

# From the Indian Church to the Universal Church: An Interview with Cardinal Oswald Gracias



*Asian Christian Review has interviewed Cardinal Oswald Gracias, the Archbishop of Bombay and the First Vice President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI). This leader of the largest Catholic diocese in the country was also elevated to the cardinalate by Pope Benedict XVI in November 2007, making him the only Asian cardinal-elect (i.e., cardinal with the right to vote at a conclave) among the 23 new cardinals.*

**Asian Christian Review (ACR): Your Eminence, as one of the most prominent church leaders in the country, what do you think are the most urgent issues for the Catholic Church in India?**

Gracias: The Catholic Church in India is vibrant, lively and active, but it does have its problems. I should not exaggerate the difficulties. However, I would say we have a few urgent problems.

The first would be external: there is a certain amount of hostility and suspicion towards the Church, there is the violence that the Church has been facing in different places. It's probably the biggest problem at the moment and is causing great anxiety to everybody including us, the church leaders.

Secondly, looking at the inner life of the Church, I feel that there is an urgent need for greater collaboration and coordination of work between the three Catholic Churches: the Latin Church, the Syro-Malabar Church and the Syro-Malankara Church. We are still finding ways of how exactly we could collaborate. There is much collaboration already but I think this has still got to be strengthened a great deal for the good of the Church.

The third point I would say would be the need for the Church to get more involved in society and become more outward-looking. I feel we, the Church in India, have been a little bit too much inward-looking, caring mainly for ourselves and our people. I will be glad if this can be changed. This will be a big step forward.

Further, I think we have to strengthen and deepen the faith formation of our people. These are the main issues which we have to work on.

**ACR: About the inter-rite issue, what kind of problems do you have among different (Catholic) Churches?**

Gracias: As you know we have three Catholic Ritual Churches in India. The

Latin Church is spread all over India, and so are the Syro-Malabar and the Syro-Malankara faithful all over. We do have Latin rite dioceses all over the country, but the other two Churches have dioceses mainly in Kerala. There is theoretically the right for the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Churches to have total autonomy and work under their own bishops, but in practice, in many parts of our country the Churches are so small and the Catholics are so few that it is practically difficult to do so and may not be pastorally advisable. Again, if we have different types of churches all over the place, it causes confusion in the minds of the common people, and even for non-Christians and the government. They do not understand the meaning of ritual Churches. This is a problem of our present time: the theoretical right of the different Churches and the practical difficulties in exercising it, how to balance and co-ordinate this is the problem.

**ACR: Violence against Christians in Orissa last year was shocking news. Yet, it does not seem to be an isolated case. Could you share with us your perspective on the current situation?**

Gracias: It is certainly not an isolated incident, but it is not that the whole of India, or all the Christians everywhere are facing violence. For example, in Mumbai we don't have any violence against Christians; and in this sense, the same in Goa, Kerala and the North-East. But there are places where there is violence. These incidents happened in Gujarat before, and in December in Orissa, and later in certain other places. There appears to be some sort of a pattern, which is causing us worry. On the other hand, it should not cause us to panic and it is not affecting the work of the Church. Also, I think we should keep in mind that the vast majority of the Indian population are very tolerant, positive towards the Church and are in good relations with the Church. I remember as a child we deeply respected other's religions and that each one would live according to his/her own religion. There was great harmony. Therefore, we should not exaggerate the situation because most people are very good.

**ACR: What are the church leaders doing or planning to do to counter Hindutva ideology and violence?**

Gracias: We have discussed this several times. What is very clear is that our work should not be affected and it is not. We certainly believe in prayer and that a strong campaign of prayer is strengthening our people. People should understand that the Church is working with proper motives and that it should have the freedom to work. That is on one side. On the other side, we must have dialogue with religious leaders of different traditions, so that we would be able to clearly put forward our point of view. I have had dialogue with some Hindu leaders and it has helped to clarify where each side stands. We also had dialogue with the government asking for the protection of the people.

**ACR: Are the Hindu leaders you had dialogue with the “moderate” ones?**

Gracias: I met the head of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), which is reported to be the strongest ideological group. It was a private, closed-door meeting and I was happy with the meeting through which we could understand each other’s position. Unfortunately, we did not follow it up—we should have—because everyone began wondering and asking what the Catholic Church was doing, talking to these people...they said that the Church was giving credibility to these people by talking to them. But I felt it was helpful as we did make certain progress in clearing up some issues...I think we should even now resume where we left off.

**ACR: Was this dialogue on the national level?**

Gracias: It was on the national level. At that time, I was the Secretary General of CBCI and we officially met each other. I led the delegation of four, and they had four on their side. Subsequently there were other meetings at different local places. But somehow, it tapered off as there were no systematic follow-ups.

**ACR: Do you think the Catholic Church in India should take on an even more prominent role in the public life of the country? Should the Church be more vocal in political matters?**

Gracias: I would say Yes and No, in the sense that I don’t think the bishops should take a more prominent role in the public life because that might give the impression that religion and politics are being mixed up. But certainly I am very keen and I have said often in Bombay, my own Archdiocese, that the lay people should definitely get much more involved in politics. Our lay people have not got involved enough in politics and the civic life. We have got many good people who are competent, generous, with educational qualifications and leadership qualities, who could make a difference to society. That is not being done. We did take for the CBCI Plenary Assembly in 2000, the topic of the “Church at the Service of the Nation.” We were hoping that this would result in an awakening among the laity and an understanding of their own role. But it did not really result in that. I think this is one of the weaknesses of the Church, that we are not sufficiently involved in social, civic, political matters.

**ACR: The recent plenary assembly of CBCI has discussed the empowerment of women in the Church and society, and has issued a final statement with courageous and ambitious policies, such as increasing the number of female officials within the Church up to 35% (with the hope to reach 50% eventually). How do you envision that these policies be implemented, for example, in your diocese?**

Gracias: Yes, we had discussed about the empowerment of women, but I was

joking when I was talking to the bishops that in Bombay we should talk about the “empowerment of men” because about 70% of all our Church committee members are women!

**ACR: Then you don’t even need to implement these policies!** (Laughter)

Gracias: Too bad! (Laughter) So we are on the opposite side. It is a question of civil society also. In Bombay, women are not treated as second-class citizens. So here we do not have that problem. But in certain parts of the country, they are not given their rightful place. Gradually we should try to change the mentality so that it becomes a reality that 35% of all committees are women. But this is not a problem at all in my diocese.

**ACR: Did the Conference give any time frame for the implementation of this policy nationwide?**

Gracias: There was a demand from the women who were pressing for an implementation of the decision within six months. But this is unrealistic. I think we need about two to three years. We did not fix a definite time frame. We said that we would begin thinking and at least within a year, we should change the structure so that we are able at least to start moving towards 35%.

**ACR: According to the survey conducted by Women’s Commission of CBCI prior to the general assembly, almost 70% of the respondents (mostly women) consider that the Church contributes to the empowerment of women. At the same time, a third of the same respondents find the Church’s hierarchy the greatest obstacle to women’s participation in ecclesial life. Would you like to comment on this?**

Gracias: I would say that the remark that the hierarchy is the greatest obstacle is not fair to the bishops. I was present at all the discussions about choosing the theme for the general assembly, i.e., empowerment of women, and there was not one single bishop who was opposed to it. Everybody in the hierarchy is certainly for empowerment, but the question is how to empower. Very often it happens that there is a cultural bar. Also, sometimes what we are accused of concerns the issue of the ordination of women, and this is out of the question. If this is seen as an obstacle to the women participation in ecclesial life, then the question is what exactly is “participation”? But otherwise regarding giving them a rightful place and a greater role in the church life, I think most of the bishops—a few may feel not comfortable because of their local customs—will be very keen on it. I myself would be absolutely keen and would encourage any initiatives in my diocese to give women more of a role. I was telling you in our committees, we have many women ... and we have not even noticed about the percentage. We have taken it for granted and we search for competent people, there is no discrimination at all.

**ACR: You were one of the 23 prelates made cardinal by Pope Benedict XVI at the most recent consistory held on Nov. 24 last year. What was your first reaction when you heard the news?**

Gracias: My reaction was one of absolute surprise. I couldn't believe it. I was a priest of the Bombay diocese, and [later] an Auxiliary Bishop of the same diocese and then an Archbishop in another diocese. So I have just come back to Bombay a year before, in December 2006. I was surprised when in October I was told by the [papal] Nuncio that the Holy Father decided to make me Cardinal. I must tell you that on the day of announcement, when my office was going to make a press statement, I rang the Nuncio a few hours before and asked him, "are you sure that there is no mistake about that?" (Laughter)

**ACR: When you went to Rome for the consistory, did you have a private conversation with the Pope?**

Gracias: We didn't have a private meeting this time. I met him in the past though. This time, I met him a couple of times during the ceremony itself and he spoke with me, and always about India. I noticed that in the past whenever I met him, he always spoke about Mumbai, but now both times, he spoke about India, as a "land of great hope," and that he had great expectations of the country.

**ACR: You are the only Asian cardinal-elect among the new cardinals. Do you think that more Asians should be included in the College of Cardinals and/or Roman curia, as the late Card. Stephan F. Hamao has suggested?**

Gracias: I am not in support of any quota system. The whole College of Cardinals should represent the universality of the Church, and I think the Holy Father should be free to choose people whom he has confidence in and who can advise him and who will be his collaborators. I really would not insist on more-Asians or less-Europeans, and any demographic shift should be a gradual change. And once you are a Cardinal, I think you should not forget the reason why you were made cardinal, to serve the universal Church and that you now called to work for the entire universal Church.

**ACR: Do you think that the Pope had something specific in mind when he appointed you?**

Gracias: For me, I thought it was really a recognition of the Indian Church and the necessity of the Indian Church contributing to the universal Church. Honestly, I am not trying to be humble, but I feel very unworthy and surprised. I also thought I was too young to be a cardinal. (Laughter)

**ACR: You have just mentioned the Indian contribution to the universal Church. You actually touched on this subject in the interview with Radio Vaticana prior to the consistory as well. What would that be?**

Gracias: I do think that the Indian Church really has got a lot to contribute to the universal Church. I can see it growing in maturity. It is rich in vocations, thanks to God's blessings. The country is growing in self-confidence economically, and the Church also grown in self-confidence. I would wish that the Indian Church makes contributions first of all with regard to personnel. I would be happy if there are more Indians in the Vatican dicasteries because we do have competent people. I would also be happy if Indian priests and nuns go out to different countries and work as missionaries. Before, we would receive missionaries from outside. But now, we can send our priests and nuns to South America, Africa, and Eastern Europe where they are needed. I also think that we have got good theologians. The whole question of the theological thinking of the universal Church could be influenced by Indian thought. I have a feeling that the Asian mentality of spirituality, of hospitality, of family life, of politeness, which are values that are very much developed in India and other Asian nations can be a gift to the wider Church. As the whole world is getting globalized, there is greater exchange between Asia (including India) and Europe (including Italy). It would really help both sides.

**ACR: In the same interview, you mention interreligious dialogue as a priority. Could you tell us a little bit more about this?**

Gracias: We are a very small minority. Catholics make up only 1.8%, Christians [all together] 2.3%. We are compelled to live in a whole non-Christian milieu with over 80% Hindus, and 14% Muslims. So we have learnt how to dialogue, to live together, to understand and appreciate each other. This is not a reality for Europe, you know. I think that Europe can learn a lot from the Indian Church as this is becoming a new reality in certain places there. We have lived through this and experimented with dialogue. We've had successes and failures and this experience would be helpful to the universal Church. For us [Indian Catholics], it is a priority, but now I think that it has also become universally an important area that we should work on.

**ACR: Finally, what do you hope of the Indian or Asian Church in the future?**

Gracias: I hope that the Indian and the Asian Church would get stronger, not necessarily in terms of numbers, but in vitality, inner strength, in the depth of living the discipleship of Jesus, in the depth of understanding the Word of God and making it more and more the centre of one's life. I also hope that the Asian Church, as I was saying before, makes a good contribution to the universal Church in terms of theology. The Asian Church is doing much for this through FABC, and I hope that the FABC, the Indian Church and the universal Church would interact much more to enthuse each other and benefit each other. I also hope that we, with a greater theological clarity, carry on our

educational apostolate, our social work, our health services, not just as secular services but services with a mission, which we very clearly have in our mind is to improve society and to plant the Kingdom of God. I think the Indian and the Asian Church have got a tremendous future. They are taking off and we will overcome these small problems which we presently have.