

Fr. Tissa Balasuriya: A radical and innovative theologian passes away



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Fr. Tissa Balasuriya OMI, a Sri Lankan Catholic priest who once came to the attention of the world due to his excommunication by Rome (which was later lifted), passed away yesterday in Colombo. He had been unwell for some time and was 89 years of age at the time of his death.

He was a trained economist and was ordained as a priest in 1953. He worked in many capacities, such as the rector of the Aquinas University College, which was developed as an alternative for those who could not attend University, and was the founder of the Centre for Religion and Society in Colombo. He played a prominent role in developing close links with all other religions and participated in many progressive initiatives relating to various issues in Sri Lanka.

Beginning his career as a conservative priest under the tutelage of renowned Fr. Peter Pillai, Fr. Balasuriya responded to the social changes that were taking place in Sri Lanka and began to call upon the Catholic Church to understand these changes positively, and not take a reactionary stance. His political acumen was, in fact, recognised by SWRD Bandaranayke, who later became a prime minister who invited Fr. Balasuriya to work with him. He refused, wanting to respond to the changes in Sri Lanka in his own way.

When Pope John XXIII announced the Second Vatican Council in the early 60s, Fr. Balasuriya and a few others, such as Bishop Leo Nanayakkara, responded positively. In fact, this Council's teachings were to change their world views and lifestyles. Later, other prominent persons like Fr. Michael Rodrigo, who was assassinated in 1987 and Fr. Alloy Peiris, as well as many others, took the same teachings as a guiding light for their lives and work.

Perhaps some of Fr. Balasuriya's most active years were those immediately following the Vatican Council, when he devoted his time to introduce these ideas to Sri Lanka and Asia as a whole. He was one of the pioneers of the Asian theological groups who would approach the problems of religion with a deep commitment to society, particularly the issues of justice. He also gained recognition as one of the most prominent writers on theological issues from this perspective in Asia.

His passionate pursuit of the Vatican perspectives led him to engage with the most progressive social thought of his time in many fields. He took the issue of gender

seriously and studied feminist thinkers and theologians. It was his engagement on this issue which led to his excommunication, relating to a book he wrote entitled *Mary and Human Liberation*. Though attacked on some technical expressions, close observers say that the actual attack was on his agreement of the ordination of women as priests.

When the excommunication was announced he openly challenged it and demanded to be shown the issues on which he had erred theologically. This challenge was never answered. However, he was under severe pressure due to one of the most intense international campaigns in his favour which caused severe embarrassment to the Catholic Church. A team of theologians of his religious order arrived in Sri Lanka and had several days of negotiations with him and he was requested to make some statement for the sake of compromise. Later his excommunication was lifted. Perhaps this is the only excommunication in the Catholic Church which was lifted within a very short period.

Fr. Balasuriya was essentially a thinker. He tried to provoke thought on national issues and also theological issues within the Church.

He lived the last years of his life very much in quietness as the overall environment within the Catholic Church had become hostile to the theological positions of the Vatican Council. However, to the last he remained a disciple and promoter of these teachings.

His work and writings will survive him and may contribute to the development of discourse in the future.

Fr. Tissa Balasuriya was a friend of the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), which played an active role in creating a global protest against his excommunication.

May he rest in peace.