

Salute to an anti-untouchability crusader within the Catholic Church

Life/Philosophy — by Henri Tiphagne — 14/05/2021



Today I write to celebrate the full life of a Roman Catholic Dalit priest, Rev. Dr. P. Antonyraj SJ who passed away on 10th May. I was nineteen years old studying in St. Joseph's College, Tiruchirappalli and staying in the hostel in Room No. 101, when I had several common mentors who moulded me in my college days like Fr. P. Ceyrac SJ, Fr. Claude D'Souza, Fr. Manu SJ , Fr. George Joseph, Fr. Selvaraj and Sr. Jeanne Devos ICM, who had equally influenced me.

My precious and confidential long night exchanges Tony, as many of us affectionately called him, which I mention it only now, utterly shocked me to understand what caste meant in the Roman Catholic Church and recruitment of a young Jesuit priest. All the exchanges were after 12 midnight when Tony, used to scale the small wicket gate on the solidarity chapel road of the campus to reach my room. But what brought us together was, that he was born into a caste that even the Church discriminated and, I was never sure of what my caste was, since I was adopted. Fr. Tagore SJ was our warden! For the sake of the dignity of the Church I refrain herein from sharing too many stories about persons in noviciates, communities and in positions of power.

But what is clear was that there existed untouchability and caste discrimination. But what is worse is that it continues silently even today. That is the ugly power of caste.

Dr P. Antonyraj was born in 1945, in a small village Meenthully in the then integrated Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu. It is from there that he has grown through his trials and tribulations to ensure that the dream of an equal society, attempted by him within his religious community, within his congregation and within the parishes where he was appointed within the church. Was he successful? Was he too aggressive? Did he contribute to polarization of castes? These are the questions for us now to collectively and personally ponder over.

Tony would always narrate the small little hut that was his house in his village and never forgot that this was where his parents, his elder brother, his elder sister and himself lived. He used to recollect that when it rained his mother, brother, and sister used to occupy the corner of the hut while he would accompany his father in the church veranda. When he failed in school in class 8, it was almost certain that there was no other way out. But he survived and ensured that he built the first revolting voice of the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement not for liberation from the government but for liberation within the church. This plain truth has to be spoken because they are relevant even today.

But all this meant that he had to 'opt to be a fighter and a fighter who believed that a self-made man was second to none.' He used to share in the many meetings I was privileged we had at my house in Anna Nagar with his then 'chaste' american english accent that he consciously cultivated with an arrogance as he learnt it the hard way and always proudly used to say 'so what if I am a Dalit'.

Tony was a personal force for Paul Raj and self-engaging in the organising of relief activities for the poorest of the poor in Vedasandur, post-1977 floods and the breakdown of the Alagapuri dam in Dindigul. In 1992 he continued to build what he called the Dalit Integration Federation within the church to fight within.

Tony must have been a thorn in the flesh for his superiors, rectors and Archbishops wherever he served. Yet, he always fondly remembered Fr. Casimir SJ, Fr. Rex Pai SJ who accompanied him in spite of all the fond 'embarrassments' that he caused, because he had a mission and cause within him.

After his ordination he was asked by his Provincial to serve in Rayappanpatti in the old Madurai district. The first question that came from the youngsters of this parish after his first mass was, "*What is the 'varna' that you belong to?*" Shocked by this question and never expecting it on the first day after mass, Tony tried to handle it lightly by responding that it was the '*orange varna*'. The caste conscious Roman Catholic youngsters were not satisfied. They knew that church was casteist and then directly asked him

what his caste was? Tony responded saying he was from the Pallar community (since the word Dalit was not known those days). Tony knew it was going to be tough working there and immediately requested a transfer and was posted immediately to Malligapuram, a place where I also voluntarily served under Fr. Selvaraj as an AICUF student.

It was the exposure and training provided by Rev. Dr. François Houtard in the Philippines during the Marcos regime that provided Tony an exposure to a church that could be rebellious; a church that could stand on the side of the poorest of the poor. He also learned to struggle on the streets with thousands participating with conviction and he did so without realising that this could cause difficulties leading eventually to his arrest and deportation from the Philippines. Tony came back to Manamadurai to work with Fr. Ceyrac and his 'thousand-wells program'.

Ultimately, Tony landed in Chicago to complete his Ph.D on the title, 'The social basis of untouchables in Tamil Nadu'. He was attempting to break the myth that there was no caste in the church, and that it existed from the cradle to the grave yard.

Tony, it was you who was instrumental in the year 1975 for me to borrow the crowbar in the darkness of night, dodging the night watchman in the 'Fathers Lodge', the watchman in the main gate, to reach the church and climb the 40-foot high gate to do one thing that I am proud of, and it was you who inspired me to it. That was to go to the RC cemetery and break the discriminatory partition-wall that separated the cemetery of the dominant castes and those of the Dalit communities. I was asked in 2016, while in Berlin, in the remains of the Berlin wall of what I had to say about the breaking of the Berlin wall. I told them it was easier to break the Berlin wall than to break the wall of caste discrimination and untouchability in the Indian context not in parishes alone, not in families alone but in our numerous congregations, in the positions of powers that are offered and in our elections to Provincials, Generals, Mother Generals, etc. The wall I broke was built with cement concrete within 15 days.

My last acquaintance with you is what I will be remembering now and for many years to come. I will not forget the days when you came home for a simple dinner in my Anna Nagar MIG flat and enjoyed the warmth of my simple family. But Tony, it is time for me to tell you something I never told you. The Jesuits also do not know of it. Fr. Ceyrac, a close friend of yours and a benefactor, also a very close friend of my mother (Dr. Y. Tiphagne) and also my mentor, once before his death when he could still travel in his vehicle and stop in Madurai, knowing my work with the United Nations, had asked me what I thought you had not done in your life. Tony, I told him, and I recall it proudly that, with your academic skills, your understanding of racism, xenophobia, caste-based discrimination, untouchability, and all

your political relationships that you had by then developed, you were the best poised person to lead the Dalit delegation to the World Conference Against Racism in 2001. The Durban declaration, the Durban conference, the United Nations and all its efforts thereafter have lost the best opportunity possible, to have you as their Special Rapporteur.

I hope all religions in this country, all religious heads in this country will learn that there can be only one Tony who fought with the cultivated arrogance. If we are to put his dreams into action at Mandela Nagar, let us realise the dream of an exclusive Dalit women's University. It is time for us to on the one hand celebrate his life, but to bow down our heads in shame, as long as we allow caste and untouchability, to play a role in the Church.

I had the best opportunity of seeing Fr. Stan Swamy who is now in Taloja jail, along with Tony at DACA in 2019. That was the place Fr. Stan loved the most among all Jesuit houses I Madurai because he loved Tony. I am so happy Fr. Stan brought us both back together after so many years of separation and we took part in so many discussions.

We have missed a beloved member of our family. But for all those who are in power, let me recollect that it was several AICUF chaplains who stood with him. It is high time that the Jesuits invest in AICUF again.

Tony you are not gone, but laid in DACA for us to come back year after year on the 10th of May to evaluate and question ourselves "*If the Church has contributed to the annihilation of caste atleast within*". ". Your comrades Fr. Jesumarian and Fr. Gnanapragasam will continue your work with Fr.Varghese and the DACA team. .

We may not agree with all that you have done, but your mission is something we will miss dearly, especially myself. Those who are destined to live together will always come together at some stage. Meet you soon, Tony!

Henri Tiphagne

Advocate and a friend of Tony

Henri Tiphagne is the National Working Secretary of Human Rights Defenders' Alert – India (HRDA) as well as the National Working Secretary of the All India Network of Individuals and NGOs working with National / State Human Rights Institutions (AiNNI). He is also the founder of People's Watch and its units of human rights education, rehabilitation etc.

<https://countercurrents.org/2021/05/salute-to-an-anti-untouchability-crusader-within-the-catholic-church>