

Report from New Delhi by Susan Maitra

An ecumenical journey

Pope John Paul II stressed unity of the Indian nation during his historic visit.

Pope John Paul II's "pilgrimage of peace and good will" to the birth place of three of the world's religions and the home today of seven major and numerous minor religious groupings, was ecumenical in every sense of the word.

First-hand experience of this ancient land with its unique religious and cultural diversity was of primary concern. But even within the small Christian community of 14,000,000 (about 2.6% of the population of India), in which 12,000,000 Catholics are the majority, there are diverse strains. Among the Catholics, the Latin Church, based in Goa where it was planted by the Portuguese in the 16th century, co-exists with two Eastern Rite Churches, the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankar, based in Kerala since about 1600.

The 2 million Protestants, principally Anglican, are under the aegis of the Church of South India and Church of North India, in turn associated with the Anglican Community under the leadership of the See of Canterbury. Interestingly, as the Pope was leaving India, the archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Robert Runcie, arrived. The two met for the third time on Feb. 9 in Bombay.

"I come to pay a pastoral visit to the Catholics of India and I come in friendship with a deep desire to pay honor to all your people and to your different cultures," the Pope stated on arrival. Noting that the Church had been an integral part of India for near-

ly 2,000 years, the Pope stated his assurance of its commitment to the unity and brotherhood of the nation, and to its progress.

The Pope's 10-day visit, the result of a long-standing invitation from the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, was organized around huge gatherings at each of 14 cities in every corner of the country where the Pope celebrated mass. In Delhi, His Holiness met the President and the vice-president and had a warm 30-minute talk with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Mrs. Sonia Gandhi. He also had a short meeting with the Dalai Lama of Tibet at the latter's request. In addition to meeting with the bishops, the Pope led two masses attended by several hundred thousand each, and participated in a special inter-religious meeting, sharing the podium with Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh scholars.

Earlier, during a visit to Mahatma Gandhi's memorial, the Pope delivered a short and passionate message. "From this place, which is forever bound to the memory of this extraordinary man, I wish to express to the people of India and to the world," he said, "that peace and justice will only be achieved along the path which was at the core of his teaching: the supremacy of the spirit and *satyagraha* [peaceful protest]." Gandhi taught us, the Pope continued, that if all peoples cling to the truth and respect the unique dignity of all human beings, a new world order can be achieved.

In Calcutta, this theme was ex-

tended at a large but select gathering of 500 of the city's intellectual leaders. A new civilization is struggling to be born, the Pope said. In this context, he told the audience, you have a "special responsibility" for the well-being of your nation. "As intellectuals, thinkers, writers, scientists, artists, you must always be intent on unleashing in the world the power of truth for the service of humanity."

In the industrial city of Ranchi, Pope John Paul II delivered a discourse to 500,000 on the dignity of labor, citing his encyclical *Laborem Exercens* that man is neither a machine nor a beast of burden, that all human work, however humble, must be respected, protected, and justly remunerated for communities to live in peace and progress.

In Madras, at a meeting with the heads of non-Christian faiths, the Pope stressed again the importance of dialogue among members of different religions to solve human problems and overcome difficulties in the task of nation-building. In this context, he paid tribute to India's powerful heritage. "Your meditations on things unseen and spiritual have made a deep impression on the world," he said. "Your overwhelming sense of the primacy of religion and of the greatness of the Supreme Being has been a powerful witness against a materialistic and atheistic view of life."

Only time will tell the impact of the visit on the Church itself. But there is no doubt that from the standpoint of the Indian nation, the visit was a positive one. Against the moral weight of a man so obviously committed to the progress of human civilization, the howling from the Left about the new imperialist danger of the Papal visit fell flat. So did the ravings of the Hindu chauvinist RSS, whose accusation that the Pope would undertake "mass conversions" of Hindus is no longer taken seriously.