



# CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF INDIA (CBCI)

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## CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF INDIA (CBCI)

### XXXVI BIENNIAL GENERAL BODY MEETING

#### FINAL STATEMENT

Jan. 31-Feb. 07, 2024, St. John's National Academy of Health Sciences, Bengaluru, India

#### INTRODUCTION

1/ With joyful confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ, we, the 170 Bishops of the *Catholic Bishops' Conference of India* (CBCI), gathered at St. John's National Academy of Health Sciences, Bengaluru, from January 31 to February 07, 2024, for our XXXVI General Assembly to reflect on the theme: *The Church's Response to the Current Socio-Political Situation of the Country and the Benefits and Challenges of Artificial Intelligence (AI)*. Our reflection was done against the backdrop of the ongoing 'Synod on Synodality' (October 2021-October 2024) with the theme *Communion-Mission-Participation* which encapsulates the essential nature of the Church. Synodality calls us to listen to the Spirit and to each other, "*For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body*" (1 Cor 12:13). We were inspired by the call of Pope Francis: "Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all" (*Fratelli Tutti* 8).

#### I. THE CURRENT SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION AND OUR RESPONSE

2/ Ours is an ancient civilization with a rich cultural heritage of unity in diversity. Indians cherish the values of religious harmony, non-violence and peace which are enshrined in the Constitution. During the CBCI Meeting, responding to the signs of the time, we first reviewed the situation currently prevailing in our

country. India has made tremendous advances in the scientific, technological, economic and other fields – the country has been acknowledged as an emerging economic power in the world. The Christian Community feels proud of our country's progress. However, we do find grave reasons for concern:

2.1. Economic development in our country seems to have benefitted only a small percentage. The rate of unemployment has vastly increased. Large scale migration has caused untold misery to many. So also, scientific and technological development has not yet reached the majority of our people especially in the rural areas, resulting in a digital divide.

2.2. We feel that development is often done to the detriment of ecology, disrupting the life especially of our tribal brothers and sisters, many of whom are being dispossessed of their lands. We have also witnessed in anguish the sufferings of the fisherfolk in the coastal areas and the long-drawn out struggle of the farmers.

2.3. There is an apprehension that divisive attitudes, hate speeches and fundamentalist movements are eroding the pluralistic, secular ethos which has always characterized our country and its Constitution. The Fundamental Rights and Minority Rights guaranteed in the Constitution should never be undermined.

2.4. Attacks on Christians continue to increase in different parts of India. Destruction of homes and churches, harassment of personnel serving in orphanages, hostels, educational and healthcare institutions on false allegations of conversion have become common. We are appalled by prolonged violence in Manipur resulting in the huge loss of life and livelihood.

2.5. There is a widespread perception that the important democratic institutions of our country are weakening, the federal structure is under stress and the media are not fulfilling their role as the fourth pillar of democracy.

2.6. There is an unprecedented religious polarization which is harming the cherished social harmony in our country and endangering democracy itself.

3/ Our Response to the present situation is along the path of non-violence, healing, justice and reconciliation. With this in view, we propose the following:

3.1. As Christians, our first response is PRAYER, "*for with God all things are possible*" (Matthew:19:26). The CBCI asks that each Diocese observes **Friday, 22 March 2024 as a Day of Prayer and Fasting** for peace and harmony in our country.

3.2. We renew the Church's commitment to serve the weaker sections of society irrespective of caste, creed and gender so as to ensure that the benefits of development reach the least and the last.

3.3. We want to ensure that our families, communities and institutions imbibe and promote the values of the Constitution.

3.4. We appeal to our political leaders to make all attempts to preserve the basic structure of the Constitution, particularly the Preamble which declares India to be a **SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC** committed to Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

3.5. We urge all citizens to enroll as voters and exercise their sacred duty to vote wisely so that we elect leaders who are committed to constitutional values and to the uplift of the poor.

3.6. We reiterate our demand that the Government grant *Scheduled Caste* status to Dalit Christians and other discriminated minorities. Similarly, the Government should desist from any attempt to deprive Christian Tribals of their *Scheduled Tribe* status and also from *delisting* of the tribal population of our country.

3.7. While we demand for the protection of our Fundamental and Minority Rights guaranteed by the Constitution, we will continue to be law abiding and responsible citizens of our beloved Motherland.

3.8. We request our Parish and Diocesan Commissions for Ecology to sensitize people about the ecological dangers in our present lifestyle such as overusing non-renewable resources of the earth, pollution of water and air, and wastage of food. We want to inculcate in all an attitude of caring for our 'common home'.

3.9. We will journey together with all people of goodwill, sharing in each other's joys and sorrows. We will conscientize the members of the Church to build bridges with their brothers and sisters of different faiths through Inter-Religious Dialogue and neighbourhood communities.

## II. CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

4/ In the context of our mission, at the General Assembly, we deliberated on the benefits and challenges of Artificial Intelligence (AI) recognizing digital technologies, including Artificial Intelligence, as gifts of God. Pope Francis urges us: "Let us boldly become citizens of the digital world" (*World Communications Day Message*, 2024).

5/ AI holds out the promise of tremendous benefits in the fields of health care, agriculture, education and research, engineering, recreation, business and finance. However, AI systems can be misused: In the wrong hands, the very same technologies can become tools that spread hatred, violence, manipulation and social bigotry. There is the danger that the human data collected by Digital platforms and AI can be misused to undermine the privacy of individuals and families. Hence, the CBCI urges the Government to engage with all stakeholders to regulate the development and use of AI so as to encourage the best practices and prevent abuses.

6/ Human beings, in all their social and cultural diversity, cannot be reduced to 'mere data' or be defined by algorithms. Hence, we recommend that:

6.1. The Communication Office in each Diocese organize well-planned media programmes whereby the entire community - children, youth, families, religious and clergy – can be educated in the responsible use of digital and AI tools, safeguarding against manipulation and abuse. We want to promote ethical use of AI to be responsible citizens of the digital world.

6.2. Our Diocesan and Regional Commissions for Social Communications and Youth Associations harness the available AI tools for effective faith formation and creative sharing of the Good News. We appeal to our young people who are skilled in AI to help in this endeavour.

6.3. Dioceses, Religious Congregations and Lay Associations equip our youth to benefit from the opportunities offered by the AI revolution.

7/ The Catholic Church in India firmly reiterates that the path to integral human development lies in promoting justice, equality, truth and freedom as a communitarian effort for the common good. For this, AI can serve as a useful instrument, provided that the human person in all his or her complexity, dignity and sanctity is respected and protected.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

8/ As Pilgrims of Hope, in the spirit of Synodality, the Church in India moves ahead towards the Jubilee Year 2025. Over the years, Christians have served the country with dedication, whether it be in the Armed Forces, in education and literacy, in health and social services. Our service to the country has been acknowledged by many of our fellow citizens. As loyal citizens of India, we will continue serving our country whatever be the cost, walking in the footsteps of Jesus our Master who proclaimed: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those*

*who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour"* (Luke 4:18-19).  
We pray for the welfare and prosperity of our country as we entrust our country  
to the Blessed Virgin Mary, our Mother, the Star of Hope.

Sd/-

Archbishop Andrews Thazhath  
President, CBCI

Sd/-

Archbishop Anil Couto  
Secretary General, CBCI



*7<sup>th</sup> February, 2024*