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Fourth Annual Christmas Lecture 2024

Saturday, December 14, 2024

By

Rev. Dr. John Felix Raj, S.J.



PARASMANI

Centre for Research & Social Outreach

Ratan Pally, Santiniketan
(A unit of St. Xavier's University, Kolkata)

Front Cover :

Michelangelo's iconic masterpiece, 'The Creation of Adam,' adorns the majestic ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City. Painted between 1508 and 1512, this sublime work captures the pivotal moment when humanity was brought into being by the divine hand.

The "Creation of Adam" embodies the profound intersection of spirituality and humanity, illuminating the intimate connection between the celestial and terrestrial realms. This iconic scene has transcended centuries, inviting contemplation and awe, as we bear witness to the sacred instant when God's creative power shaped human destiny.

Fourth Annual Christmas Lecture 2024

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On 14.12.2024

At

Parasmani

Center for Research and Social Outreach

Ratan Pally, Santiniketan

Programme Schedule

11 : 00 a.m. : Registration

11 : 25 a.m. : MC welcomes the guests

11 : 30 a.m. : Baul song

11 : 35 a.m. : Inauguration

11 : 40 a.m. : Talk on “Spirituality for life and leadership”

12 : 20 p.m. : Q/A session

12 : 35 p.m. : Vote of Thanks

12 : 45 p.m. : Lunch

SPIRITUALITY FOR LIFE AND LEADERSHIP

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Rev. Dr. John Felix Raj, SJ

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Warm greetings and a heartfelt welcome to the annual Parasmoni Lecture. Today's topic is "Spirituality for Life and Leadership." I extend my sincere gratitude to Father Mourlin and his dedicated team from the Association of Jesuit Collaborators (AJC) for organizing this enriching program.

Teilhard's Challenge:

Today, we embark on an inspiring journey to rediscover spirituality's profound impact on our lives. Often misunderstood as exclusive to religious or monastic realms, spirituality's true essence embraces a broader, inclusive scope – permeating every aspect of human existence. As the visionary Jesuit Philosopher, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin eloquently phrased, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." This powerful statement revolutionizes our understanding, intertwining spirituality and humanity.

Teilhard's transformative perspective challenges conventional views, positioning spirituality as our fundamental nature – transcending physical existence. He envisions life as a temporary, yet transformative journey of spiritual growth, self-discovery and service – united with all existence.

Nelson Mandela's Spirituality:

I would like to share with you an inspiring testament about Nelson Mandela's life embodying the transformative power of spirituality.

Nelson Mandela's visit to his former prison cell on Robben Island after becoming South Africa's first black president in 1994 showcased his extraordinary spiritual depth, humility and capacity for forgiveness.

Having endured 27 years of harsh imprisonment, forced labor and mistreatment, Mandela chose not to harbor bitterness. Instead, he demonstrated remarkable compassion when encountering his former jailer.

Mandela's response to the officer, "You gave me the opportunity to practice my patience, my resilience and my determination. And for that, I thank you," illustrates his inner spiritual depth and transformative leadership style. This anecdote encapsulates Mandela's ability to find value in adversity, inspiring countless individuals worldwide.

As a champion of reconciliation, Mandela's presidency (1994-1999) focused on healing South Africa's apartheid wounds. His humility, forgiveness and commitment to equality earned him global admiration. Mandela was a man who forgave his past and promoted national unity. By his servant leadership style he prioritized the needs of his people over personal interests. He empowered the youth by educating and enabling them. At the international level he collaborated with world leaders to address global challenges.

Mandela's legacy extends beyond South Africa. He inspires generations as a symbol of freedom, resilience and compassion, exemplifying the human spirit's triumph.

Guiding Force of Spirituality

Religion serves as a guiding light for spiritual growth, fostering peace, harmony, liberty and justice. Leveraging our diverse faiths, we can preserve and enrich cultural and religious pluralism – a precious asset. Our approach must embody reverence, respect, tolerance and compassion.

The book of Genesis 1:27 reminds us that every individual is an image of God, rendering each person sacred, unique and irreplaceable. Tragically, societal issues arise when humans create God in their own image.

To bridge divides, we must cultivate inclusive spirituality, resonating with the broadest possible audience. Spirituality is vital to holistic well-being, influencing personal and societal governance and development.

The aftermath of 9/11 exemplifies spirituality's enduring significance. "God bless America" became a unified refrain, illustrating humanity's innate reliance on spiritual connection.

Spirituality: A Multifaceted Concept

Spirituality is a complex, multifaceted concept often misunderstood as escaping life's challenges through religious observances. Historically

tied to religion, spirituality evolved alongside Enlightenment thinkers and Nietzsche's "death of God" announcement. The late 20th century's secularism and New Age Movement further distinguished spirituality from religiosity.

While spirituality and religiosity intersect, they are distinct. Spirituality transcends religiosity, evolving from diverse faith traditions like Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism. Practices such as meditation and prayer originate from religious rituals, yet spirituality encompasses a broader quest for meaning, purpose and interconnectedness.

Spirituality encompasses transcending worldly barriers, realizing connection to the Truth. It involves personal experience, self-awareness and inner growth. Recognizing one's true nature, relationship to God, universe and life, and liberating from ego, embracing authentic self, are its core aspects.

Catholicism defines spirituality as acknowledging life's deeper dimensions, God's presence and transformative power (Richard McBrien, 1980). Indian traditions view it as exploration into the self/soul (atman). Ursula King describes spirituality anthropologically as becoming fully human and alive.

Spirituality supports personal and professional growth, fostering mindfulness, resilience, emotional intelligence, empathy, purpose-driven leadership and holistic well-being. It is: Inner quality transcending worldliness, caste, creed and sensuality; Personal experience-focused; Concerned with self/soul exploration and a path to God and becoming God-like.

Historical Context

Until the 19th century, spirituality was bound within religious history. Enlightenment thinkers and Nietzsche's ideas expanded its scope. Secularism and the New Age Movement solidified its distinctiveness.

One can simply state that spirituality is one's inner quality that makes one transcend the barriers of worldliness and realize one's connection with the Truth. It focuses on personal experience. Many spiritual traditions, accordingly, share a common spiritual theme: the "path" of perceiving and internalizing one's "true" nature and relationship to God,

to the universe and to life, and of becoming free of the “egoist” self in favor of being fully one’s “true self.”

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Spirituality has to do with the “spirit” of our life - with the way in which we live out our relationship with God: our way of being spirit filled. To be “spiritual” means to know, and to live according to the knowledge, that there is more to life than meets the eye. It is to know, and to live that God is present to us in grace as the principle of personal, interpersonal, social and even cosmic transformation. To be “open to the Spirit” is to accept explicitly who we are and who we are called to become.

The Spirit: Essence of Life

Jesus teaches, “God is Spirit” (John 4:23-24), emphasizing worship in spirit and truth. Scripture also reveals, “God is Love” (1 John 4:8) and “God is Light” (1 John 1:5). God transcends form, space, time, gender, caste, color and religion.

The word “spirit” originates from “wind” or “breath,” symbolizing life. Spirituality nurtures life, transcending self-boundaries. It unfolds life, calling for transcendence, experience, awareness and appreciation of life beyond self.

Spirituality helps individuals experience God as truth, love and peace, surpassing egocentric nature and filling them with other-centric attitude. This profound transformation elevates one’s perspective, fostering compassion, empathy and unity. Embracing spirituality inspires introspection, encouraging individuals to explore their connection with God and humanity. This introspection cultivates humility, forgiveness and kindness, illuminating life’s purpose.

Thirumular’s Thirumanthiram: Unveiling the Divine

Revered Tamil poet, Thirumular profoundly explores the Omnipotent nature in his seminal work, Thirumanthiram. He asserts God transcends spatial confinement, quantification and linguistic definition, existing beyond human comprehension.

This unity underscores the interconnectedness of divine and human love. Only ignorance separates Love and God; enlightened souls recognize the Divine as Love incarnate. Thirumular describes God as beginning-less, endless and timeless, transcending temporal bounds. In

spiritual ecstasy, devotees experience the Divine variably: as Father, Spouse, Lover or Friend.

Grasping this truth, seekers attain spiritual enlightenment, becoming saints. Thirumular's wisdom echoes universal spiritual principles, bridging Tamil tradition and biblical teachings.

Spirituality lies at the heart of human existence, embracing the essence of being uniquely human. It encompasses an intrinsic energy, presence or drive shaping actions and nurturing life. This profound "restlessness," as St. Augustine termed it, propels individuals toward transcendence.

Spirituality serves as a journey toward divine connection, striving to embody God-like qualities. Renowned physicist Albert Einstein exemplified this quest, seeking to comprehend "God's thoughts." Even ardent atheists like Spinoza have experienced profound spiritual transformations, exemplifying the intoxicating allure of divine connection.

Ignatian Spirituality: A Pathway to Deepened Faith and Service

Ignatian spirituality, rooted in St. Ignatius of Loyola's profound experiences and Spiritual Exercises, offers a transformative approach to faith. This Jesuit tradition emphasizes God's active presence in daily life, guiding individuals toward deeper prayer, discerning decision-making and selfless service.

Inspired by Ignatius' personal conversion, this spirituality fosters an intimate, personal connection with Jesus Christ. It cultivates awareness of divine presence in everyday experiences, recognizing God's intricate involvement in human life.

The First Principle and Foundation underscores human dignity and purpose, forming the bedrock of Ignatian spirituality. This visionary approach inspires individuals to discern God's will, making informed choices aligned with their values and faith.

The Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius' seminal work, provide a structured journey for spiritual growth. This four-part path encompasses gratitude and awareness, purification and forgiveness, illumination and insight and commitment and action. Through these movements, individuals deepen their faith, embracing compassion, justice and love.

Ignatian spirituality's core essence lies in finding God in all things,

bridging the divine and mundane. By embracing this philosophy, individuals embody faith through service, nurturing a profound, personal relationship with God and through Jesus Christ.

This beautiful perspective highlights the profound dimension of spirituality known as awakened consciousness. St. Ignatius of Loyola's wisdom from his Spiritual Exercises encourages us to recognize the divine presence in every aspect of creation, from the life-giving force in plants to the sensory experiences of animals and the rational understanding of human beings.

This holistic view resonates with the ancient Upanishads' concept of "Cosmic Consciousness" or Brahman, which permeates all existence, transcending life and matter. This unified consciousness weaves together the intricate tapestry of the universe.

According to St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises, people can be categorized into three groups based on their approach to achieving life satisfaction through service to God and humanity. These individuals can come from various walks of life, including religious, business, education, and other sectors.

Their common goal is to attain fulfillment through selfless service, but they differ in their willingness to detach from worldly attachments. These attachments can take many forms, such as excessive fondness for money, material possessions, status, or other comforts that bring temporary joy but hinder spiritual growth.

To overcome these attachments, one must be willing to sacrifice. St. Ignatius identifies three types of individuals based on their approach to this challenge.

The first type is unwilling to let go of their attachments. Despite recognizing the need for change, they fail to take necessary steps due to sloth, avarice, fear, lack of self-confidence, or lack of faith. As a result, they remain stuck and unable to achieve spiritual growth.

The second type seeks a middle ground, attempting to retain their attachments while minimizing their negative impact. They try to manipulate circumstances to suit their desires rather than adapting to divine providence. While they may achieve partial detachment, they struggle with true freedom.

In contrast, the third type willingly sacrifices their attachments for the greater good. They prioritize service to God and humanity above personal comfort and strive for excellence in their spiritual journey. This mindset allows them to embrace detachment as a path to inner peace and selfless service.

St. Ignatius emphasizes that genuine spiritual growth requires a willingness to relinquish attachments. This classification serves as a reflection tool, helping individuals assess their own willingness to let go of attachments and pursue a life of purpose and service.

Gandhian Spirituality:

Mahatma Gandhi's concept of God is multifaceted and profound. To him, God embodies Life, Truth, Light and Love, representing the Supreme Good. Gandhi firmly believed that amidst death, life prevails; amidst untruth, truth endures; and amidst darkness, light shines through. This unwavering faith stemmed from his experiences and spiritual quests.

Gandhi's spirituality was deeply rooted in service to humanity. He believed God resides within every individual, guiding and empowering them. His autobiography, "The Story of My Experiments with Truth," offers insights into his spiritual journey and philosophical outlook.

The anecdote, often attributed to an unknown 12th-century monk, beautifully represents a universal truth, beginning with the desire of a young man, to change the world driven by youthful energy and idealism. As he faces challenges and realizes the difficulty of changing the world, he narrows his focus to smaller circles, first to his nation and then to his town. However, he continues to confront his limitations, and as an older man, he tries to change his family.

Ultimately, he comes to a profound realization: the only one he can truly change is himself. This epiphany underscores the ripple effect of personal change, where transforming oneself can impact family and loved ones, and collective transformation can inspire change in the community, nation, and ultimately, the world.

The monk's story, much like Gandhiji's remarkable life, serves as a powerful reminder that personal transformation can have a ripple effect, inspiring positive change in the world around us.

Gandhiji's philosophy of "Be the change you wish to see in the world"

resonates deeply, emphasizing the importance of individual self-reflection, growth, and transformation. By working on ourselves, we can become catalysts for broader social and societal change.

Lincoln's Spirituality:

Spirituality guides individuals to recognize their purpose, emerge as leaders, and compassionately serve others. This selfless service is not merely a social duty but a divine calling, as "service to humanity is service to God."

However, this noble vision is often distorted by leaders in various spheres who exploit and deceive vulnerable populations, particularly the poor. Yet, despite their outward success, these individuals cannot escape the scrutiny of their own conscience.

This conscience serves as a moral compass, reminding them of their actions' true nature and the disparity between their deeds and the divine mission. This internal voice prompts self-reflection, accountability, and ultimately, the pursuit of genuine leadership aligned with the greater good.

Abraham Lincoln's spiritual leadership is indeed legendary. His response to Secretary of State, Stanton during the American Civil War, "My dear chap, it is more important that we are on God's side," underscores his deep understanding of the importance of aligning one's actions with a higher purpose. This anecdote highlights Lincoln's commitment to spiritual principles, which guided his decisions and actions as President. The quote from Sri Aurobindo, "All depend on the spirit in which a thing is done, the principle on which it is built, and the use to which it is turned," resonates with Lincoln's approach to leadership. Lincoln believed that true leadership required a strong moral compass and a commitment to serving a higher purpose.

Throughout his presidency, Lincoln's spiritual leadership inspired the nation. His Second Inaugural Address, delivered in March 1865, remains a powerful testament to his faith and commitment to healing and reconciliation. In it, he acknowledged the complexity of human conflict and the limitations of human understanding, humbly recognizing that God's purposes may differ from human intentions.

Lincoln's legacy as a spiritual leader continues to inspire Americans to

this day, reminding us that true leadership requires a deep commitment to moral principles, compassion, and service to others.

PDF Compressor Free Version **A Way to Understand Spirituality:**

A guru decided to test the spiritual understanding of his disciples. He gave each of them a dove and instructed them to kill the bird in a place where no one could see them. The task seemed simple, but its true purpose was to reveal the depth of their spiritual awareness.

Only one disciple returned to the guru, unable to complete the task. He explained that he had searched everywhere for a secluded spot, but couldn't find one. The reason wasn't that he couldn't find a physical location hidden from human eyes, but that he felt the dove's gaze upon him, and in that moment, he sensed God's presence witnessing his actions.

The disciple's words conveyed a profound realization: God is ever-present, everywhere, and always watching. This awareness transcended physical solitude and spoke to the heart of spiritual truth.

Spirituality is the emptying of self, knowing no boundaries. It makes persons active and alive, transcendent and joyful. The only source of joy and happiness is the "Spirit" (God), the Aatman. This aligns with the nature of Sat – Chit – Aanand, representing Existence – Knowledge – Bliss.

In Hindu philosophy, particularly Advaita Vedanta, Saccidananda encapsulates the ultimate reality. Bramabandha Upadhyaya applied this concept to understand the Christian mystery of God as Trinity.

"I bow to Him who is Being, Consciousness, and Bliss. I bow to Him whom worldly minds loathe, whom pure minds yearn for, the Supreme Abode. He is the Supreme, the Ancient of days, the Transcendent, Indivisible Plenitude, and Immanent yet above all things."

Self-Discovery in Spiritual Quest:

This reminds me of a beautiful and profound story. The Salt Doll's journey is a poignant metaphor for the spiritual quest. His desire to understand his identity leads him to the ocean, symbolizing the infinite and the divine.

The ocean's response, "Come in and see for yourself," invites the Salt Doll to immerse himself in the unknown, letting go of his boundaries.

As the Salt Doll dissolves, he realizes his true nature, but simultaneously acknowledges the fact of losing his individual identity and becoming one with the Ocean (Father Anthony De Mello). This story resonates with the Saccidananda concept we discussed earlier.

The Tamil poetic work, Purananuru, eloquently expresses unity and interconnectedness:

“To us, all villages and towns are one and all persons are kin.”

This ancient wisdom resonates with modern spiritual leaders like Swami Agnivesh, who emphasized: “The hallmark of spirituality is responsiveness to the given context”.

Swami Agnivesh’s words highlight the intrinsic link between spirituality and social responsibility:

“The spiritually enlightened person cannot remain indifferent to the problems and sufferings of others. Justice becomes the most authentic expression of spirituality in the social context.”

Spirituality and Religion:

Spirituality and religion are not mutually exclusive. Instead, spirituality is regarded as the active and vital energy that transforms life. It is not identical with religion, but rather the essence that breathes life into it. As William Irwin Thompson aptly puts it, “Religion is the form, spirituality takes in civilization.”

Spirituality is a dynamic and transformative process, often described as a two-stroke process. The upward stroke signifies inner growth, where an individual changes themselves and their relationship with the external universe. Conversely, the downward stroke manifests improvement in physical reality around oneself as a direct result of inward change.

This universal force unites humanity, transcending religious boundaries. Spirituality is inherent in every individual, regardless of their religious affiliations. It prevents disintegration, fosters harmony with the universe, and binds us together as one human family.

As the Dalai Lama XIV said, “Spirituality is not religion. Spirituality is the search for the sacred, the search for meaning.” I am reminded of Rabindranath Tagore’s words: “The universe is not a collection of distinct objects but a continuum, where every point is interconnected with every other point.”

Teilhard de Chardin's "Hymn of the Universe" is a poetic exploration of spirituality, cosmology and human existence. He emphasises the interconnectedness and oneness of all things, and sees human evolution as a spiritual process. He described the world as a sacred, divine environment.

Spiritual Leadership:

Osho Rajneesh, a renowned Indian guru, offered insightful perspectives on spiritual leaders. "Out of one hundred masters, there is only one Master, ninety-nine are only teachers," he remarked. According to Osho, a Master is distinct from a teacher. A Master is not necessarily learned, but lives out of their own being, embodying spontaneity, outspokenness, and constructive criticism, unbound by tradition.

In contrast, teachers rely on intellectual knowledge, which may not necessarily translate to inner transformation. Osho's distinction highlights the difference between mere intellectual understanding and authentic spiritual guidance.

Osho's teachings emphasize the importance of living authentically, embracing life's complexities, and cultivating inner awareness. His thoughts continue to inspire spiritual seekers worldwide, encouraging them to embark on a journey of self-discovery and transformation.

Call to Action:

"The earth is one, but the world is divided." This stark reality necessitates unity and collective action among spiritual leaders. They must converge and take a resolute stance against corruption, injustice, and communal violence.

They should also champion justice, harmony, and peace. In times of crisis, they must guide humanity toward a brighter future. Their role entails promoting a profound and inclusive spirituality that resonates at both political and corporate levels.

This visionary approach empowers politicians and business leaders by instilling a shared sense of purpose. Such purpose is the cornerstone of good governance, national unity, and holistic development.

By embracing this collective responsibility, spiritual leaders can bridge divides, foster global unity, and illuminate a path toward a harmonious and prosperous world. Their unified voice can inspire transformative

change, ensuring a brighter future for generations to come.

This lecture is our collective exploration of spirituality's transformative power. **PDF Compilations Free Version** going path to holistic well-being, compassionate leadership and unity.

Now, Sisters and Brothers, allow me to end this sharing of my reflections with the profound prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola for total surrender to God:

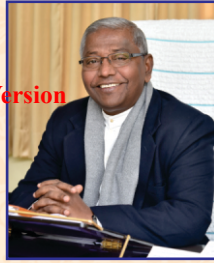
PRAYER OF ST.IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA

Take, O Lord, and receive my entire liberty,
my memory, my understanding and my whole will.
All that I am and all that I possess you have given me.
I surrender it all to you to be disposed of according to your will.
Give me only your love and your grace;
With these I will be rich enough,
And will desire nothing more.

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Father John Felix Raj, SJ

Rev. Dr. John Felix Raj, S.J. (born 1954) is a distinguished Jesuit priest of the Calcutta Province, renowned for his multifaceted contributions to education, administration, and philanthropy. As the founder Vice-Chancellor of St. Xavier's University, Kolkata, and former Rector and Principal of St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, he has left an indelible mark on the academic landscape.

Fr. Felix Raj's academic expertise spans Development Economics, Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization, with a strong focus on Spirituality, Leadership Skills, and Training. His commitment to education extends beyond the classroom, with initiatives like "College to Village and Village to College" and "One Rupee Revolution," which have pioneered innovative approaches to learning.

A dedicated philanthropist, Fr. Raj has been associated with numerous NGOs and has engaged in various charitable activities. His leadership has been instrumental in the expansion of St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, including the establishment of the Raghobpur rural campus and the construction of twin hostels in 2014 respectively.

During his tenure as Principal of St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, he introduced new undergraduate, postgraduate, and Ph.D. courses, cementing the college's reputation for academic excellence. His vision and leadership were crucial in shaping the values and framework of St. Xavier's University, Kolkata, which has become a model for alumni participation.

Fr. Raj's achievements have been recognized with seventeen prestigious awards, including the Banga Bibhushan and Siksha Ratna awards from the Government of West Bengal. He has authored and co-authored twelve books and presented papers at numerous national and international conferences.

In a tribute to Fr. Raj's exceptional qualities in August 2012, former Governor of West Bengal, M.K. Narayanan praised his unique blend of administration, piety, and intellectual rigor, hailing him as a "true icon in education."

In January 2024, on the occasion of his golden jubilee as a Jesuit, Mamata Banerjee, the Hon'ble Chief Minister of West Bengal congratulated him, saying: "This milestone is a testament to your dedication and unwavering commitment throughout your illustrious career. Your long and inspiring leadership at St. Xavier's has been marked by zeal and passion, earning the institutions a pride of place in the whole of India."