

A Pioneer Ecumenicist and A Courteous Humanist

My recollections of Father Thani Nayagam relate mainly to the period when I was working as University Chaplain in Peradeniya. I remember him as a personal friend; and I recall the fact that he was a Catholic priest who anticipated many of the attitudes that became widespread after the Second Vatican Council, while retaining the spirit of Catholic humanism at its best.

He was a genuine ecumenicist blazing a trail wherever he lived and worked. I well remember that he was the first stranger to call on me in the Chaplain's Bungalow after my arrival in Peradeniya. He was both welcoming and friendly. No doubt he had his personal convictions as a Roman Catholic about the unique nature of his own Church but he accepted other Christians as brethren in Christ though separated from his Church. He also recognised the clergy of other Christian Churches as colleagues, in the same spirit. I still have a book of his entitled *Approaches to Christian Unity* by Father C. J. Dumont O.P. which provides the theological basis for the attitude he adopted. We were thus able to work in co-operation, share insights and grow in friendship. In fact when he left Peradeniya, I took over his cook, a courteous Catholic of the old-school named Joseph, who came with me to Kurunegala and looked after me until he retired.

His ecumenicism extended to persons of other religions as well. He was in fact what is now called a 'wider ecumenicist'. His long study of Indian religion and culture made him accept other religionists as fellow-seekers and fellow-wayfarers in the pilgrimage to the Eternal, while keeping his own convictions about the unique status of Christianity. This willingness to appreciate the contribution of other religions to human culture, and to learn from their religious insights and moral values, was once again a pioneering outlook at that time. In terms of the Second Vatican Council he saw the Church as the sign and sacrament of the new humanity. He was thus able to envisage people of other faiths and ideologies making, their contribution to the building up of the new humanity in Christ, each in their own way and each according to their capacity. It was such a perspective that made him a recognised and respected colleague among Hindus engaged in Tamil studies. Likewise, it enabled him to make and keep friends from among the Sinhala Buddhists through a period of trial and stress both in Peradeniya and elsewhere in Sri Lanka. He was neither narrow nor sectarian. He retained a wider outlook and long-term perspective in the face of sectarian, linguistic and religious controversies. He always appealed to the highest ideals in times of crisis whether such an appeal was popular or not. There was both an universal and international dimension to his outlook that gave him a quiet confidence about the future even when the situation looked desperate.

My final comment is that he was a traditionalist in the best sense of the word. As a Catholic steeped in scholarship, he bore witness to the great tradition of Christian humanism. He saw all knowledge and wisdom, all life and activity that belonged to the human spirit, as enfolded in the Divine wisdom and will; he saw all that was human and good as sharing in the goodness of the Divine Spirit. Truth, beauty and goodness belonged to God as Source, Guide and Goal. In an article on 'The Scope of Adult Education', in a journal published in Peradeniya, he gave expression to this humane and humanistic religious ideal. He saw adult education as essential for a real democratic society and polity. It was a means which enabled an individual to perfect himself within the community by a process of life-long and shared learning. He quotes a renowned Catholic humanist, Sir Thomas More who envisaged such a process of life-long education as a 'garnishing of the mind'. Fr Thani Nayagam was a liberal in an age of increasing ideological rigidity and group conflict. He accepted people as persons rather than types representing racial, religious or ideological interests. He believed in the value and power of dialogue and reasonable discourse to overcome the barriers of antagonistic mentalities. These virtues are not highly rated at this time. But they respect the saner aspects of the human spirit and must be preserved until their importance becomes recognised once again.

I would like to add my simple tribute to a pioneer ecumenicist, a courteous humanist and a kindly friend.

— **Rt. Rev. C. L. Wickremasinghe.**