

*Welcome address by Fr. Dr. K.M George at the inaugural session of the International Conference from 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> October, 2025, at Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam. This conference was organised under the Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios Chair, in collaboration with the School of Gandhian Studies and the School of Environmental Sciences.*

Honourable Vice Chancellor, distinguished speakers, students, professors, sisters and brothers. May I welcome you all most heartily to this International Conference.

We are gathered here to celebrate the 156<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, the 42<sup>nd</sup> year of the founding of this university in the name of the Mahatma and the 100<sup>th</sup> year of Gandhi Ji's visit to the state of Kerala. Again, inspired by the vision of the Mahatma, we are assembled here to reflect on the theme of Sustainable Future for the life of humanity and of all creatures on our planet.

Let me briefly say a few words about why we are here as an academic community, a community motivated by scientific rational quest and inspired by wisdom traditions to seek knowledge and truth.

1. First of all, let us be reminded that both ancient wisdom traditions and contemporary science recognise the deep interconnections of our physical and trans physical reality. In fact, we are all one body, even physically. And we seek a sustainable future, that is, a life sustained in all its interconnected and holistic well-being. The metaphorical expressions we use in our digital culture, such as web and net, virus and link, cell and network ecosystem, are all borrowed from biological phenomena. These metaphors and analogies are not just figures of speech but are visceral, emerging from the deeply hidden sources of the mystery of life.

This insight of the wisdom traditions is illustrated in the digital culture today. We know that a defining feature of the digital culture is the complex web of layered interconnections that constantly interact. The mobile phone in your hand or pocket records and transmits to the global network not only your words and images but your very breath and very heartbeat. There is no privacy or private individual any more. A very new theory called Quantum Memory Matrix (QMM) postulates that the universe remembers everything. No information whatsoever is lost.

2. In cosmology and astrophysics, a major question is: what is it that holds together our ever-expanding inflationary universe as one coherent whole? It seems that the four fundamental forces- gravity, electromagnetism and weak and strong nuclear forces- are not adequate to explain the universe that expands with ever-accelerating speed. We may raise the same question in our social, philosophical, ethical and spiritual reflection: what is it that holds humanity as one body in spite of the innumerable inner conflicts in the name of race, territory, religion, language and culture. We may have many answers. One ancient wisdom tradition I am familiar with says that it is Love - Love of the Creator that unfolds the universe in all directions while holding it together as one body.
3. It is obvious that all human creative activities, from arts to technologies, to all disciplines of knowledge, are by and for the same human actor. The new emphasis on interdisciplinarity in the academia and the interfaith perspective in religious discourse is derived from this reality of the human subject as the sole actor, creator and designer. However, this unique human subjectivity is already being shared with artificial Intelligence, and it might soon be totally assumed by AI. The consequences will be alarming, as several historians point out. Can the human subject still control and guide this radically shifting scenario?

4. Poet Rabindranath Tagore adopted the ancient Indian Vedic insight, *yatra viswam bhavati eka needam* – the whole world becomes a single bird-nest. We know that birds build nests only to lay eggs and bring up their young ones, not to settle down comfortably like human beings. If the universe becomes one nest, it is to protect life, to nurture it, and thus to ensure a future.

Now, let me mention a few paradoxes that we need to address in this conference and beyond.

- Trust Versus Zero Trust: Mutual trust is the true matrix of a just and peaceful social order. In traditional diplomatic language, trust-building is a first step towards the resolution of conflicts between nations. However, in our times, powers obsessed with security, especially cybersecurity concerns, actually promote what is called Zero Trust. Everything and everybody is kept under suspicion, and the threat of the imagined enemy leads to increasing weaponisation and staggering spending on tightening security. Conflicts are deliberately precipitated to the profit of arms dealers and war mongers at the expense of even the primary needs of the common people.
- A similar paradox is rampant in all our economic systems. While the government agencies urge for higher and higher consumption and production, leading to higher emissions of greenhouse gases, the same heads of government meet every year in climate summits and ritually pledge Net-Zero carbon emission.
- Another paradox is presented by the major religions of the world. While they proclaim and promise the inclusion of all humanity under their umbrella of care and munificence, they increasingly reduce their domain of interest to racial, communal, and territorial limits.

This leads to the tightening of the language of ‘we and they’ or ‘we versus they’, leading to mutual suspicion, hostility, and terrible violence.

There are many more such paradoxes that stare at our idea of a Sustainable Future. So what do we do? As one of the organisers of the conference, I may suggest a few points for our consideration in view of a sustainable future.

1. We need to move from hostility to hospitality at all levels, from personal to international relations and interactions. All ancient cultures consider hospitality as a prime virtue because it is the antidote to hostility, exclusion, conflict, violence, and death. but both the host and the guest, whether it is in international relations or domestic situations, have to respect each other’s dignity without ulterior motives of exploitation or instrumentalisation of the other.
2. We need to interpret anew the political concept of sovereignty in terms of hospitality, sharing and caring rather than claims of uniqueness, power and dominance based on the possession of wealth and weapons. As we are surrounded by the demonic darkness of ongoing wars, genocide and terrible violence against children and pregnant women, the world looks on in passive silence. What then is our future? Let us wish, pray, and act on the wise insight *vasudhaiva kutubakam* – all earth is one family.
3. We need to reinstate the authentically universal symbols of all religions, which are now being politically manipulated as symbols of exclusion and eventual violence, instead of illuminating human minds and hearts. To many, these religious symbols seem to spread darkness rather than the light of life. Therefore, let us wish, act and pray *asato ma sadgamaya*– lead me from untruth to truth.
4. We need to rediscover the genuine elements that constitute the evolved human nature, particularly in face of the threat of computer malware,

deepfake, and the underworld of the dark web- all creations of human intelligence. Therefore, we need to wish, pray and act *tamaso mā jyotir gamaya* - Lead me from darkness to light.

5. New enhancement technologies in synthetic biology aim at redesigning all human genetic structures, increasing the span of life and invigorating all human faculties to superhuman levels. It ignores the mystery of death but still deeply yearning for some sort of immortality. Therefore, let us wish, pray and act *mrityorma amritam gamaya* -Lead me from death to immortality.