature, Tamil poetry on the whole remains **secular** in the sense that the writers do not go out of the way to look for religious connotations. Rather, they teach us "a simple, spontaneous, unreflecting joy at contact with nature." Well said indeed. The focus on nature and the process of nature is truly remarkable. One might almost say that nature is like the Kingdom of heaven—quite an original and secular way of discovering that the Kingdom of heaven is like to nature!

In a sense the student of Tamil literature has a special preparation to understand the parables that Jesus spoke about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus spoke of the kingdom as very much like the process of nature. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus said, is like the seed that is sown, like the mustard seed, like the seed that grows secretly, like the seed that has to die.....

The fascination that Fr Thani Nayagam had for nature as expressed in Tamil poetry rejoins in some way the attraction he had for the kingdom of heaven as revealed by Jesus of Nazareth. "Look at the birds of the air, the flowers of the field." His life was one of communion with nature, neighbour and God as revealed in Christ. What seemed to be secular studies took him closer to what was most sacred in his religious experience.

The Grace of Nature

Scholars can rightly dwell on the various facets of Dr Thani Nayagam's personality and work, but the lesson I like to retain from his writings and conversations, and above all his life and friendship, is that one cannot be really religious and Christian if one does not strive to be natural and human. Grace builds on nature; or more exactly to our point: nature can be a divine milieu. Thus he underlined a forgotten dimension of true grace as the capacity for communion with nature and humanity.

And this striving to be natural and human, he taught us from the great Tamil classics which really are ecumenical in outlook long before our current, structured ecumenical movements. Fr Thani practised a wider ecumenism of openness to all religions. He was indeed a citizen of the world, quite at home in the East and West, North and South. How St Augustine who spoke of *anima naturaliter christiana* (the soul as being naturally or innately Christian) would have rejoiced to see the way Fr Thani has shown that aphorism to be true with regard to the literature of the Tamil people.

People's Rights

One matter which deeply occupied and pre-occupied him during the last few decades was the relation of politics to culture. He felt that the type of politics which the British left behind while assuring some form of social order and economic progress tended—as it has done even in the British isles — to stifle the soul of minority cultures under the pretext of unity and efficiency. Both in India and Sri Lanka, a centralized political economy often lost sight of the deeper values of a people's language and culture. The legitimate concern of assuring food, clothing and shelter, made some political leaders forget too easily that man does not live by bread alone.

One aspect of the living bread that man needs to survive is a people's particular sensitivity to what is beautiful and true and good in nature and nurture, and which flowers as culture and cult. When these cannot be affirmed and celebrated, then all the paraphernalia of modern civilization turn into dust without a soul. Life becomes lifeless.

That is why he devoted himself to fight for the rights of language and culture—not in any narrow, sectarian way—but in a spirit of international openness and Christian love. He felt that pragmatic uniformity assuring efficiency and success in a modern nation-state generally struck at the very root of human nature as a call to freedom in self-understanding and self-expression.

As an internationalist, he remained open to all cultures not merely in theory, but in real practice. He knew English and Italian literature as much as his own Tamil literature, not to mention his competence not only in the classical languages of India, but also in Latin and Greek. He understood well that true unity can be built only on the uniqueness of diverse cultures. He wanted that Tamil culture—so ancient and so new—be allowed to grow and blossom and radiate in the world its own particular fragrance of communion with self, nature, neighbour and the Unseen.

Sometimes Church authorities, at other times political powers, and occasionally both together misunderstood or felt threatened by Fr Thani Nayagam's initiatives. But with peace in his heart, he was ready to calmly proclaim to angry nationalists, arrogant imperialists, pragmatic politicians and diplomatic Churchmen the rights of man to his own culture, to his own language, literature, art, music and forms of worship.

In the spirit of the Tamil literature he cultivated, he wanted a harmony of cultures, specially when a one-sided worship of one's own culture can result in the horrible spectacles of Nazism and Fascism. He had experienced them first hand in Europe.

A dominant culture in a country or continent, just because it is the culture of the majority, is not necessarily a better or higher culture. It is a different culture. A dominant culture that becomes dominating and domineering loses its credibility; rather it must show its own inner strength by not being threatened by the cultures of the minorities. Thus using political power to propagate, with an eye to economic benefits, one's own language and culture, weakens that culture's innate ability to persuade, edify and enlighten. No culture can grow by putting down another culture. And the putting down can take subtle forms of benign neglect and quiet assimilation.

It is in such a context that Fr Thani Nayagam tried to make his discreet, prudent and non-violent word heard over the clashes of extremists on both sides. When I met him in recent years, he was more and more concerned and crushed by the spiralling violence of extremists. What was happening desecrated the cultures of both the majority and minorities. The values of both the Sinhala-Buddhist culture and the Tamil-Hindu culture—to mention the principal ones—were set aside by the political opportunists and philistine extremists. He suffered deeply from this turn of events (he never quite recovered from the tragic deaths during the Tamil Conference held in Jaffna); and he hoped against hope that unity and justice will prevail.

This may not be the place to go into the details of this national issue. From my conversations with him during my recent visits to Sri Lanka, one thing that came through was certainly not a desire for a separate Eelam (which he did not exclude as a viable alternative), but for justice, with greater autonomy in regional administration, somewhat along the lines that Mr Chelvanayakam had envisioned. This greater autonomy, he felt, should go hand in hand with due recognition of the bi-lingual and multi-cultural nature of the country.

Having spent as much time of his life in the South as in the North, he loved deeply the whole country, all its people, and the total mosaic of cultures that Sri Lanka is blessed with. He did not want to lose any of it. He lived and died a citizen of Sri Lanka, in spite of all his extended sojourns abroad. One need not lose one's identity as a Tamil because of one's citizenship. Rather, one can be enriched by interacting with other cultures with their different contributions to the perception of the good and beautiful within nature and human life.

To a country that is confused with various political, economic, religious and social conflicts, he repeated in contemporary terms, and lived out in such a simple way what the poet Kapilar expressed so succinctly in his *Ahaval* (which my father used to sing so beautifully at home in Jaffna):

குலமுமொன்றே; குடியுமொன்றே;
இறப்புமொன்றே; பிறப்புமொன்றே;
வழிபடு தெய்வமுமொன்றேயாதலால்
முன்னோருரைத்த மொழிதவருமல்
எந்நாளாயினும் இரப்பவர்க்கிட்டுப்
புலையுங் கொலையுங் களவுந் தவிர்ந்து,
நிலைபெற அறத்தில் நிற்பதை யறிந்து
ஆனும் பெண்ணுமல்லதை யுணர்ந்து
பேணியுரைப்பது பிழையெனப் படாது
சிறப்புஞ் சீலமு மல்லது
பிறப்பு நலந்தருமோ? பேதையீரே!

— Fr C. A. Joachim Pillai O. M. I.