

# **Celebration of Prophecy in Consecrated life: Blessings & Challenges**



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Blessings & Challenges**

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# **Birthng A New Vision**

## **The Empowerment of Women Religious in India**

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Streevani, Pune  
2014

## **From the Director's Desk . . .**

Welcome to this edition of the “Birthing a New Vision”. It was put together at a time when the national and international news is dominated by the increase in violence against women and children; the murder of innocent children in Pakistan, the most horrifying terrorist attack killing 2000 innocent people in the villages of Baga and its surroundings in Nigeria; and the ongoing battles in Syria, Iraq and other parts of the world; and the religious and caste violence in different parts of our own country. Such violence and killing and the pain and loss they cause to others, affront human dignity and the value of human life. Similar situations demand our radical response, a commitment to justice and prevention of violence. Our interventions, as consecrated persons, are more important than ever in today's world and are essential to ensure the dawning of the reign of God.

During this year of Consecrated Life, we are called to celebrate our life as consecrated persons. Pope Francis, in his message on the occasion of the commencement of the Year on 30th November 2014, underlined the aims of the celebration of the Year of Consecrated Life as: to look to the past with gratitude, to live the present with passion and to embrace the future with hope.

As consecrated persons, Jesus unites us all by being the one real icon, a living sign, to lead our life to the fullness in the Gospel way. He takes us to the lanes and the by lanes, to public light and to a living display of the vitality of the Spirit in the world. Today we find ourselves standing at the crossroads, not knowing which route to tag on. We find ourselves

a little lost at times, with various problems such as the dwindling vocations, disciplinary problems of our members, various abuse cases, often both the victims and abusers are insiders and the lack of commitment by the authorities to address the issue in a just manner leads to loss of personal and institutional credibility and the struggle for financial self reliance. We need to be concerned about the internal and external challenges, which are exigent in our mission, even our own existence at times.

The status of women in the Church today, especially of consecrated women, is often a topic for study, discussion, banal speeches and public discourse, forgetting that we are human beings with rights, responsibilities, have powerful intellects, leadership capabilities, physical competence, financial skills and a capacity for reaching out to others and that we are made in the image and likeness of God. We speak about the complementary nature of genders. This highlights the differences between the genders, rather than the fact that both share similar human qualities. On the contrary we need to emphasize the mutuality of genders. We ask for a greater participation in the Church's mission. It is imperative that we be given greater involvement in the process of discernment and decision making especially in what concerns our life as women and more specifically as consecrated women.

*“The fact is that Religious Life is on the rocks and recovery, even under Francis, is most unlikely. No matter what happens in the near future the election of Pope Francis has qualitatively changed our situation in the institutional Church. This Pope is a Religious, respects Religious, and understands Religious Life. This changed atmosphere has allowed us to take a deep breath and perhaps will enable us to relativize the threat from the ecclesiastical power structure that has been consuming so much of our time, energy, and emotional resources in the last few decades.”*<sup>1</sup>

Today how do we respond to our call as consecrated persons and celebrate our life? “Religious Life is a free response to a personal and compelling vocation to a particular kind of relationship with Jesus Christ and a particular kind of participation in his mission (namely, full-time prophetic ministry)”, says Sandra Schneider. The people whom we

serve are our primary concern and not our institutions. Our institutions give us more power and status and many of us identify ourselves with our position in such institutions, even to the extent of outgrowing the congregation and its mission. We need to think out of the box to be creative in our prophetic mission. Not our clothes and dwelling places speak of what we are, but our work and mission speak of what we are and who we are. Our life as consecrated persons is deeply rooted in our spirituality, prayer and community life.

The formation of our members should be given greater importance, an intermingling of professional studies as well as religious studies. The Second Vatican Council document, *Dei Verbum* emphasized scripture as the font of life for all believers, This is yet to be a reality. Our interactions, Congregational policies and chapters, Church documents and studies keep us grounded and rooted in who we are and what we are about. Our community life will not be three Religious persons living together as mandated by some congregations to form a community, or many who live together because they are all assigned to the same school or hospital. We need to discover new ways of being a community and to participate in the mission of the Church and congregation as prophetic persons deeply committed and inspired by our Founders.

We need to be people of courage, engaging ourselves with the signs of the time while remaining faithful to the integrity of our calling. We need to express our solidarity to one another as we pursue our mission to those on the margins despite all the difficulties and challenges, thus celebrating our life. “You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things, said St. John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata* (110).

The articles in this volume are very pertinent to our theme “Celebration of Prophecy in consecrated life: blessings and challenges and reflects deeply from various aspects of consecrated life. Among them I would like to draw your attention to the ‘Norms for dealing with cases involving sexual abuse by Church personnel’ which was presented to the CBCI



for consideration in 2013, and has not received a positive response till date. This volume is thus a good resource to positively guide the discussions and debates on the impact of consecrated life as lived today and to create mutual respect, solidarity and a partnership of equals in the Church.

I end my reflections with the following quote. “I am counting on you ‘to wake up the world’, since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy. This is the priority that is needed right now”, says Pope Francis. Let us scale to the new heights captured by the Jesus movement, inspired by our founders, disturbed by the world realities and passionately committed to the mission.

**Julie George SSpS**

## **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> Sandra Schneider, *The ongoing challenge of renewal in contemporary religious life*, A paper delivered at CORI (The Conference of Religious of Ireland), Malahide, Co Dublin, 25th April 2014

# **Consecrated Life: Embracing Discipleship of Equals**

*- Shalini Mulackal PBVM*

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## **Introduction**

The year 2015 is declared as the year of Consecrated Life. Though consecrated life is no more an attractive option for the modern generation, especially in the West and in some parts of the developing countries, it continues to attract young persons in lesser developed regions of the world even today. The situation of our own country is not different. The geographic location for vocations to Consecrated life seems to be shifting. It has already shifted from Southern and Western India to East, Central and North East India. More and more girls and boys from the tribal belt are now attracted to this form of life in our country. This shift has kept new members entering consecrated life, hence it is still relevant for us to reflect on Consecrated life in its varied forms.

Even in post-modern times, the Indian context is characterized by divisions based on caste, creed, sex, religion, language, etc. In spite of the development that is taking place in our country, gendered hierarchy is still very strong. Males are valued more as they continue to enjoy special privileges in our homes, Churches and in the public scenario. The census of 2011 bears witness to the consequence of the male child preference existing in our country. Though there is marginal improvement

in the sex ratio from 933 to 940 per 1000 males in the general category, the Child Sex Ratio (CSR) in the 0-6 age group fell from 927 in 2001 to 914 in 2011. The equality of male and female in our country is still a very distant dream. It is in this context of inequality sustained and perpetuated by a patriarchal culture and ethos that I want to reflect on Consecrated life in Christianity as a way of life that bears witness to the radical equality of persons of both the sexes which Jesus proclaimed and practiced in his time.

## **1. Consecrated Life in Christianity**

Consecrated life is almost as old as the Church itself. This form of life has been present in Christianity from the very beginning right up to the present day. It is a stable form of Christian living by those faithful who feel called to follow Jesus Christ in a more radical way. It “is characterized by the public profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, in a stable state of life recognized by the Church.”<sup>1</sup> The Code of Canon Law defines it as “a stable form of living by which the faithful, following Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, are totally dedicated to God who is loved most of all, so that, having been dedicated by a new and special title to his honor, to the building up of the Church, and to the salvation of the world, they strive for the perfection of charity in the service of the kingdom of God and, having been made an outstanding sign in the Church, foretell the heavenly glory.”<sup>2</sup>

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says: “From the very beginning of the Church there were men and women who set out to follow Christ with greater liberty, and to imitate him more closely, by practicing the evangelical counsels. They led lives dedicated to God, each in his own way. Many of them, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, became hermits or founded religious families. These the Church, by virtue of her authority, gladly accepted and approved.”<sup>3</sup> It has assumed diverse forms in different centuries, starting from the eremitic life of the desert, the great Monastic Orders of both monks and nuns, Mendicant Institutes of the Middle Ages to the Apostolic Institutes of the later times. Today, besides the Religious and Secular Institutes, other forms of Consecrated

life exists in the Church. They include Societies of Apostolic Life, The order of Virgins, and Consecrated widows/widowers. Since the source and center of Consecrated life in Christianity is Jesus, it is distinct from monastic life found in other religious traditions such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Jainism. Basic to all forms of Christian Consecrated life is the desire to follow Christ of the Gospels and to be authentic to a Gospel way of life.

The history of the Church right from the early period witnessed powerful spiritual and prophetic movements led by several holy men and women. Hermits were the first on the scene. They left their homes, near and dear ones and entered the desert to lead a life totally consecrated to God. The difficult desert situation with meager vegetation, thorny bushes, scarce water sources and modest temperature provided an ideal environment for the ascetics who wanted to have solitude and penitential life in their search for a God-experience.<sup>4</sup> St. Antony of Egypt (251-356) is the first well-known hermit and gradually the eremitical movement began to spread in Egypt and Syria.

As time went by, it was found that all could not thrive in such a rigorous life without the support of a community and fixed time table. This gave way to the ‘cenobites’<sup>5</sup> who lived in close proximity while still maintaining a life of isolation. St. Pachomius (290- 346) led this type of consecrated life by writing down a Rule, according to which the hermits came together for meals, but kept strict silence and meditation. St. Basil (330- 379), the Father of Eastern Monasticism, further developed this form of life by writing a comprehensive Rule, under which the monks lived, prayed and worked together. They lived a common life based on moderation and fellowship. In the West it was St. Benedict of Nursia (480-543), who is well known especially on account of the Rule he wrote for the monks of Monte Cassino, the great monastery he founded in Italy.<sup>6</sup>

## **2. Women and Consecrated Life in the Church**

From the very beginning women too embraced Consecrated life. Since the following of Christ constitutes one of the basic characteristics of any form consecrated life, we find its origins in the Gospels. Among

those who accepted Jesus and his message, the Gospels portray two groups of people. A larger number of those who accepted the message, remained in the same situation of home and work in which the Gospel found them. There is also a group of followers in a stricter sense: Those who accompanied Jesus in his missionary travels from Galilee to Jerusalem. Besides the twelve, this group also included certain women (Mary Magdalene; Johanna, the wife of Chusa; Susanna; and others) who provided for them from their own resources (Lk 8: 1-3, Mk 15: 40-41).

Within the early Christian communities, an “order” of widows developed a female apostolate to the sick and needy and an educational mission particularly for women. These women were supported by the communities in return for their prayer and for sharing the revelations that sprang from their intense meditations. “They “widows” were the fountain head from which many springs flowed: communities of virgins, recluses, cloistered nuns, and care givers...”<sup>7</sup>

The grouping of widows which began in the New Testament times (1 Timothy 5: 9-16) continued in the later generations of Christianity. Polycarp refers to them as “the altar of God.” St. Ignatius of Antioch uses the term ‘widows’ in a technical sense in which it is extended to include not only genuine widows but also women who had never been married and who had committed themselves to a life of chastity.<sup>8</sup>

In the middle of the second century, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, testified that groups of women from every walk of life were leaving their homes, parents, and husbands- too literally interpreting the Gospel commands.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes they joined prophets. Syneisactism, made particularly noticeable by the propensity of male and female prophets to travel together and to regard one another as equals in the prophetic life, became tentative indicators of heresy. The clergy made a concerted attack on the prophets when they tried to alter certain established doctrines. Nevertheless, women and their chaste male partners were making a place for themselves in Christian churches everywhere.<sup>10</sup>

By the end of the second century, widows and virgins were clearly distinguished in the early Church. The former engaged in active life and

the latter living a secluded life devoted chiefly to prayer and asceticism. Towards the end of the third century, the order of widows gradually got replaced by deaconesses.

During the third and fourth centuries, there were many Christians who left the cities and withdrew into the desert. With the establishment of the Church during the time of Constantine, 'Christian life was less and less understood as a Gospel call to discipleship.'<sup>11</sup> Fleeing to the desert was also a reaction to the growing clericalism and sacerdotalism of the church as well as desire to be away from corrupt cities. The desert dwellers shared an inherently anti-clerical ideal, subtly expressed in their ability to remain in the wilderness without the sacraments for decades at a time.<sup>12</sup>

Women played an important role in the development of asceticism in the West. For them the monastic life provided an alternative to marriage and offered them new independence from roles dictated by their culture.<sup>13</sup> Melania the Elder, a wealthy Roman woman, moved to Jerusalem around 378 where she governed a community of some fifty women on the Mount of Olives. A number of women strongly influenced by Jerome, who became their director, practiced celibacy and gave themselves to the study of Scripture.<sup>14</sup> St. Brigid established a "double" monastery of men and women at Kildare in the fifth century Ireland.<sup>15</sup>

### **3. Consecrated Life and Discipleship**

Consecrated life in the Church is always understood as a closer following of Jesus. The ancient Christian tradition of the *imitatio Christi*, "the following of Christ," the seeking and going after Jesus, remains today the supreme reason for which Christians freely choose Consecrated life. Vatican II repeatedly stresses the 'following of Christ' as the fundamental characteristics of religious life. The following of Jesus is the special "profession" of religious life (*Perfectae Caritatis* 5) or their particular vocation (PC 8) whereas all Christians are called to follow Jesus through their professional life. "Religious life is thus a living out publically, professionally, institutionally (and therefore in community) of the following of Christ as proposed by the Gospel, and so of the Gospel values that are implicit in all Christian life."<sup>16</sup>

All three synoptic Gospels describe both specific women and a general group of women as followers of Jesus (Mk. 15: 40-41; Lk.8: 1-3; Mt. 27:55-56). It is significant that both Mark and Matthew use the Greek word *akolouthēin* for women followers as well. In the New Testament the use of this word signifies the following of the historical Jesus. As far as the Gospels are concerned, there is no distinction made between the disciples of Jesus based on gender. Besides following Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, women were the first to receive the news about Jesus' resurrection. All four Gospels bear witness to this fact (Mk. 16: 1-8; Lk.24: 1-10; Mt. 28: 1-8; Jn. 20: 11-18). They were entrusted with the great task of proclaiming the good news of the resurrection.

Discipleship in the Gospels seems to be reflecting two key aspects. First, Jesus' call to discipleship is a call to discipleship of equals. Second, it is a call to lead a life according to his teachings and thus to further the reign of God. It means "recognizing him in those who are poor and those who are suffering."<sup>17</sup> Discipleship engages one in cooperating with the power of God in transforming the present. It carries a practical and critical edge. It involves both, the mystical and the political, worshipping, praise of God and action on behalf of justice; personal conversion and critical engagement in oppressive situations; spirituality and the work of re-creation. All these are profoundly integrated when we understand Consecrated life as the life of discipleship.<sup>18</sup>

Consecrated women from the earliest periods of religious history in Europe provided shelter, education, social development and catechetical direction for women, whom no one considered worth serving. Many religious orders of women were founded in a flurry of social needs. They came together in order to respond to situations of need. They followed the call of Jesus so that the blind could see, the lame could walk and the poor could have the 'good news,' proclaimed to them in loving service.<sup>19</sup>

## **4. Discipleship of Equals**

The disciples of Jesus, according to the Gospels, are those who hear and respond to his call to follow him (Mk 8: 34). The technical expression

denoting discipleship in the Gospels is the ‘following’ of Jesus. Even though the majority of named disciples are men, all four evangelists allude to women who followed Jesus during his ministry.<sup>20</sup> The two verbs used in the vocabulary of discipleship and ministry in the NT are: they “followed” (*akolouthēin*) Jesus and “served” (*diakonein*) him. The Gospels have five passages referring to the women who followed Jesus: Mark 15: 40-41; Matthew 27: 55-56; Luke 8: 1-3; Luke 23: 49; and Luke 23: 55. In John’s Gospel, there is no explicit reference to the women who followed Jesus but he mentions their presence near the cross (Jn 19: 25).

Overcoming male hierarchy today requires reclaiming the unique Christian heritage of a discipleship of equals. The concept of a discipleship of equals is best understood in the Jesus’ movement, which invited followers from among the poor, the despised, the outcast women and the non-persons of the community. The Jesus community can be understood as anti-patriarchy, set to replace the patriarchal household relationships in the community of equals. In Mark 3: 31-35, Jesus defined his true family: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister and mother.” Jesus not only points out the inclusion of women among the followers, but also constituted a new pattern of household or discipleship community that abolished the claims of patriarchal family. Jesus’ new familial community is the portrayal of the priesthood of all believers. It is the radical ethos of inclusiveness and equality of all.<sup>21</sup>

Not only his invitation to discipleship was open to all, but also his teachings in the form of parables were indicative of this radical equality. The parable of “the laborers in the vineyard” (Matt 20: 1-16) for instance, articulates the equality of all rooted in the goodness of God. In this parable, those first hired grumbled because the householder “has made the last equal to themselves.” Jesus’ parable thus startles his hearers into the recognition that God’s Reign establishes equality among all of us, righteous and sinner, rich and poor, men and women, Pharisees and Jesus’ disciples.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus spelt out the reality of God in his preaching, healing exorcisms, and inclusive table community and called forth a circle of disciples to



continue what he did. The God of Jesus wills the wholeness of everyone and therefore enables the Jesus movement to become a “discipleship of equals.” They are called to one and the same praxis of inclusiveness and equality lived by Jesus. Like Jesus, they are sent to make the *basileia* experientially available in their healings and exorcisms, by restoring the humanity and wholeness of God’s children.<sup>23</sup>

Many women were important persons in Jesus’ ministry. Mary Magdalene became the primary apostolic witness to the resurrection. Mary of Nazareth, the nameless Samaritan woman, Martha and Mary of Bethany, the nameless adulterous woman, are regarded as women disciples who are the paradigms of women’s apostolic discipleship and leadership.<sup>24</sup> In a similar way women were the first non-Jews to become members of the Jesus movement. Although the Syrophoenician respects the primacy of the “children of Israel,” she nevertheless makes a theological argument against limiting the inclusive messianic table community of Jesus to Israel alone. That such a theological argument is placed in the mouth of a woman is a sign of the historical leadership, women had in opening up Jesus’ movement and community to “gentile ‘sinners’” (Gal 2: 15b).<sup>25</sup>

The Galilean women were not only decisive for the extension of the Jesus’ movement to gentiles but also for the very continuation of this movement after Jesus’ arrest and execution. These women disciples did not flee after his arrest but stayed in Jerusalem for his execution and burial. They were also the first to articulate their experience of the powerful goodness of God who did not leave the crucified Jesus in the grave but raised him from the dead.

The early Christian practice of a discipleship of equals also pointed to the reconstruction of Christian churches. Since women were among the wealthy and prominent converts (Cf. Acts 17: 4, 12), they played an important role in the founding, sustaining and promotion of house churches. Many texts describe women’s leadership in house churches: Paul greets Apphia as “our sister” who, together with Philemon and Archippus, was a leader of the house church in Colossae to whom the letter to Philemon was written (Philemon 2). In mentioning the missionary

couple, Prisca and Aquila, Paul made it clear twice: “the Church in their house” (1Cor 16: 19; Rom 16: 5). In the letter to the Colossians, Nympha of Laodicea and the “Church in her house” (Col 4:15) are clearly mentioned. According to Acts, the Church of Philippi started with the conversion of the business woman Lydia from Thyatira who offered her house for the Christian mission (Acts 16:15).<sup>26</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

It is very clear from the above discussions that Consecrated life is a call to follow Jesus in a radical way. Following Jesus constitutes the heart of Consecrated life. The Gospels bear witness to the fact that Jesus preached and practiced the concept of equality of all. The vision of the *reign of God* which he proclaimed emphasized the radical equality of all human beings. Therefore his invitation to follow him was an invitation to form a community of disciples who will bear witness to the vision of the Reign of God through their very lives. Women were part of his “discipleship of equals.”

Consecrated life existed from the very beginning of the Church. Women were part of this movement all through the centuries. Women were full partners in urban apostolates and desert asceticism. Even in sexually segregated communities, monks and nuns, brothers and sisters, subjected themselves to the same disciplines and shared their labor and its fruits. Chaste celibacy endowed virgin martyrs and desert mothers with the power and authority that nature normally reserved for men. Virginity wiped out gender differences by giving women independence and authority like men to pursue a lofty spiritual calling.

Today, the presence of women religious and other consecrated women in the Church gives concrete expression to Jesus’ call to a discipleship of equals. They are in the forefront of the Church making the *basileia* vision of Jesus experientially available to people especially those on the margins. They have personally answered Jesus’ call to radical discipleship by renouncing marriage and family life and have left their homes and dear ones in order to pursue their dream of being authentic disciples of Jesus. It is through their lives that they continue to bear witness to Jesus’ call to “Discipleship of equals.”

## (Endnotes)

- <sup>1</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), no. 944
- <sup>2</sup> Code of Canon Law, canon 573 # 1
- <sup>3</sup> CCC, no. 918
- <sup>4</sup> See Mathew Paikada, “Monastic Traditions and Apostolic Communities in Conflict?” in *Jeevadhara*, Vol XLI, No. 244, (July 2011): 271-285 at 272.
- <sup>5</sup> The literal meaning of this term is, ‘life in common’
- <sup>6</sup> See Paikada, “Monastic Traditions and Apostolic Communities in Conflict?,” 273.
- <sup>7</sup> See Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia*, (London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 2.
- <sup>8</sup> See Thomas C. O’Brien, (ed.), *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Vole XII, (New York: The Catholic University of America, 1967), 289.
- <sup>9</sup> See Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms* 26-27.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* , 27.
- <sup>11</sup> See Thomas P. Rausch, *Radical Christian Communities* (Collegeville, Minnesota: the Liturgical Press, 1990), 39.
- <sup>12</sup> See McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, 86.
- <sup>13</sup> See Rausch, *Radical Christian Communities*, 366.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.
- <sup>16</sup> See George Soares -Prabhu, “Prophetic Dimension of the Religious Life,” *CRI Bull etin* (December 1986): 8.
- <sup>17</sup> Alejandro Cussianovich, *Religious Life and the Poor: Liberation Theology Perspective* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd. , 1979), 52.
- <sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Johnson, “Discipleship” : 870.
- <sup>19</sup> Joan Chittister, OSB, “The Prophetic Dimension of Religious Life,” *Religious Life Review* , Vol. 35, No 177, (Mar-April 1996): 79-87 at p.82.

- <sup>20</sup> Pauline Chakkalakal, dsp, *Discipleship a Space for Women's Leadership? : A Feminist Theological Critique* (Mumbai: Pauline publications, 2004), 127.
- <sup>21</sup> Aye New, "Overcoming Hierarchy: Reclaiming Discipleship of Equals," *In God's Image*, Vol. 30/No. 2, (December 2011): 11-15 at 14.
- <sup>22</sup> See Elizabeth SchusslerFiorenza, "The Sophia-God of Jesus and the Discipleship of Women," in Joann Wolski Conn, (ed.), *Women's spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 261-273 at 262-63.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.
- <sup>24</sup> See Aye New, "Overcoming Hierarchy: Reclaiming Discipleship of Equals," 14.
- <sup>25</sup> See Elizabeth SchusslerFiorenza, "The Sophia-God of Jesus and the Discipleship of Women," 269.
- <sup>26</sup> See Aye New, "Overcoming Hierarchy: Reclaiming Discipleship of Equals," 14.

# Mission: The Key to understand Consecrated Life today

- Fr. Joseph Mattam, SJ

*Fr. Joseph Mattam, SJ is an emeritus professor of theology and teaches in various seminaries and institutions. He writes extensively on relevant issues in the Church and society.*

The profession of the Religious is being a religious, “being with Jesus to be sent out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons” (cf. Mk 3:12). Adherence to the person of Jesus, belonging to Jesus is the key to understand consecrated life; and this belonging obviously implies mission. Very often it happens that some of those called to be with Jesus forget that there is a primacy to *being with him*, over *being sent out*, though the two are inseparable.

Being with Jesus means relating to the Father as he does, seeing reality as Jesus sees, loving as Jesus loves and doing what he has been doing; and spending quality time with him in prayer. He sees everyone as his brother/sister; he loves all, even those he opposes, like the Pharisees; and his mission is to bring about the kingdom of God by overthrowing Satan. The religious will have to follow Jesus precisely in the way they look at people, the way they love and the mission of overthrowing the rule of Satan, namely, oppose the internal power structures like greed, lust, hatred, fear, attachment, poor self image, legalism and ritualism, and the external socio-political structures which enslave and dehumanize people. In Jesus’ time Satan was considered the evil power structure

that kept people enslaved; but today we cannot be satisfied with that world view and continue chasing Satan, but must oppose the real satanic attitudes like greed, lust, etc.

The mission of the Religious is carrying on the mission of Jesus. Jesus responded lovingly and creatively to whatever situation he faced, bringing about newness in the lives of the people: the blind were made to see, the lame made to walk, the sick were healed, the hungry were fed and the possessed were freed. The context conditioned the mission of Jesus, so too should our context condition our mission. In the life of Jesus we notice that his mission depended on the kind of person he was. Thanks to the Abba experience, he was a truly free person (free from the outlook of the world which is governed by competition, greed, lust, hatred, fear, ambition, legalism and ritualism), and hence he loved all and made an option for the poor as they were victims of injustice and oppression.

In the past with the natural supernatural divide and the dualistic mentality that ruled our thinking the mission was understood primarily as saving souls for an afterlife, as salvation was possible only in the Catholic religion which was supernatural, as opposed to all other religions which were considered natural, the work of Satan had to be destroyed. After Vatican II all this has changed and we began to have a positive regard for other religions, seeing them also as the work of the Spirit of God. We began to see that the enemy was not other religions, but evil in all its manifestations; other religions are our collaborators in opposing and destroying evil. Earlier, mission territory was seen as foreign missions, in a geographical sense, being sent from the centre to the periphery. Today we look at mission not in geographical terms, but in terms of areas of life which are not yet fully human, which are not sufficiently evangelized and structures which keep people enslaved.

When we look at the history of the Religious life, we notice that the founders of the religious congregations/orders responded to the needs of the time, be it illiteracy of women, orphans, poverty of the people, etc. Hence today we will have to look around and see where are people still in chains, still undernourished, illiterate, etc and respond to that situation. In the past most of the congregations had started elite

educational institutions in the hope that if they influence the elite children of a place and give them Christian values, they would eventually transform society and bring about changes in society. Now we realize that it does not work that way: the children are with us for a maximum of six hours in a day, five or six days of the week; the rest of the time they are in a different world and our work has no real effect on their thinking and behaviour. We need to look at our own context and see what the most pressing needs of the people are. I will mention just a few areas, without being exhaustive. Here I am not referring to the socio-economic context that we are familiar with and to which we normally pay attention. These are other areas which we often ignore.

1. In India Christians are no longer welcome; there had been a time when Christians, especially the religious who ran schools, hospitals and other social services were not only welcomed but were really appreciated and even supported. Now all that has changed: we are not needed any more, as there are many NGOs doing what we had been doing – often better than what we were doing; even government institutions have become better. Now, not only do they not need us, but many want to eliminate us, as we can see from the number of priests and sisters who have been murdered in the recent past as also the attacks and murder of Christians. The attacks are not only in Khandhmal or Gujarat, but in most of the states, even in Kerala, there are regular attacks on Christians and their institutions.

2. There is the ‘*gharvapsi*’ movement of reconversion of Christians to Hinduism in many parts of the country; the number of people being reconverted is increasing day by day.

3. Even after 2000 years of Christian presence in India, Christians are not even two and half percent of our huge population; that means nearly 98% of our population has not known and accepted Jesus. This needs to disturb every follower of Jesus. We know, as Pope Francis says, Jesus has the answer to most of the problems of the world; hence the urgent need to proclaim him to everyone.

4. When Christians were attacked how many of our ex-students and their parents came to our rescue? From our schools and colleges, how

many people have made a real difference to the country in terms of social and human problems? These ought to make us reflect on what we have been doing all these years.

5. The changed political situation. For many years we had, at least apparently, 'secular' governments at the centre; but now that has changed. The BJP, with its Hindutva ideology has come to stay at least for some time. They are already beginning to show their real Hindutva colour (the distribution of very warped text books in Gujarat, are an example); we can expect more and more opposition to our work and our existence.

This description of the context is not exhaustive; there are many more areas we need to keep in mind; but for this short article this should suffice. Within this context, how do we look at our mission and which are the areas we need to focus on? I point out just a few out of the many areas that require our attention. Due to the brevity of the article, I am not developing the kind of persons we ought to be; it is obvious we need to be like Jesus.

*1. The prophetic mission of the Religious.* This aspect is often ignored. By becoming religious we are accepting to be prophetic in the Church and in the world. This prophetic mission has to be lived at the level of the community, congregation, Church and the world. One of the most neglected areas has been the prophetic mission at the level of the Church, namely to challenge the present structures of the Church which are strictly 'man'-made (the word 'man' is intentional), and not coming from Jesus. Jesus did not leave behind a two-tier Church of clerics and laity; and did not ordain anyone as 'priests'. Jesus never spoke about priests (he used the term 'priest' only in the story of the Good Samaritan and when instructing the leprosy patients to show themselves to the Jewish priests). He did not ordain any priest, but he left behind him leaders who were 'lay' persons, not clerical, a class set apart. Jesus did not ordain any priests to offer sacrifices to God, which was the task of the priest in Jesus' time. He left behind followers who would be servants of the community, at the service of the community (the 12, Apostles, elders, overseers and deacons), with very clear instructions as to how they were to function in the community, who would be equal



to everyone, without titles like father or master. This was the extent to which Jesus envisaged an egalitarian community (Matt 20. 24-28; Lk 22. 24-27; Jn 13. 1-20; Matt 23. 8-12) which Paul compares to a body where no member can claim to be superior or more important (1 Cor 12). What has emerged today, namely a male clerical church, with only males having responsibility in the community is not what Jesus wanted.

Now, only the religious who are not part of this system can challenge this (“pull down” Jer 1.10ff) and bring it back to the kind of community Jesus envisaged. A lot of rethinking in this area is needed and the Religious, especially women religious and Religious Brothers, will have to take the lead in this prophetic mission. A male clerical Church hierarchy, patterned on the empire system with titles and way of life of the empire (Reverends, Lords, Eminences, Excellencies and Holiness) is contrary to the will of Jesus and this needs to be pulled down. We need to move towards a community where all the members have different functions, which do not make anyone superior or inferior and where all the services in the community are open to all the members, not just to the males. The first mission of the religious, then, is to focus on this prophetic aspect.

2. *Child labourers*: In spite of the laws of the government, we know thousands of children are working in various areas. Caring for these children is an urgent task that the religious need to look into. In some places some religious are looking after such children, giving them shelter, education, etc. Much more needs to be done in this field. Recently we read in the papers how the timely intervention of some religious sisters freed some 97 minor girls who were employed in a fish factory in Maharashtra. Such bold interventions are urgently needed today.

3. *Migrant workers and their children*: A large number of people in India are migrant workers due to the availability of job opportunities in the cities, and they keep moving to different places. Hence, their children do not get any education and remain uneducated. This is an area that needs urgent attention and some action is to be organized. Some attempts are already underway. For example, Father Jolly Nadukudiyil, SJ has started a school for the children of migrant workers, ‘Xavier centre for migrant workers’ at Kattamba, Vadodara; these children are given private tuition in this centre (from class 1 to 12) and they are

registered in some nearby schools, through which they appear for their exams in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> standards. Besides, the condition of these migrant workers is often pathetic without any proper accommodation, water, etc. Since this phenomenon is going to be a regular feature of our country for years to come, should we not plan something permanent for such people?

4. *Female foeticide/infanticide*: India tops in the practice of female foeticide/infanticide; so many thousands of female infants are killed before or soon after they are born. This area needs immediate attention and action by creating awareness, even among women, of the rights of the unborn infants and the evil of murder of the baby girls. This is an area that needs collaboration among various people, so that the guilty can be punished and the practice stopped. Sometime ago I read a report which claimed that more than 20 million female infants have been killed in the last 15 to 20 years, as we can also gather from the unequal sex ratio in many of the Indian states.

5. *Empowering of women and other weaker sections of society*. For some time now we have been speaking of the empowerment of women; but not much has been done as yet. Even the CBCI has a document on the empowerment of women, but nothing has been done to discard male clericalism in the Church. This has been one of the reasons for women not being empowered. By understanding service in the Church as a matter of power and prestige reserved only to the males, women's power to serve in the community has been taken away. This has to be radically corrected. Stopping child-marriage is an aspect of the empowerment of women.

## **Conclusion**

The areas I mentioned are not exhaustive, but just pointers to the direction we need to take to carry out our mission today. Hence, Religious life as being with Jesus and being sent by him on his mission is a great challenge; it demands that we become people rooted in Jesus, responsive to the concrete context in which we find ourselves, by empowering the powerless and being the voice of the voiceless, by carrying out our prophetic mission in the Church.

# **Re-claiming and Re-rooting the Conciliar Documents:**

*Perfectae Caritatis and Lumen Gentium*

- Jose Thayil, SJ

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It is promising to note that this issue of Birthing a New Vision is on “Celebration of Prophecy in Consecrated life: Blessings and Challenges”. *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life, is the document issued by the Second Vatican Council which deals specifically with institutes of consecrated life in the Roman Catholic Church. The Council does not propose giving religious communities a fundamentally new orientation, but rather to restore proper precedence to traditional norms. It clearly states that “the final norm of the religious life is the following of Christ as it is put before us in the Gospel and this must be taken by all institutes as the supreme rule” (PC 2a). Jesus was considered a prophet by his contemporaries (Mt 21:46; Lk 7:16). Jesus lived a prophetic life challenging the oppressive structures of his time and he had to pay the price through his life. All the rules of religious life are supposed to help us to follow the Gospel values more effectively. As we understand today, religious life is not a renunciation of the world but a deeper immersion into the world as disciples of Jesus with the Gospel radicalism. It is not a way to self-realization through isolation but it is a call to live in-communion with others and to build communities of freedom, friendship and justice.

Pope Francis announced 2015 as the Year of Consecrated Life, starting from November 30, 2014 and ending on the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, February 2, 2016. He has made this announcement on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, and of the decree on the renewal of religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis*. At this time of grace, Pope Francis reminds all the religious that we should not be simply nostalgic about the past glory, but prepare to build a glorious future. We may have made mistakes in the past, but with the help of God, we can learn from those errors and thus avoid them in future. This requires openness to the promptings of the spirit and the courage to follow his inspirations.

During this year of Consecrated Life, the Pope expects all the religious to look back at their origins with gratitude, to live the present with passion by making necessary changes after reading the signs of the times and to embrace the future with hope, especially when there are plenty of situations where hopelessness prevails. We should be able to read the signs of the times and allow the original spirit of the congregation to come alive today in our present context.

Prophetic witness involves discerning and responding to what the Vatican Council II called “the signs of the times” (Mt. 16:3). Hence, the prophet/prophetess is not simply announcing the Gospel in general or explaining doctrines in the abstract. A prophet/prophetess is the one who knows the mind of God and is also very much concerned about the plight of the people who are poor and marginalized. Our rootedness in God needs to be deep enough and our understanding of reality clear enough for us to be a voice of conscience. The vocation of religious life is prophetic and charismatic by nature, offering an alternate lifestyle to that of the dominant culture. Prophecy is both God’s gift as well as the product of rigorous asceticism. The prophetic voice challenges structures that excludes some and benefits others. The prophet is the inspired outsider, not part of the power structure.

Pope Francis conveys to the religious that he is counting on them “to wake up the world”, since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy. This call to become prophets is not limited to the religious

alone, but religious are called in a special way to lead a prophetic life. They are supposed to be like the watch dogs who keep alert to see that the society is protected from injustice, oppression and inhuman ways of behavior. They are expected to take up the cause of the poor and become their voice in defending their rights. Religious are called to form a contrast community in the midst of a consumeristic and individualistic culture. To lead a prophetic life is not easy, especially when there are so much of vested interests among the rich and the powerful of the society. They may feel that their prophetic voice is a waste of time, money and energy. But they are called to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

The Second Vatican Council had already given an exposition of the nature of religious life in chapter 6 of the Constitution, *Lumen Gentium*. This chapter described the essential form of religious life as a life “Consecrated by the profession of the evangelical counsels” (LG 44). The Second Vatican Council was a historical turning point in theological reflection on the consecrated life. No Ecumenical Council had ever spoken at such length and with such depth of this important Charism in the Church. The very heart of ministerial religious life is its participation in the prophetic mission of Jesus. That mission is one of proclaiming the Good News of salvation to the poor in concrete historical situations of suffering. Proclamation of the Good News has to be done with joy and happiness, if not we become announcers of doomsday.

We have a broad variety of religious communities with their different histories, characteristics, customs, and missions, hence the Vatican Council II did not give specific indications, and left to each individual community, the authority to determine what needed to be changed in accordance with the spirit of their founders, the needs of modern times and in the circumstances in which they lived and worked.

We read in no. 2 of the Pastoral Constitution (PC) that the renewal of the Religious life “Comprises both a constant return to the sources of the whole of the Christian life and to the primitive inspiration of the Institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time”. Every congregation starts with a specific mission to a specific group of

people. The original spirit of the founder/foundress has to be kept in mind when making changes in the rules and regulations. “The hope of renewal lies more in greater diligence in the faithful observance of the rules and constitutions than in multiplying laws” (PC 4). Pope Paul VI warned in his 1964 address: “Multiplicity of laws is not always accompanied by progress in religious life. It often happens that the more rules there are, the less people pay attention to them.” Therefore let constitutions, directories, custom books, books of prayers and ceremonies and such like be suitably re-edited and, obsolete laws being suppressed, be adapted to the decrees of this sacred synod (PC 3). *Ecclesiae Sanctae* is also of the opinion that obsolete rules must be examined and modified to suit the needs of the present time. “The institutes should strive for a genuine knowledge of their original spirit, so that faithfully preserving this spirit in determining adaptations, their religious life may thus be purified of alien elements and freed from those which are obsolete.” (Eccl. Sanct., 16)

The manner of living, praying and working should be suitably adapted everywhere, but especially in mission territories, to the modern physical and psychological circumstances of the members and also, as required by the nature of each institute, to the necessities of the apostolate, the demands of culture, and social and economic circumstances (Cf. PC 3).

Religious prophetism is often modeled after the prophets of the Old Testament and of Jesus himself. The religious in general accept that they have a prophetic vocation. They often limit their prophetic mission to the world outside. They have to be prophetic in their own congregations as well as in the Church. If the Church is not following the path of Jesus, they have a duty to bring it to the notice of the Church authorities. That is their specific vocation and duty. Religious orders are not the creations of the ecclesiastical institution, although they are approved and supervised by ecclesiastical authorities.

Religious Life is meant to be a charismatic form of life, called into existence by the Holy Spirit, to live corporately the prophetic charism in the Church. Religious are not primarily meant to take care of the

official ministries of the Church. They should have their own basic freedom to function according to the charism of their founder/foundress. This is especially true of “exempt” Congregations which minister across ecclesiastical boundaries.

Religious life normally attracts candidates who are compliant and docile. Entering religious life does not make one a prophet/prophetess and there are many prophetic figures who do not enter religious life. Being a prophet/prophetess doesn’t mean that one has to be conspicuous or stubborn or anti-authority. True prophets/prophetesses are very reluctant to call themselves prophets. The prophetic vocation is not undertaken on one’s own initiative. Nor is one appointed to it by human beings. The call comes from God, often to the one who feels frightened, unworthy, or incompetent.

The prophets/prophetesses look at the world from a divine point of view. Their main task is to bring the world into divine focus. Hence, they do not judge the people with worldly norms, but with the divine norm. Their mission is to invite the people to perceive reality from the divine point of view and to help them to act justly and righteously. The prophets/prophetesses are very much concerned about the injustices that are prevalent in the society. We may look at injustices as typical ingredients of social dynamics, but these holy people consider them as great disasters. We are faced with acts of injustice, manifestations of hypocrisy, falsehood, and misery in our day to day lives and have become insensitive to them. So we fail to understand the prophets’ extreme impatience with injustice. We fail to understand why the glorious city of Jerusalem be destroyed because of the injustices and oppression committed by some (Micah 3:9-12).

The things that horrified the prophets/prophetesses are now daily occurrences all over the world. Amos condemns the rich for trampling upon the needy, oppressing and cheating the helpless poor, and buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals (Amos 8:4-6). He says that the land shall tremble on this account (8:8). This could mean a prediction of an earthquake which brings grief and misery upon all the inhabitants, especially the rich, and is considered an expression

of Yahweh's wrath since the people are totally helpless when faced with an earthquake.<sup>1</sup> Slaves and property meant wealth at the time of the prophet. The properties of the poor were taken over by the rich when they could not pay their debts. Amos condemns such cruel practices. The words of Amos would apply to many modern societies. The prophets/prophetesses were sensitive to the cries of the poor and the needy.

We cannot please God without fulfilling the demands of justice. In Micah 6:6-8, the prophet discusses the nature of worship. He says that God cannot be pleased with 'burnt offerings of calves and rams' or with 'ten thousands of rivers of oil'. Even if a man 'offers his first-born to the Lord for his transgression', it is not enough. What God requires is 'to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God'. The prophet/prophetess is convinced that one can establish the right relationship with God only when he/she establishes the right relationship with his/her neighbours. The vertical and the horizontal relationships are complementary to each other. The prophets insist on the interiorization of the law.

Totality of life was the clear-cut criterion of the prophets/prophetesses' words and course of action. Life, in all its fullness, including its materiality, was their first concern. The bread of life and the earthly bread are not opposed to each other. Denying bread to the needy is one of the greatest crimes that human beings can commit. Religion is not an extra dimension to life, but life is the essence of what is religious. Here we find that there is a profound correlation between God and life.<sup>2</sup>

At times we are much too worried about the decline in the number of religious vocations. Soon after the Second Vatican Council there was a sudden drop in vocations to religious life as well as many defections, especially among the young. It could be possible that the Vatican II reforms may have taken away the special esteem that religious life held which made vocations less appealing to the youth. In fact no congregation "needs" more members than are actually called by God. There is nothing called an optimum number for any religious congregation. Some congregations have large numbers while others have small numbers. In spite of small numbers, some congregations are able to



make a great impact on the society in general and the Church in particular.

At ordination the cleric makes a promise of obedience to his ecclesiastical superior which binds him to obey that superior and his successors in relation to the exercise of his office in the Church. This is not the case with religious. Religious make their vows to God (not to their superiors or Church officials) to live the religious Life. Living the religious life includes the obligations of a lifelong practice of the vows. Religious make their vows according to the constitutions of their order in the presence of their superiors, but only to God. This means that religious, unlike the clergy, are not agents of the institutional Church just as Jesus was not an agent of institutional Judaism. Although, as members of the Church, they are subject to Church authority, it is not their responsibility as religious to teach, defend, or enforce Church teaching, law or policy.

As prophets/prophetesses, religious may be called up on to disobey certain customs, rules and regulations on moral grounds. For centuries, the scriptures and religious leaders have taught that obedience to the religious and secular rules and regulations is a virtue and disobedience is a sin. But blind obedience to oppressive laws can be enslaving and responsible disobedience can be liberative. Obedience to irrational and insane authority can be detrimental to the growth of any human being or group. There is individual as well as structural irrationality. The caste system in India is an example of structural irrationality.

A person may disobey a certain law because it goes against his/her conscience or hinders justice and human rights. Responsible disobedience may at times mean a higher obedience. When there is a conflict between the will of God and human authority, one has to choose the will of God. Peter and the apostles were forbidden by the high priest to teach in the name of Jesus. When they disobeyed the command of the high priest, they were summoned and threatened by him. So they answered him: "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29).

There is nothing wrong in pointing out the mistakes of Church authorities if one feels called to do so following his/her conscience and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. “When Peter made himself one with those who favoured circumcision, Paul opposed him. An ecclesiology that overlooks the possibility of error in the Popes and other authorities in the Church and that of their being legitimately opposed and corrected, does not seem to be faithful to the Gospel teaching.”<sup>3</sup> People have an obligation to obey public authority as far as it is for the common good. But they also have the right to defend their own rights and those of their fellow citizens against any abuse of authority (GS 74) .

In the Bible we find many holy people disobeying the civil and religious laws. The Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, disobeyed the commands of the king of Egypt in order to save the male children of the Hebrews (Ex 1:15-22). Moses killed one of the Egyptians in order to save one of his own fellow Hebrews (Ex 2: 11-12). Many prophets/prophetesses spoke against the civil and religious leaders of their times and had to pay the price for that, some even by death. King Ahab called Prophet Elijah ‘disturber of Israel’ (1 Kings 18:17). But the prophet was only following the commandment of the Lord.

Jesus followed the path of a normal Jew with regard to going to the temple, regular prayers, and having familiarity with the Scriptures. He even underwent John’s baptism of repentance. But he was judged by the religious authorities of his time as ‘disobedient’ and that led him ultimately to the cross. Jesus is known more for his disobedience than for his obedience. Even his disciples couldn’t understand the rebellious Jesus. His attitude towards Samaritans, tax collectors, lepers, children, etc. was quite revolutionary. Jesus took quite a different view of people and situations from the pious Jews of his time, and even John the Baptist. Jesus condemned mere ritualistic practices like the ritual of washing the hands (Mk 7:1ff) without following the spirit of these practices. Jesus justified the plucking and eating ears of corn by his disciples on the Sabbath. He also justified the plucking of ears of corn from other’s field by quoting the action of David and his companions. When they were hungry, they entered the house of God and ate the bread of the

Presence, which was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests (Mt 12:1-8). Jesus also healed people on the Sabbath.

Jesus came to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to promote it. Everything else was relative to the Kingdom of God. He was totally obedient to his Father and committed to the mission entrusted to him by the Father. This meant that at times he had to disobey the civil and religious authorities of his time. Ultimately he had to follow the law of love. He associated himself with sinners, tax-collectors and prostitutes. Any law or custom that opposes the law of love is against the will of God. If one has to be faithful to the will of God, one has to disobey such unjust laws and customs. Loyalty to the Church does not mean that we have to follow unquestioningly all that the Church authorities dictate. Loyalty to the Church should not contradict our loyalty to Jesus. When laws are unjust, one is not bound by them, which means that rules should not be obeyed blindly. Mahatma Gandhi gave an example of responsible civil disobedience. Martin Luther King was arrested over thirty times. He is known more for breaking the law than following it.

By the early 1900s women's apostolic religious life was thoroughly institutionalized, standardized, and unfortunately, largely domesticated. Virtually all women religious were living in convents and working in Catholic institutions where they were helping the Diocese or the Parish. The latter defined the apostolates of these women and controlled both the work and the religious themselves, often well beyond the scope of their legitimate authority which was ill-defined. Women religious often ended up as work force supplying free labor for clerical authorities who suppressed any unapproved initiative of the women and who owned not only most of the institutions in which Sisters served but also the local houses in which they lived as well as most other resources upon which they depended. Sometimes they were asked to take care of the household chores of the clergy. The clergy used their power to control the women religious. If they refused to obey, they were denied the Holy Eucharist and other sacraments. In the recent past women religious have respectfully but firmly resisted the Vatican's attempts to keep them under strict control, for example the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the United

States (LCWR). Blind obedience, within their Congregations or to the Church authorities, is no longer considered a virtue by these religious.

The current conflicts between hierarchical authority and the exercise of their prophetic ministry by women religious have been escalating since the institutional renewal of Religious Life began in the early 1970's. Implicit in the call of the Vatican Council to Religious to renew their lives for the sake of ministry in and to the world, which the Council itself had embraced in a new way, is a new understanding of their practice of obedience as rooted in the prophetic nature of Religious Life itself. Religious began to embrace a call to ministry fully compatible with their vocation, indeed more compatible in many ways than the standardized institutional apostolates of the past century. They began to reclaim the specifically ministerial (but non-ordained) nature of their life which was, in effect, a reclaiming of its prophetic character. Religious were no longer as easily controllable by the clergy. They could no longer be taken for granted and deployed to fill the gaps in the institutions run by the hierarchy. Now many women religious have new ministries of their own initiatives, sometimes beyond the borders of Catholic institutions like women empowerment, working with NGOs to eradicate human trafficking, prostitution, etc.

Religious obedience is precisely an exercise of a prophetic vocation calling its members to carefully discern the meaning of discipleship in a particular situation. Here we see very clearly the tension between two different understandings of obedience. The hierarchical definition of obedience is total and absolute submission in thought, word, and deed, interiorly and exteriorly to authority. Any deviation from this understanding amounts to dissent, which is always sinful, and if acted upon, is disobedience. The prophetic definition of obedience is the prayerful listening to the will of God in all relevant "voices" and the search for that will in the "signs of the times," followed by careful discernment and responsible speaking and acting out of that discernment for the good of all people in concrete situations. This may at times involve responsible disobedience as a creative contribution to a fuller discernment of and obedience to the will of God in the concrete situation. Obedience is not unconditional submission but a responsible commitment to discerning

the will of God. If God's will coincided exactly with the will of the superiors, there wouldn't be any need for discernment at all. But the example of Jesus makes it abundantly clear that this is not the case and no one is dispensed from the challenges of discernment, even when the teaching or law in question is from hierarchy itself.

As a conclusion we can say that this year of Consecrated Life is a wonderful opportunity to renew our commitment to lead an authentic religious life, especially the prophetic aspect of our religious life. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, and of the decree on the renewal of religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, let us once again become aware of the signs of the times and take appropriate steps to make this world a better place to live. Religious are supposed to offer hope to the hopeless and courage to those who are fearful. The special task of the religious is to wake up the world, to prick the conscience of those who got used to the injustices and unequal sharing of wealth and other resources of the earth. The prophetic mission of the religious comes from the mission of Jesus who went around preaching the good news to the poor, healing the sick, eating with the sinners, the outcast and the marginalized. Multiplying the laws is not going to make the religious any better unless they are imbued by the spirit of the laws. As prophets/prophetesses, religious may sometimes be called upon to disobey certain customs, rules and regulations on moral grounds. Responsible disobedience is meant for a higher obedience. We may even say that Jesus was known more for his disobedience than for his obedience. Women religious in a special way are called to become aware of their prophetic vocation and evaluate their various ministries. Let us become aware of our prophetic call and the mission entrusted to us.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Mays, Amos: A Commentary, 145.
- <sup>2</sup> Sobrino, The Epiphany of the God of Life, 68.
- <sup>3</sup> Felix Podimattam. Responsible disobedience. In Puthur (ed) Moral theology today: Trends and Issues, Pp. 104-105.

# **Consecrated Life: Blessings and Challenges Redefining Leadership for the Future**

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The celebration of the year 2015 as the year of consecrated life against the background of the Golden Jubilee of Vatican II with its path-breaking documents on the Church, does indeed open new horizons in the exercise of leadership and prophecy.

Leadership in all societies manifests the hopes and aspirations that move communities of people to pursue particular paths of action in the light of meaningful goals. Leadership can also help to provide new vision and a greater impetus in the established pursuit of goals.

When Pope Francis was asked by the major superiors of religious men (November 2013), to say what he thought was the priority of consecrated life, he spoke of the religious as men and women who light the way for the future. It was his way of describing the prophetic role of religious.

To speak of lighting a way for the future or of redefining leadership implies that a way exists already and that one is questioning its relevance for a world that is constantly in a process of evolution and change. Thus one may speak of Christian leadership before Vatican II and its emergence after the Council. Vatican I and Vatican II set the tone of leadership in the Church which has influenced the structures of governance in consecrated life as well.

**Vatican I** : An over-all view of the Council would indicate a pressing desire to bring order into the Church of the time as a sequel to a number of historical upheavals that questioned her authority, her doctrinal positions, her control over various areas in the functioning of the Church including the Roman Question regarding the territory of the Vatican. Fearful of the threat of a world in evolution the Church became defensive and suspicious of those who thought differently as undermining Her position. This defensiveness led to a need of affirming a centralized authority with a “primacy of jurisdiction” that was immediate and direct on the whole Church.

Such an ordering of structures made for a top-down approach where the centralized authority is seen as the only conduit through which the Will of God is made known so that the members of the Church had to follow in accord. While there is no doubt that over the last fifty years the winds of change have blown over the Church in many ways, it nevertheless remains true that the centralized pattern continues its hold at various levels of the Church functioning: the Curia, in dioceses, parishes and religious communities.

Such a centralized pattern tends to encourage authoritarianism and patriarchal attitudes at the top thus breeding a sense of frustration and disillusionment at the receiving ends. The inability to dialogue with freedom and mutual confidence in the context of common goals leads to conflict, even condemnation from the powers that be. These situations of “impasse” give rise to negative reactions of a sense of injustice, hurt, and guilt which alienate people from the fullness of life in the Church and cloud their witness as Christians. While discipline and the indication of a clear line of action is essential in the pursuit of goals, yet the human touch and the loyalty that springs from the heart can never be replaced by a system specially one that favours the person at the top as divinely inspired.

**Vatican II** The atmosphere of Vatican II, about a hundred years later, was very different. Here the need was felt to open the closed atmosphere of the Church to a freshness from the outside. This refreshing approach found expression in the reflection of the Church on herself in *Lumen*

Gentium. The approach is pastoral rather than juridical. The Church is not just an institution with power to regulate affairs but a mystery in which God calls human persons to share in the life of the Trinity. Placing the first two chapters before the hierarchical structure, the Church draws attention to the importance of the context in which authority is to be exercised. It is a pilgrim Church moving by God's grace toward a goal that is not statically fixed for all time but towards a divine mystery that unfolds with ever greater fullness at every epoch. The Church thus accepts to search her way to God with humility and persevering faith until, through the mystery of the Cross, "she may attain to that light which knows no setting." (L.G.10)

The second chapter of LG on the People of God begins thus: "At all times and in every race anyone who fears God and does what is right has been acceptable to him." (Acts 10:35). God has willed to save humankind not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but as a people called to him (LG9). This race would be the new People of God, made one, "not according to the flesh but in the Spirit".

They are of the dignity and freedom of the sons and daughters of God in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells. Their law is "the new commandment to love as Christ loved us". Their destiny is deliverance from the slavery of corruption to the freedom of the children of God. The Church is meant to lead each and everyone extending her outreach to all regions of the earth, entering human history, transcending at once all times and all racial boundaries. The Church as a communion of life, love and truth is called to become the light of the world and the salt of the earth for humanity. (LG 9).

The third chapter of LG draws attention to the hierarchical structure of the Church. The Spirit endows both the hierarchy and the people of God with institutional and charismatic gifts which must be recognized and encouraged for their potential in contributing unitedly to the holiness and radiance of the whole Church.

What emerges as a profile of post- Vatican leadership is:

**1. Recognition of the Mystery of God** in the call of the Church to seek His Will in a world of challenge and change. It is to walk in His



Light, to walk both into the unknown as well as on a path of trust and confidence in God who is faithful. The leader does not know everything a priori but searches humbly and responsibly with the help of His grace midst the trials, tribulations and surprises of this world.

**2 Recognition of the vocation of the people of God** and their instrumentality in revealing God's saving love to the ends of the earth.

Post-Vatican II leadership hinges on these two poles which have been further developed in the document *Lumen Gentium* and specially in *Gaudium et Spes* ( the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World) which speaks about marriage and the family, culture, economic and social life, politics, the solidarity of peoples and peace.

The concept of the people of God is extremely far-reaching in its implications. In an interview with *La Civiltà Cattolica* in November 2013, Pope Francis elaborates his views on 'Thinking with the Church'. He says:" Belonging to a people has a strong theological value. In the history of salvation, God has saved a people. There is no full identity without belonging to a people. No one is saved alone, as an isolated individual...God enters into this dynamic, this participation in the complete web of human relationships. "Further he says:..." the church is the people of God on the journey through history with joys and sorrows. Thinking with the Church therefore is my way of being a part of this people... when the dialogue among the people and the bishops and the pope is genuine, it is assisted by the Holy Spirit. So this thinking with the Church does not concern theologians only...the Church is the totality of God's people."

There is a strong emphasis **on 'inclusiveness'** in the concept of the People of God. However diverse the composition of the people, the outreach to one and all is clearly expressed. This responsibility that the Church bears to reach out to all who "strive to lead a good life", must be borne also by every member of the Church. The Church is the home for all. We should not reduce her universality by confining her to a select chapel with select people.(Echoes of the interview with Pope Francis).

Within the Church itself we need to do more of thinking together and interacting with the baptized so that our search for God's Will becomes a way of being and not just an adjustment to accommodate to a legal dictat. Greater **dialogue** within the Church opens the way to greater dialogue with the wider circles of people who may not share our beliefs or traditions but who have their own codes of conduct and who collaborate positively with Christians in so many professional contributions in what is called the secular domain.

To be able to dialogue with people one must **understand the reality of peoples' lives**. Here again Pope Francis has some pertinent reflections: "I am convinced of one thing: the great changes in history were realized when reality was seen not from the centre but rather from the periphery...the need to become acquainted with the reality and life-experience of the people. If this does not happen we run the risk of being abstract, ideologists or fundamentalists which is not healthy." Remaining only at the centre equidistant from the periphery, is what can make Church leadership a merely legislative function, more concerned with preserving the status quo rather than finding solutions that are responsive and helpful for people's lives. "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt, I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed I know their sufferings and I have come to deliver them...(Ex.3:7-8).

To reach out to the vast network of the people of God, proximity to the people is essential. Across the complex web of human relationships, cultural differences, political ambitions, the Church has to find her way and she can do this only with the **collaboration** of all God's people as well as all persons of good will. How else could she open herself to a universal embrace of the regions of the world? The presentation of the good news must be effected with a respectful understanding of the mind-set and aspirations of those who think differently but who are also moved to search for a more spiritual quality of human life and an authentic humanism..

The forms of leadership and communication in the Church have derived their visibility largely from the feudal ages of Europe. Does one need to continue using the insignia of the high officials of imperial courts to express

pastoral presence or to touch the peripheral reality of people's lives in various continents and cultures of the world? Inculturated in a feudal system, the pastoral role of the Church has tended to slide into a clericalisation where official postings, titles of address, bureaucratic procedures and ritualism become more important than the simple sense of faith and service of the people. Today the invasion of globalization tends to promote a culture of competitive glitter rather than a culture of concern for the human dignity of all.

In the process of dialogue and inculturation, one may make mistakes. One must be willing to recognize one's errors and start afresh. In exploring new terrain, one always runs risks. It is better to make mistakes, regret and learn from them in order to break new ground for the glory of God rather than hold back because of the fear of error. Pope Francis says: "Being prophets may sometimes create a noise, an uproar, some say 'a mess'. But in reality the charism of religious is like yeast: prophecy announces the spirit of the gospel." The pope sees religious men and women as called to a prophetic life by demonstrating how Jesus lived on this earth. The biblical understanding of "prophet" is "one who speaks in God's name and under His inspiration". The prophets of salvation history brought forth matters that pertained to the "conscience of Israel" and to the Will of God for the people. Even today religious are **called to speak in God's name and under His inspiration** in contemporary situations where the human rights of persons are ignored and set aside.

The traits of the post Vatican II pattern of leadership in the Church have been traced such that religious life can also take its cues.

In keeping with trends from Vatican I, religious institutes too have been (and tend to be) more pre-occupied by the observance of the Rule rather than by the persons for whom the rules are made. To keep the peace one may resort to a uniformity of observance which gives the appearance of order and discipline but may stifle legitimate aspirations and quests of members who also hold the good of the Institute at heart. **Responsibility for the mission and manner of growth of the Institute has to be shared so as to become a common concern.** Each member of the Institute has been endowed with natural talents

and gifts of the Spirit which need to be recognized and given creative expression for the greater good. Such efforts may well bring in their train, tension and conflict but in the words of the bishops of the Congo (in *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013): “Our ethnic diversity is our wealth... It is only in unity, through conversion of hearts and reconciliation, that we will be able to help our country to develop on all levels.” (par.230). What they say of the country applies to our religious institutes and to the people of God as a whole.

There may be many reasons for the reduced number of youth desirous of religious life today. One of the reasons is in the type of formation which increases dependency and makes for immaturity rather than providing opportunity for adult growth through challenge. Pope Francis speaks about the fundamental importance of formation which is based on four pillars: spiritual, intellectual, communitarian and apostolic. What one needs to fight against is “the image of religious life understood as an escape or hiding place in face of an ‘external’ difficult and complex world. The four pillars should be integrated right from the entrance to the novitiate and not be arranged sequentially. They must be interactive.”

Finally it is to be recalled that without a desire to live in communion, our commitment to the Church or to religious life remains but a dream. Unity to be real must be visible. It is a real historical community, the people of God, showing God’s historical relationship with humankind. With the desire of working together, consulting, believing in the other, searching in the power of the Spirit despite divergences, it is possible to multiply our common interests for human well-being and peace. One must be ready to discover and learn from one another. One needs to show appreciation for what others do to strengthen the search for truth and dignity in human living.

The culture of destruction and death, so brutally rampant today, and so subtly masquerading under the glamour of technological progress, globalization and development can leave us with a sense of helplessness or an effort to compensate by running after trifles in the name of worldly success. One can re-echo the call of Pope Francis to religious men and women: **“wake up the world”**, **“light the way for the future”** and

**“be witnesses of our life in God from day to day, in the footsteps of our Lord and Master.”**

The challenge of leadership in the paradigm of Vatican II, is daunting. May we ever remember that it is God who leads His Church; it is God who calls His people and our strength is in the power of the Spirit. The unity of the People of God lies in the spiritual bonding that goes beyond nation and culture, to effect **a communion of love** that is creative and life-giving. This communion of love is the most powerful force of change that we can witness to in the journey towards the One we were taught to address as “Our Father”.

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## **Vision - Mission statement of the Consecrated persons for today in line with the vision of our Founders**

*- Jacob Peenikaparambil CMI*

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We are living in a world in which we experience change at unimaginable speeds and some changes are radical. For example internet and mobile phones have brought about revolutionary changes in information technology and in turn in the lives of individuals and societies. Today with just basic computer skills we could get most of information needed with only a few clicks on the laptop keyboard or even mobile phone. “Steam engine took 150-200 years to diffuse. The automobile took 40-50 years to become widely used. The transistor, from the point of its invention to its common usage, was just 10-15 years. It took just three years for the internet to hit 90 million users.” (Shaping Future by William P. Belgard and Steven R. Rayner) In order to cope up with the internet age, we have to increase our speed in such a way that we need to do within two months what we had been previously doing 12 months.

The situation in which a religious congregation operates also changes in course of time, giving rise to new challenges. For example, globalization with the movement of capital and workers all over the world, movement of information through internet and movement of culture from one country to another, poses a great challenge to many nations and societies. Various religious congregations originated at various historical, socio-economic, political and cultural contexts in order to respond to the challenges that arose from those contexts and make the mission of Jesus relevant to the situations. The original vision and to mission of the religious congregations are generally understood as CHARISM. When the situation or the context changes the need for restating the Charism arises. In the contemporary terminology it is known as 'Revisiting the Vision and Mission'.

## **Evolution of the Vision or Charism and its Reformulation**

We understand from the study of the history of religious congregations that a congregation originated from the Vision of the founder or the founders. If we closely observe our thought process we can notice different steps like observation, experience, reflection and conclusions, leading to convictions and vision emerges from the convictions. Mother Theresa had a deep experience when she travelled from Kolkata to Siliguri. Her reflections led her to the conclusion that the Lord was calling her for a unique mission. Looking at people dying in inhuman conditions, she visualized that people who are destitutes should have a dignified life and that they should have a dignified death too. Gradually hundreds of women were attracted by her vision and mission and joined her and thus emerged the congregation of the Missionaries of Charity. The congregation adopted a life style which Mother Theresa proposed in view of realizing the vision and mission of the congregation.

The scenario can change in course of time. The families, communities, municipalities and the government departments may become aware of their responsibility towards the people who do not have anyone to depend upon and start holistic Care Homes for them. In such a situation the Missionaries of Charity may have to revisit their CHARISM (Vision,

Mission and goals). Another scenario could be that women may not be attracted to the life style and the methods adopted by Mother Theresa. If we closely analyse the Charism of Missionaries of Charity we may find that the heart of the Charism is *serving the neediest in the society*. The neediest in the society may change in course of time. The method of serving the needy also may change. It is not necessary that the MC Sisters directly serve the destitute, orphans etc. In the context of dwindling vocations to the congregation, the sisters may adopt a method of motivating families, local communities to take the responsibility of caring for the neediest and support them by giving guidance and training. Charism does not mean continuing the same activities and life style adopted by the founder, but to grasp the objectives with which the founder started the congregation and changing the activities according to the need of the time and situation in order to realize the objectives. The objectives can be broadly categorized as Vision, Mission and Goals.

## **The Process of Formulating / Revisiting Vision, Mission and Goals**

The process of formulating Vision, Mission and Goals in the corporate sector and Non-Governmental Organizations is known as Strategic Planning. The process of revisiting the vision and mission is almost the same. Strategic planning determines where an organization/institution is going over the next few years, how the organization is going to get there and how it will know whether it has attained its target. Generally the following questions are asked during the process of the strategic planning and revisiting the strategic planning.

- Who are we?
- What capacity do we have/what can we do?
- What problems are we addressing?
- Where do we want to go
- What difference do we want to make?
- Which critical issues must we respond to?
- Where should we allocate our resources? Or what should our priorities be?



Strategic planning starts with **Situation analysis**. It is a method used to analyze both the internal and external environments of an organization in order to understand its own capabilities, the target population and working environment. The method used for undertaking the situation analysis is SWOT Analysis or Problem Tree Analysis or a combination of the two methods depending on the choice of the team. The preparation of strategic planning or revisiting the strategic planning is to be participatory, involving representatives of all stakeholders. In the case of a religious congregation, the team that prepares the plan shall consist of representatives from all ministries or apostolates of the congregation, representatives of the lay staff and representatives of the target population or the population with whom the Congregation works. While preparing the strategic plan or revisiting the strategic plan of a religious congregation, it is advisable to adopt a combination of SWOT Analysis and Problem Tree Analysis. The strategic planning or revisiting is done in a 3 to 5 days workshop in which representatives of all stakeholders are present.

## **SWOT Analysis**

It is a simple tool used both in the planning as well as evaluation. ‘S’ stands for strengths, ‘W’ for weaknesses, ‘O’ for opportunities and ‘T’ for Threats. Strengths and Weakness are internal to a religious congregation whereas Opportunities and Threats are external. Strengths are positive tangible and intangible attributes, internal to an organization or congregation. Weaknesses are factors that detract a congregation from its ability to attain the desired goal. They are the areas the congregation has to improve? Opportunities are the chances that are available for the congregation by making use of which the congregation will be able to achieve its goals. Threats are the factors or risks which are beyond the control of the congregation, which may cause harm to it. Hence there is need for taking precautions or strategies to deal with the threats. The purpose of the SWOT Analysis is to further strengthen the strengths, to convert the weaknesses into strengths, to transform the threats into opportunities and make use of them.

The first step in the SWOT Analysis is to identify the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. These are to be clearly

articulated. Once these four items are listed out by the participants of the workshop, they are prioritized and a consensus arrived at.

The second step is to make proposals for strengthening the strengths further, proposals for converting the weaknesses into strengths or at least to reduce the weaknesses, proposals to convert threats into opportunities or at least to take precautions to prevent threats and proposals to make use of the opportunities.

The third step is categorizing the proposals. Some of the proposals may be aimed at long term objectives, some medium term objectives, some short term objectives and some could be activities or interventions. The Vision, Mission, Goals and Interventions can be formulated from the four categories of proposals. The Vision is derived generally from the long term objectives; the mission from the medium term objectives, Goals from the short term objectives and the remaining as interventions. While this exercise is done, care is to be taken to show a link among all the four categories: the interventions leading to the achievement of the goals, the goals leading to the fulfillment of the mission and the mission contributing to the realization of the vision.

## **PROBLEM TREE ANALYSIS AND OBJECTIVE TREE ANALYSIS**

This is also done by a team consisting of representatives of all stakeholders as mentioned earlier.

**A problem** means any negative situation that is present and has the power of hampering the process of progress. It should not be used to describe the absence of a desired situation.

As a tree has three major parts: trunk, roots and fruits, the Problem tree also has three parts: the **focal problem**, **root causes** below the focal problem and the **effects** above the focal problem.

### **1) How to do the Problem Tree Analysis**

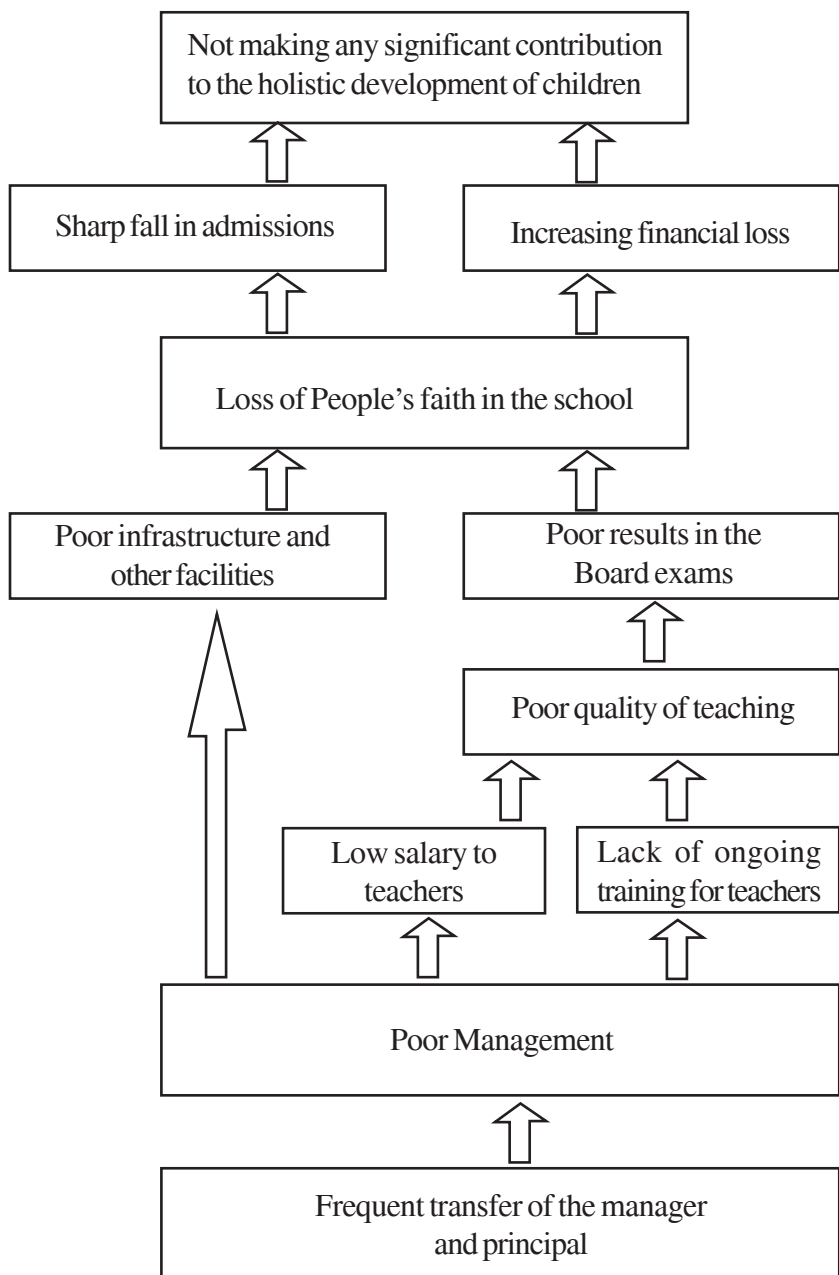
Put the Focal Problem at the center and find out the root causes and the sub root causes as well as the effects of the focal problem so that the situation could be understood better.

E.g. “Girls of the village do not go to school” is the Focal Problem. The root causes of this problem could be 1) Poor economic condition 2) Large families and 3) Parents are insensitive. The two causes for the parents to become insensitive are 1) Lack of awareness 2) Gender bias. Two effects of the focal problem are 1) child labour and 2) child marriage.

## 2) Steps in Problem Tree Analysis:

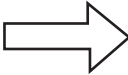
- Preparing a list of all problems. The problems could be related to the congregation and the problems of the people whom the congregation/province serves.
- Identification of the Focal Problem
- Listing down all possible causes of the Focal Problem
- Identifying the direct and immediate causes and placing them just below the focal problem.
- Further going down till we reach the root cause.
- The analysis is stopped when we reach a human behaviour like lack of awareness.
- Placing the problems that appear as effects of the focal problem above it.

The diagram given below is an example for problem tree analysis of a school. The same method can be followed in the problem tree analysis of an organization or a religious congregation. The focal problem in the given example is ***People losing their confidence in the school.***

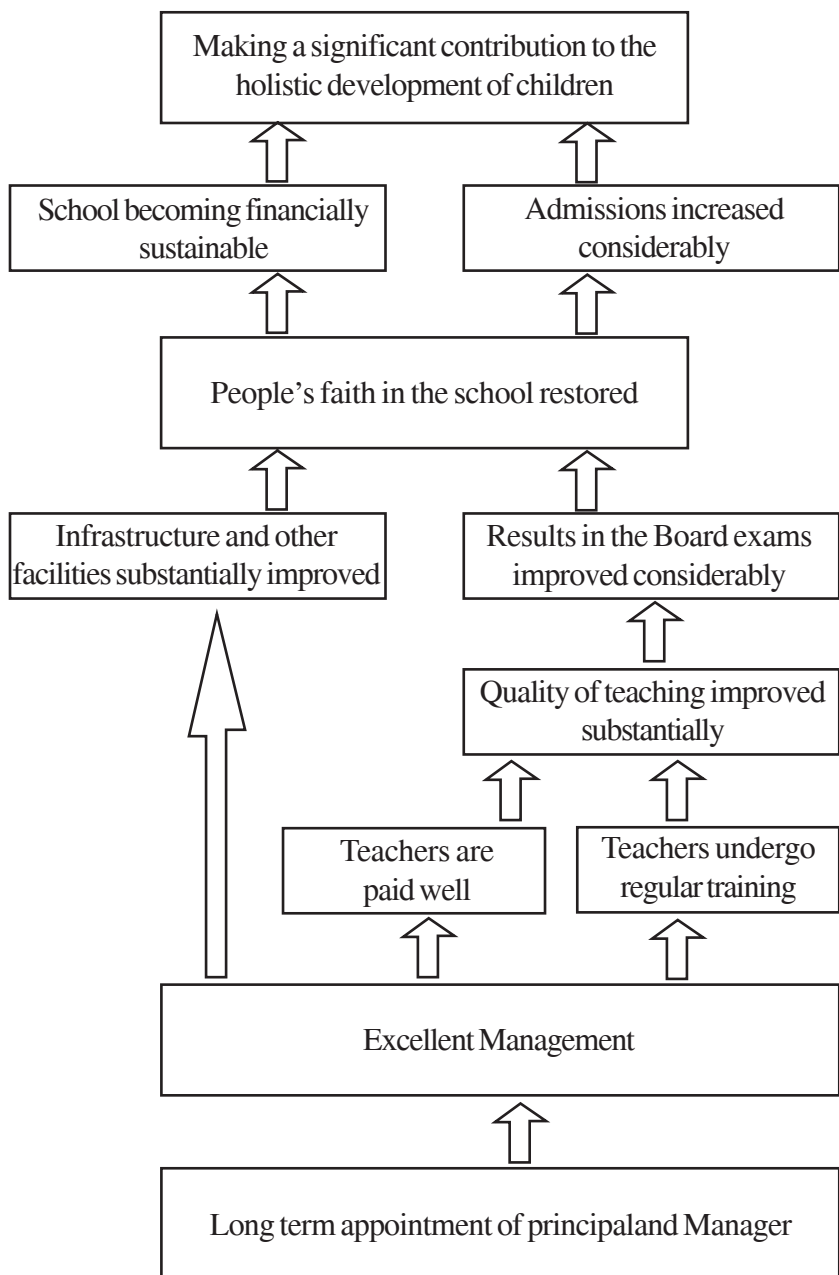


## 6.2. Objective Analysis

The method used for objective analysis is the preparation of an Objective Tree. The positive way of writing a problem becomes an objective. Objectives are desired future situations, they are not activities. An objective is a description of what it will be like once something has been improved, reduced and constructed. When writing an objective it is often simply a matter of turning the problem statement around. The following are some examples for converting problems into objectives.

PROBLEM		OBJECTIVE
Frequent Transfer of the Manager and Principal		Long term appointment of principal and manager
Increasing financial loss		School becoming financially sustainable
Sharp fall in the admissions		Admissions increased considerably
Loss of faith of people in the school		Faith of the people in the school restored

After converting the problems into objectives one can notice a hierarchical order of **“means to end”**. Sometimes a few objectives may have to be reorganized to make the logic hierarchical. While doing this exercise one should not lose sight of the Focal Problem. If some problems cannot be converted into objectives, it is likely that these problems are too general or unclear and they are to be re-stated or they may be dropped as they are not important. Finally the hierarchies are to be reviewed and the objectives are to be put into clear **means to end** relationship.



## Strategy Options

While doing the strategy option one has to start with the objective that covers the original **Focal Problem** and label it “**Mission**”. In our example the Mission could be “*Restoring the confidence of the people in the school.*” There are three objectives above the objective that covers the focal problem. Out of the three objectives the one that is broader could be selected as the Vision. The Vision could be formulated as “*Making a significant contribution to the holistic development children*”. Out of the objectives below the level of Mission, the ones which are essential to achieve the mission could be selected as Goals. As per our example the goals could be formulated as follows.

- Improving the results of the Board exams considerably
- Enhancing the quality of teaching substantially
- Improving the infrastructure and other facilities significantly

All the other objectives could be taken as interventions or policies or activities to achieve the goals. The major interventions needed are 1) putting in place a policy for ensuring long term appointment of the principal and manager with the required systems for making the persons accountable, transparent and participatory. 2) Improving the management/administration of the school by introducing the needed systems and processes like Financial Management System, Human Resource Management System and a system for planning, monitoring and evaluation. 3) Putting in place an attractive salary scale for the teachers and other staff with the provision for annual increment based on performance appraisal. 4) Providing regular ongoing training to the teachers to enhance their level of knowledge and skills.

In the light of the above description the Vision, Mission, and Goals could be briefly explained as follows.

**Vision:** The broad strategic objective to which the institution or organization or congregation will make a unique contribution.

**Mission:** This is what the institution or congregation has to achieve within a specified period.

**Goals:** They are the achievements of various interventions that will be undertaken by the organization or congregation, which in turn will lead to the realization of the mission.

## **Conclusion**

Generally the preparation of the strategic plan is done in a workshop of all stakeholders and the workshop is facilitated by a person or expert who is conversant with the process of preparing or revisiting the Strategic Plan. The Congregations and provinces may adopt preparation of strategic plan and revisiting it once in six years or eight years so as to coincide with the General Chapter of the Congregation. Revisiting also can be done once in three years. Prior to the General or Provincial Chapter, a Working Group can be constituted for preparing or revisiting the Strategic Plan. As already explained earlier, the Working Group shall consist of all stakeholders: representatives of all ministries or apostolates of the congregation and representatives of the people for whom the congregation exists.

The strategic plan prepared by the Working Group can be later presented to the General or Provincial Chapters for further discussion and approval. Some of the members of the Working Group could also be the members of the General or Provincial Chapter. These members will be able to explain to the members of the chapter how the plan was prepared and its effectiveness.

This kind of planning will help the congregations to become relevant to the context in which they live, instead of living in the past. The strategic planning process will be an effective tool to the religious congregations to focus on the results, the changes they want to bring about in their own members and in the society, rather than routinely continuing the traditional interventions.



# **The Prophetic witness of women religious in the tradition of St. Mary of Magdala**

*Dr. Fr. Subhash Anand*

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John presents an encounter between Jesus and a woman caught in the act of adultery (8:3-11). Today, however, scholars agree that this pericope does not belong to John.<sup>1</sup> The history of this text is also of importance. Even though the episode does not belong to the Fourth Evangelist, nor was it penned by “(... any of the other three Gospel writers), yet there is no reason to doubt its substantial truth. The saying that it preserves is completely in character with what we know of our Lord, and quite out of character with the stern discipline that came to be established in the developing Church.”<sup>2</sup> The story of the woman accused of adultery “is more Lucan than Johannine.”<sup>3</sup> Its “style and language are more akin to the Synoptic Gospels than to the Fourth Gospel.”<sup>4</sup> The Synoptics proclaim in no unclear terms that Jesus came precisely for the sinners, and that he was at home with publicans and prostitutes (Mk 2:16-17; Lk 7:37). Luke also carries the story of the young man who spent his share of his father’s property “living with harlots” (15:30). On his way back home, “while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (v. 20).

The response of Jesus was also totally out of character with the earlier Jewish practice. Thus, this episode is a very clear demonstration of the criterion of discontinuity: it goes against the practice in the Jewish society and in the early Church.<sup>5</sup> It is rooted in the ministry of Jesus. Yet it is not found in some of the oldest and most important manuscripts available to scholars. What could have been the reason for its absence from some of the important oldest Greek manuscripts? Augustine reports the fears of some disciples that this story “would give their wives encouragement to sin with impunity! This led him to believe that this was the reason for its *removal* from the Gospel.”<sup>6</sup> He seems to presume that women are the primary actors in adultery. This is a little surprising, given Augustine’s past. Others think that the reason for its delayed acceptance was “the ease with which Jesus forgave the adulteress was hard to reconcile with the stern penitential discipline in vogue in the early Church.”<sup>7</sup> This explanation reveals a bias of the early Church that was slowly drifting away from the compassionate message of Jesus and moving towards the rigid mentality of the Old Testament. The early scribes had a special difficulty with the story of the woman taken in adultery. They found it difficult to believe that Jesus not only forgave the woman but also turned the tables against her male accusers.<sup>8</sup> When Jesus challenged the male accusers “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her” (Jn 8:7), he does not explicitly refer to some particular sin, yet “it is most likely that it [‘sin’] refers to sin in the sexual area.”<sup>9</sup>

To understand the situation, it is important see how adultery was viewed by the Old Testament: “sexual intercourse between a married or betrothed woman and any man other than her husband. The marital status of the woman’s partner is inconsequential since only the married or betrothed woman is bound to fidelity...”<sup>10</sup> This difference is explained by the patriarchal bias which makes the law-maker think that “the primary evil of adultery lay in the violation of a husband’s rights.”<sup>11</sup> Adultery was considered a very serious crime: the married woman and her partner were doomed to death (Lev 20.10; Deut 22.22). “The reasons for the gravity of this crime are never explicitly stated in the OT [Old Testament], the patrilineal nature of Israelite society strongly suggests

that mistaken paternity would surely be dreaded.”<sup>12</sup> To forgive a married woman guilty of adultery and allow her to live would be a terrible affront for the patriarchal society. A woman just should not be allowed to mother the child of some man other than her husband! That rot had to be rooted out!

The Scribes and the Pharisees who brought her are not really concerned about her fate. “They are anxious to place Jesus in a situation where he may appear to be in conflict with Moses and the Law... the woman is but a trapping in the conflict... She is being instrumentalized.”<sup>13</sup> Jesus turns the tables against them: his response to them suggests that they were equally guilty of adultery. They had judged the woman and passed judgement on her. They brought her to Jesus to trap him. Jesus is the real judge. He reads their minds and hearts. They find themselves trapped: he knows them thoroughly; he has passed judgement on them. They have no option but to quietly get away. Jesus’ words to the women after her accusers have left give her new life and dignity. She was brought in as an object. She goes away as a person.<sup>14</sup> She is dragged to Jesus by persons who are determined to judge her by the patriarchal norms concerning adultery they have laid down. She walks away free, empowered by the concern and compassion of Jesus.

The position of the story in John’s Gospel is not without its deep significance. It “disturbs the storyteller’s systematic account of Jesus’ presence at the feast of ‘the Jews’.”<sup>15</sup> Some “witnesses place it elsewhere in John.”<sup>16</sup> Jesus is aware that the patriarchal hierarchs are getting ready to eliminate him. He indicates the one within his inner circle who will function as their mole (6:71). The Jewish feast of Tabernacles was approaching. Jesus goes up to the Temple (7:14). He boldly tells the crowd that they are not really faithful to Moses. They are guilty of adultery (Jer 3:8; Ezek 16:28-32). This was bound to provoke some reaction. “The Pharisees heard the crowd thus muttering about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest him” (7:32). Those who are sent come back without him. Then we have a piece of Johannine irony. To justify their coming empty handed, “the officers answered, ‘No man ever spoke like this man!’” (v. 46). John is hitting at the patriarchal hierarchs. His Jesus is so unlike them:

he speaks with authority, and none of them can come anywhere near him!

During his teaching in the Temple Jesus makes a claim: “If any one thirst let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water’,” (vv. 37b-38). This claim of Jesus “embodies the memory of the great deeds of God in the past and anticipation of the saving acts of God in the future, both united in an affirmation of their fulfilment in Jesus in here and now.”<sup>17</sup> We need to remember that the Fourth Gospel is illumined by the glory of the Risen Lord from its inception (1:14). Explaining what Jesus meant by offering the living water to those who come to him, John says: “Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (7:39). It was the next morning that scribes and the Pharisees brought the woman to Jesus. She is the first to benefit from the offer of Jesus. She was brought to Jesus to be condemned to death. Jesus gives her the promise of life: life in the Spirit. Thus the promise made to another woman (4:10), who had five husbands (v. 18), is now being fulfilled.

The scene takes place in the Temple precincts (8:2), so to say under the nose of the chief priests and all their henchmen. Jesus is aware that the chief priests want to trap him and find a way to demand his death. By claiming to be the living water, Jesus claims to be the new Temple (Ezek 42:1-12). The Temple that was the source of pride, especially for the priests, will be desecrated (24:21), and eventually destroyed (Jn 2:19). The Risen Lord will be the one and only Temple who can mediate God’s presence. The story of the woman being forgiven by Jesus “is about the challenge to embed religious authority that Jesus brings and the possibilities of new life that arise from this challenge. Jesus places his authority to forgive and to offer freedom over against the religious establishment’s determination of the categories of life and death.”<sup>18</sup> By his death and resurrection Jesus abolishes all patriarchy and hierarchy. We will be empowered to approach our Abba without any intermediaries. Patriarchy and hierarchy is the real adultery. When we indulge in this kind of thinking we abandon the Triune God: a

communion of three different but equal persons. We replace him with Baal (Jer 2:8). We begin to load it over others, and thereby behave like the unbelievers (10:42). Then we make a God unto our image and likeness.

The woman brought to Jesus is symbolic of patriarchal domination. The crime of adultery is defined to suit patriarchal passion. A married man can sleep with any number of women, provided they are not married, and still go scot free. A married woman, who sleeps with another man, married or not, should be stoned to death. In a society where poverty is rampant, there are many needy women who for the sake of some money are prepared to entertain men. The core criminality of rape is the violation of the dignity of persons. "Rape is a devastating crime... But the emotional trauma can be worse than any physical injury. Women who are raped have nightmares, panic attacks, waves of self-doubt, an overwhelming sense of distrust. The lives of women who are raped are forever changed. Some say they will never be the same that it's like dying."<sup>19</sup> Hence, women who are forced by poverty to sell themselves are in some manner being raped. They are not engaging in sex with full freedom. Patriarchy and hierarchy are greater crimes than actual rape and adultery. They structurally ensure that women will never be allowed to be fully free. In challenging the accusers to the woman to throw a stone at her if they were free from sin, Jesus is also questioning them on the crime to keeping women submissive to them. He is hitting out at patriarchy and hierarchy. The men who came to accuse are now being accused. But they still have some honesty. They are aware of their crime, and they respond. One by one they disappear, starting with the eldest (*presbyteros*, v. 9), the symbol of patriarchy and hierarchy.<sup>20</sup> If the woman has to be freed, they have to disappear not only from the scene, but also from her life. In not condemning the woman Jesus wants her to live. He wants her and all women to live with the dignity that is theirs as daughters of the one God, as sisters of the one Lord. That will happen when they are free from patriarchy and hierarchy not only as social structures, but also as interiorized 'values'.

The equality of woman and man is part of the radicality of the Good News. Hence the challenge of gender justice comes in as a major threat

to many, as most of us have yet to understand Jesus. There is bound to be resistance. Yet, if women are to be fully free, it is not enough that some structures are changed. We need to rediscover Jesus and think in new ways. We need to see people the way Jesus saw them. We need to remind ourselves once again that “judged by the standards of his religious environment, [Jesus] was in fact ‘liberal’, and that it was probably that very fact that sent him to the cross.”<sup>21</sup> We need to make our own the creative movement of Salvation history, believing that the Spirit of the Risen Lord will lead us to the fullness of truth (Jn 14:26). Only when women are fully free will the society and Church be free. Only when women are equal citizens of the state and equal members of the Church will we be fully human, fully Christian. Only when women share in all the responsibilities within the Church as priests, prophets and as pastors, will the Church be fully Catholic.

The woman was brought to Jesus to be condemned. Jesus does not condemn her not because she did not sin (v. 11), not merely because he did not come to condemn but to save (Jn 3:17) but because by condemning her he would endorse the patriarchal expectation. That is what Jesus least wanted to do. He corrects the narrow understanding of adultery prevalent in the earlier tradition. According to the Old Testament, a man was guilty of adultery only if the woman with whom he had intercourse was married. Now were a man to lustfully look at a woman, married or not, he would be guilty of adultery (Mt 5:27-28). In this text “Jesus places the blame for lust on men, something rather unusual in ancient Mediterranean cultures.”<sup>22</sup> Those men, who were trying to defend the Law, are like those two old men who brought Susanna to trial. She was brought veiled. The two old rascals “ordered her to be unveiled, that they might feed upon her beauty” (Dn 13:32). They could not commit real adultery with her. They are trying to make up for it through visual adultery. They are the real criminals. So often today those who claim to be protectors of law and order, of truth and justice, are the ones who are most guilty. They have defined law and order, truth and justice, to suit their purpose. They need to be freed from their blindness. They need a new vision. Jesus himself suggests this.

It is very interesting to note that after sending the woman home, Jesus makes a surprising claim: "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (v. 12). The woman goes home with a new vision. Her meeting with Jesus has been the source of enlightenment. She now sees herself equal to man. She now realizes that men cannot make laws that deprive her of justice. She is also freed from a prejudice. Not all men are misogynist. It must also be stated that often when women are oppressed other women are party to that oppression. I can imagine the mother-in-law laying a trap for her daughter-in-law, who does not dance to her whims and fancies, in order to get rid of her. There are many men like Jesus, who stand up for women's rights. What Jesus did for her may have reminded her of another great prophet. Daniel too had rescued a woman accused of adultery, and got her accusers condemned. She and all women have reasons to hope: God's prophets and his Son are on their side. Those who try to oppress them will have to face divine judgement, as did those two elders.

The episode of the woman being forgiven was "a radical story."<sup>23</sup> This story itself has its own story that is very significant for us today. Its literary character makes it more a Synoptic text rather than a Johannine narrative. The Synoptic Gospels were composed around 70 A.D., while John was ready by 90 A.D. The early Christians were largely of Jewish origin, very much soaked in a culture shaped by patriarchy and hierarchy. It took time for the early Christian community, to discover the depth of the Jesus-event and its significance for humans. This became necessary as the Church had more and more Gentiles members. It was forced to go beyond Old Testament categories and thought patterns. It is John who helps us in this direction. "The Christology and theology of this gospel provided the raw material out of which the great Christian doctrines were forged...[this is significant because] Major questions about Jesus, God and the Christian life were left unanswered by Jesus and the apostolic Church."<sup>24</sup> John's theological contribution has been such that some have even considered him to be "*the* theologian."<sup>25</sup>

Towards the end of the first century and the early decades of the second, the community of Jesus was seen more and more as the new Israel.

Thus the early Church lost the originality of Jesus and went back to the Old Testament in many ways, absorbing its cultic, legalistic and hierarchical mentality structures. Patriarchy was the original hierarchy. “It was only when a more liberal penitential practice was firmly established [within the Church] that it [the story of the woman] received wide acceptance.”<sup>26</sup> The story reflects the graciousness of God, the God who acts in the most radical way in our history through the mystery of the Incarnation. Patriarchal structures resist divine interventions: they unsettle their authority. They find it more convenient to return to the Old Testament.<sup>27</sup> Today too the Church may be resisting the Word of God given to us in Jesus, the Word that proclaims equality of woman and man in all aspects of life. They do have differences, but these are related to the transmission of life at the biological level. In all other areas of life, they are primarily persons, and like the Persons within the Trinity, they are equal. To press differences beyond that point is to resist the gracious God and close ourselves to his Word. Only by being pilgrims moving ahead can we be faithful to God who joined us in our pilgrimage through the mystery of Incarnation. God’s Word as it comes to us in Scripture has to be properly understood and integrated into our life. For this we need to be open to competent Bible scholars and committed theologians. Only then will we be able to birth a new vision.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Francis J. MOLONEY, *The Gospel of John*, SP: 4, 1998, p. 259.
- <sup>2</sup> George R. BEASLEY-MURRAY, *John*, WBC: 36, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999, p. 143.
- <sup>3</sup> Raymond E. BROWN, *The Gospel according to John*, AB: 29 & 29A, 1970, p. 336. <sup>4</sup> BEASLEY-MURRAY, *John*, p. 143.
- <sup>5</sup> John P. MEIER, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols. NY: Doubleday, 1991-2009, vol. 1, pp. 171-174.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144. <sup>7</sup> BROWN, *The Gospel according to John*, p. 335.
- <sup>8</sup> There are many in the Church today bishops and their scribes, canonists and theologians who wish some passages in the Gospels were expunged. They do not wish to see Jesus as one places his authority to forgive and to offer freedom over against the religious establishment’s determination of the categories of life and death.
- <sup>9</sup> MOLONEY, *The Gospel of John*, p. 260.



- <sup>10</sup> Elaine Adler GOODFRIEND, “Adultery”, *ABC*, vol. 1, pp. 82a–86a, here p. 82a.
- <sup>11</sup> Roland J. FALEY, “Leviticus”, *JBC*, pp. 67-85, here p. 80a.
- <sup>12</sup> GOODFRIEND, “Adultery”, p. 82a.
- <sup>13</sup> MOLONEY, *The Gospel of John*, pp. 260-261.
- <sup>14</sup> Gail R. O’DAY, “The Gospel of John”, *NIB*, vol. 9, pp. 491-865, here p. 629b.
- <sup>15</sup> MOLONEY, *The Gospel of John*, p. 259.
- <sup>16</sup> BROWN, *The Gospel according to John*, p. 336.
- <sup>17</sup> BEASLEY-MURRAY, *John*, p. 113.
- <sup>18</sup> O’DAY, “The Gospel of John”, p. 630.
- <sup>19</sup> Mary DICKSON, “Rape, the Most Intimate of Crimes”, 1996, <http://www.pbs.org/kued/nosafeplace/articles/rapefeat.html>; a.o 31-07-2014.
- <sup>20</sup> It should be noted that within the New Testament that ‘*presbyteros*’ and ‘*episkopos*’ are used interchangeably (See J. ROHDE, “*presbyteros*”, in Horst BALZ & Gerhard SCHEIDER, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 vols., Grand Rapids (Mich): William B. Eerdmans, 1982–83, vol. 3, pp. 148b-149b, here p. 149b).

This explains why “there is a broad consensus among scholars, both Catholic and Protestants, that in the New Testament one does not find evidence to support the theory that before the apostles died they appointed a bishop in charge of each of the churches which they had founded. Rather, it is generally agreed that with the exception of Jerusalem, where James the brother of the Lord exercised leadership, at the close of the New Testament period each local church was being led by a group of men called ‘elders’ (*presbyteroi*) or ‘overseers’ (*episkopoi*).

*Most Catholic scholars agree that the historic episcopate is the result of a development that took place in the post-New Testament period.”* F. A. SULLIVAN, “Apostolic Succession”, F. A. SULLIVAN, “Apostolic Succession”, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 15 vols., New York: Gale, 2003, vol. 1, pp 589b–592a, here p. 590a; emphasis added.

It is also very interesting to note what Jerome states very emphatically: “A presbyter and a bishop are the same; and *before the urging of the devil gave rise to factionalism in religion...* the churches were governed by a joint council of presbyters.” William A. JURGENS, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, 3 vols., Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, rep. 2005, vol. 2, p. 194, no. 1371; emphasis added.

From this it is clear that the monarchical episcopate, and later on the monarchical papacy are the result of the process of centralization of power within the Church. As such it is victory of pre-Christian patriarchal thinking over the egalitarian spirit of the Good News.

- <sup>21</sup> Earnst KASEMANN, *Jesus Means Freedom: A Polemical Survey of the New Testament*, London: SCM Press, 1969, p. 17.
- <sup>22</sup> D. M. SCHOLER, “Women”, in Joel B. GREEN, Scott McKNIGHT, & I. Howard MARSHALL, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Downers Grove (Ill.): InterVarsity Press, 1992, pp. 880a-887a, here p. 881b.
- <sup>23</sup> O’DAY, “The Gospel of John”, p. 630.
- <sup>24</sup> MOLONEY, *The Gospel of John*, p. 20.
- <sup>25</sup> BROWN, *The Gospel according to John*, p. cxxvii.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.
- <sup>27</sup> There are enough indications that many in the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, especially during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, preferred to follow Vatican I rather than Vatican II. Sad to say, this is happening even today.

## New forms of Consecrated Life

- Joyce Almeida

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It is in the midst of the world the consecration is lived. Does this seem a contradiction?

Life of consecration and a secular life-style : hence such persons are named by the official Church, as members of the Secular Institute (S.I.) – through the Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII “Provida Mater Ecclesia” in 1947.

In praise and appreciation of S.I. the same Pope in Motu Proprio “Primo Feliciter” stresses “...it must be kept in mind that the proper and the special character of these institutes, that is, their secular character, which constitutes their whole reason for existence, must always stand out clearly in everything....Christian perfection must be pursued and professed in the world.”(Primo Feliciter no. II March 12, 1948).

Trying to live this S.I. way of life for the past fifty years was an uphill task to begin with, because it is the Church personnel who first of all do not understand. Some say straight to your face “this is neither fish nor flesh”. Lack of understanding, less encouragement and sometimes misunderstanding has caused some of the S.I.s to be stunted in growth.

There is always a comparison made with Religious life: e.g. numbers of novices and the big institutions run by them while S.I. do not run institutions etc... There is one factor that has to be kept in mind, viz. in their life-style and apostolate if these S.I. persons are not sufficiently secular their identity is not clear. That is the reason several institutes that got started on these lines were hesitant to go ahead because of the atmosphere in the Church that held on to traditional ways of consecrated life and were challenged by these new forms in the Church.

When I left home while already working as a teacher 53 years ago, it was difficult to convince my own brothers and sisters about my decision. It is not that I knew everything about the S.I. way of life back then. But my conviction that it is a challenging way of life offered by the Church, convinced my parents to send me with their blessings.

St. Vincent Pallotti lived between the years 1795 – 1850. He saw very clearly, and promoted the role of the laity in the Church. He wanted lay people, men and women to be equal members in the Church by actively living their apostolate. It is such a spirited group of Pallottine (men and women) who ventured to start a women's group with a clear vision to live a secular institute way of life with the Pallottine ideals in India. Hence young Indian women were invited.

Here let us reflect as to what is a S.I. vocation. We understand that life is always a vocation and in some aspects unique. Life is always a mission in the broad sense and in this life each person is invited with a task for her/his own people or family. But a special vocation and a special mission with characteristics that transcend the family environment, opens out to embrace an entire nation or even the whole of humankind.

During 1950s and 1960s several lay consecrated groups in Europe got started and brought members to India. My group however consists of a full Indian membership, now known as The Khrist Sevikas, as part of the Pallottine family. Similar Pallottine lay consecrated groups numbering seven in all, exist in different parts of the world today. S.I.s are like the leaven in the dough Mt.13,33. These (S.I.) become leaven to raise the dough. Hence the function of the S.I. is not the function of

a group commitment in the temporal realities, nor is it a function of group commitment in the ministry of the Word or the Eucharist. Substantial elements of the Institutes of consecrated life that Vatican II calls our attention to: like 'Primo Feliciter' which spell out the specific characteristics of these institutes consist of the following three elements:

a) the profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience.

b) the assumption of the above counsels as obligation, through a lasting bond (vow, promise, oath) recognized and regulated in the law of the Church.

c) secularity, finding expression in all aspects of the life of the members and which permeates all their apostolic activities.

These three elements are equally necessary and indispensable. The fundamental charism would be different in each Institute as per the Founders. The difference between Religious Institutes and Secular Institutes is precise and clear. We could say that a typical commitment of the members of a S.I. is one that leads them to turn their whole life into evangelization.

In India we organized a Federation of S.Is and Lay Societies more than 30 years ago independent of the large and powerful body of the Conference of Religious in India. I remember writing as president of this Federation in India, to the then President of the CBCI (Catholic Bishops Conference of India) informing him of our existence as we moved ahead in our own way. Thus today we have 19 groups of different S.I.s in India and we meet regularly on the National level. We have held several Asian level meetings too. Representatives have also been present at the World S.I. meetings which usually take place in Rome.

One faces 'reality' in its varied forms daily while living out this way of life. I recall some of my experiences here. Soon after the conclusion of Vatican II, Renewal programmes were taken seriously. The CBCI and the NBCLC (National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre) in Bangalore organized programmes for various groups in the Church. I was then on the staff at this centre, and also a member of a mobile team

that went out to dioceses to conduct seminars for the clergy. The team consisted of two priests and myself. It was unthinkable that a woman could be on the team to teach, give model Catechism lessons, conduct meditation and prayer sessions for 300 priests. “You are not even a sister?!” “How can you lecture to Priests?” “O, No you can’t stay at the Bishop’s house” even though the other team members could! These were the reactions towards a consecrated lay woman those days. Thank God some of this mentality has changed today at least in some places. In one diocese while all the priests with the bishop attended the seminar, their problem was how could a woman enter their dinning hall?! Well, years have passed, hopefully renewal has taken place at all levels.

I was also a trained journalist and an accredited Reporter. Hence I was officially appointed to Report the all India CBCI meetings twice, in Pune and at Chennai . Those days one Reporter was allowed to attend all the sessions of course only to listen and not to speak but send out reports daily. I could sense not all were comfortable with the presence of a woman with all bishops, but I also found some very understanding participants who allowed me to do my work. I enjoyed those challenging days as a journalist. In the ICPA, (Indian Catholic Press Association) there were only a handful of women among the men. When I was appointed the executive director of SAR News (South Asian Religious News) which was the only Catholic news agency in India, the question arose how a woman could be appointed to this post which only priests/men held.

All through my apostolate and life of witnessing, there have been several instances that I can recall where customs and situations were challenged. Once while reporting on an important Church event of a high profile personality, it was doubly checked with my news agency wheather I was a good Catholic, strong in faith who had studied theology.

Few elements are given here concerning the life of S.Is. It is also good to note how work is purified through a life lived in accordance with the evangelical counsels. Therefore it is made to conform more closely to the will of the Creator as expressed in the command given to man and woman at the moment of creation. Thus the efforts of members of S.Is to find a spirituality of labor can be fruitful for the Church as a whole.

S.Is. can offer their experience to all the laity and thus make a contribution to the construction of a spirituality of labour in keeping with lay life. The S.I. represents the natural place for elaborating a spirituality of labour, (Provida Mater, Lex Peculiaris, Art III, para 4) that could become and be lived by all those who are engaged in the world of work. S.Is. live diverse legitimate vocations in various institutes.

Some other members of my Institute worked in poor villages on the border of Delhi in Haryana. They lived in a mud house like the villagers where the buffaloes had the best place while the rest of the family adjusted. Slowly the two of them whom they called “diddi” (older sister) got a hut to themselves without a buffalo! There they cooked, slept and also prayed, but it was an open house where the children and women could come in at any time. People were curious to see what they ate and what they did sitting silently in front of a ‘Diya’. As women began to trust them they started sharing their problems and the children gathered for non-formal education. From the diocese of Delhi some one visited occasionally and on weekends in a fortnight they went to the city for Prayer, Holy Mass etc. Appreciated by the Church personnel, this life of witnessing in a fully Hindu village could not continue for more than two years as the members were often attacked by malaria. The literacy and hygiene classes given were well remembered there. At that time there was a comparison made and it was said that only the S.I. members can live such a life. I question Why? We often think an Institution must be built to start a work or do social work. When one of our members started collecting children from various slums under a tree she did not visualize how that would grow. Over the years through planning recreational facilities, study and celebrations of feasts, several of these children who were later admitted to normal schools and completed the 10<sup>th</sup> class are many without an Institution. Our member who trained in Feminist Theology has been empowering various women’s groups both in the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations. This is a slow process but it is making headway today through groups of enlightened women all over the country.

My experience of working and living in mixed (men/women) communities of church institutions are completely unique. Mixing and interacting

with laity is quite a learning and happy experience of being with equals. However it is another experience with clergy in the church. Even if one is on par with them professionally they treat a woman member of a S.I. differently. Quite often if one is found efficient, competent, working hard, not all men on the staff are able to appreciate it and accept you as equal. There are exceptions though. Standing up for my rights and questioning has led me to quit too. While the community experience was matured interaction speaking up and expressing opinions sometimes could be disastrous! On the other hand living in a mixed community is an experience in growth and maturity.

I am grateful for the chance to live and work with the poor tribal families in Bihar on a direct evangelization assignment from the Bishop of the diocese where I not only learned how to live with minimum but also learned basic values for life. I learned so much from them. I lived in a mudhouse of a very poor village with two male catechists and one sister, my role as leader of the team taught me much and helped in the growth of my own spiritual journey.

In this way of life I am not told to do this or that apostolate. It is a process of sincere discernment that takes into consideration the situation and need of particular people that helps me reach a decision. In this process I consult the leader of the group (President) and her team try to who will stand by me, support me and pray for me even though the decision is mine. Thus living this type of life I stand alone in my struggles. It is a profound experience of prayer, closeness with the Lord and often with the help of a good spiritual guide and trustworthy friends that one can continue growing in this consecration. Once I feel called to serve a particular people, I really 'pitch the tent' and try to be fully present and get involved with them.

Comparing our kind of life to the community life of the Nuns, we are often put down. As the S.Is. are not bound to community life (Canon 716 no. 2), yet to belong to a group and fulfill certain responsibilities towards it, it is not easy. There are so many personal decisions to be made and lived for. This has to be in keeping with one's responsibilities in the profession and the sense of belonging to the institute. Where do



I live and how? These are practical decisions, I have to settle in keeping with my Constitution. No one decides for me. Members of S.Is. mostly decide their apostolate, hence no transfers as is the custom among the Religious. There is however a danger that that one can build her/his 'kingdom' and live forever there. My experience has been to keep moving so that I could give myself to more, as and when required. Definitely, life is more colorful and fulfilling besides there is a movement of a pilgrim as part of the 'Pilgrim Church'.

Naturally the type of formation for S.I. members is different in keeping with the documents of the Church and the Canon Law no 722:1,2,3. This is to suit our life and outside the set patterns of formation that exist. Each Institute works out their Formation plan in keeping with their special charism too. I have been in the formation work for our institute for few years. In the field of formation among Priests and Religious, so much is written and discussed. It seems to be a never ending topic for discussion and study. Once a sister genuinely interested to know about life in a S. I. asked, to my surprise, "do you have a formation?" My answer was "if you need 3 years of it, don't you see that our type of life would need more?" Yes, this is an area that can't be ignored. Yet proper planning and implementation is it seriously important. A well structured Formation Plan (FP) exists in every Institute. But to execute it, one needs a broad mind with a lot of flexibility. This is because the whole formation period is different from person to person as it is a more individual personal formation and not a group programme. According to the age, background and profession of the individual the FP has to be adjusted. There may not always be a group yet each person's formation is to be taken seriously. As per her profession (she may have a permanent job) and taking into account the acute unemployment in the country, we can't just put aside everything and begin the formation. So in-service-training may be one way and this may take a longer period. There may be courses to be studied through correspondence etc. However all levels of formation have to be completed. Adjustment and flexibility alone can make the programme successful. The person is called to make many adjustments and sacrifices. Through all this, the individual person with all God-given talents will emerge and blossom.

With lesser institutional security as compared to the Religious, one might ask what about security in old age? This is a big question today when natural families do not fully care for parents, elders, etc in most cases. My Institute is still tackling this issue. The uncertainties do exist but that too is part of life. With minimum security, life can still be meaningful and challenging because the final security is the assurance that God has called me for His mission here and now. Therefore alone and yet not alone.

Here I recall what late Fr. J. Neuner sj our great 'Guru' had stressed over and over as he gave a strong spirituality for the S.I.s. in India leading and guiding us for many years. He made the S.I. members understand their prophetic role. He stressed "there can be no true witness to God unless it is related to actual life; God's word must touch our earthly realities, men and women of our world, so that they are able to translate into practical categories. This precisely is the task of the laity who must know both, God and the world. Filled with the Spirit of Jesus Christ they must also be aware of and concerned with, the secular city. This means more than professional competence". (Secular Institutes and Lay Societies today, Published by the Federation of S.I. & L.S of India and Sri Lanka, 1982). Being close to people sharing their lives and struggles, we are present in our world with its innumerable needs, not only to criticize but to help, encourage, build, unite through word and deed; this is to anticipate in concrete life the coming of God's Reign. In and through our life and work, witness and mission Jesus's own mission is continued.

All along I must say that life has offered many experiences and each of them has been a new page in learning and growing in my consecration to live for God's people. The joy, the fulfillment, the pain and the struggle are all simply part of this. There is always a future holding out hope in difficult situations with those I work for. I need to live the present passionately. I need to keep alive the faith I live and work for in this world that has lost much of the spiritual values in the midst of materialism which we breathe day in and day out all over. Our life therefore is more of 'Being' than 'Doing' i.e. witnessing in our own little way wherever we can as the joy of living is what the world can see, 'in the midst of the world.'

## ***Walk the Talk: Life of Creative fidelity***

- Alice Erani SJC

*Sr. Alice Erani SJC is a teacher turned lawyer who lives among people. She is one of the pioneers of St. Joseph's of Cluny Sisters who initiated the insertion community movement in her Congregation in 1993.*

Openness, dialogue, change, renewal, reform, inclusiveness, adaptation, creativity and fidelity are some of the terms that characterise the second Vatican Council which certainly has been a very important event, a significant milestone in the history of the modern day Church. It has given a new direction to the whole life and mission of the entire Church reclaiming its prophetic role in the world in faithfulness to the Word Incarnate.

### **VATICAN II & CONSECRATED LIFE**

The council lauded Consecrated or Religious Life, it as an integral part of the institutional Church and invited all Religious institutes to renewal for the effective fulfillment of the mission of Jesus. All Founders of religious Congregations were enlightened by the Holy Spirit and were captivated by a deep experience of a profound encounter with Jesus of the Gospels and simultaneously they encountered a particular need of oppressed and suffering humanity. They made a definitive choice to share their pain and struggle and devote their life to serve these people and adopted a lifestyle in line with this choice. But as it usually happens, over the years the members drifted far from the original spirit.

Vatican II made a clarion call to all religious to recapture the original founding spirit and refound their respective religious institutes. “The adaptation and renewal of religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, No.2)

## **FIDELITY TO MISSION**

In response to the challenge of the Vatican II to renew, reform and re-found religious life, in the late seventies and eighties religious life experienced a springtime with much creativity and radicality in its life and mission. There was a new awakening in individuals and groups in religious Congregations. But today, fifty years after Vatican II, looking at the way religious life is lived in the Church, it is very evident that conformity is the order of the day. Recently I heard someone making an observation about community living: “Unity is such a distant dream, almost unachievable. So let us have some uniformity at least”. In this situation of a feeling of hopelessness and desperation, it is imperative to think creatively to recapture the noble aims of religious life.

Fidelity to the mission of Jesus cannot be replaced by mere adherence to a set of rules and regulations oftentimes irrelevant and even detrimental to meaningful living. In other words, it is the mission that should determine or shape our religious life and not vice versa. It was the challenge of the mission in a particular context at a particular historical moment that inspired those who were docile to the Spirit’s prompting to found Congregations. Being true to the original charism of the founding leader does not mean replicating what the leader did, but being true to the spirit of the leader and acting in a way adapted to the needs and challenges of the present day. It certainly presupposes creative thinking and courageous action. It is a call to be prophets “having the mind of Christ” (Phil 2:5) with self-emptying attitude and with a deep sense of the presence of God in the contexts of one’s life.

## **CREATIVITY IN MISSION**

God’s presence in creation invites everyone to participate in the transformation of the world. Since the world is not a finished product,

we are co-creators in the process of continuous creating. That is why there is room for new discoveries and inventions in every field. The world is in a process of evolution whether we like it or not. We are to become part of that evolution consciously. Creative people cause re-evolution - revolution. Jesus did that. He became part of the evolution of the Jewish society and caused a revolution in its thinking, attitude and life. As a result a new way of life was born- a movement called ***the way of Jesus of Nazareth***. Creative fidelity to Jesus' movement of counter-culture is to live and continue Jesus' culture of humanizing the world by announcing the way to create a situation of God's presence and denouncing the systems and structures that prevent and obstruct the presence of God. Prophets and prophetesses of all ages and creeds belong to this tribe. The religious are called to be such prophets and radical witnesses to this mission of Jesus. Just as Jesus did not give any blueprint to his disciples, the Council did not spell out details of renewal, but offered broad guidelines for the same leaving it to the creativity of the members of each religious institute.

## **NEED FOR SERIOUS INTROSPECTION**

There have been many ways of actualizing God's dream of a new Kingdom through the education of the young, ministry of healing and through the social ministry. But, by and large, in the course of time we religious have settled down to institutional structures and systems to carry out the mission. We have been doing a lot of good works and continue to do so through our institutional structures even though the beneficiaries of our service are not by and large the poorest of the poor who have no one to stand for them. We are aware that while serving the people who can afford to avail themselves of our service, we often forget that our main focus must be the poorest of the poor.

## **‘NEW PRESENCE’ WAY OF LIVING - A NEW INITIATIVE**

Following the call of Vatican II to renew religious life and re-capture the original charism to make it relevant to mission in today's world, almost all the religious Congregations began to reflect and evaluate their way of life and mission. It is in this context that we the Cluny

Sisters of the Southwest Province of India initiated in 1993 a new venture called *The New Presence*. While not devaluing or minimizing the importance of the committed service rendered by our Sisters in our institutions it was also a strong conviction among some of us Cluny Sisters in the Southwest Province of India, that a more radical way of living the vision and mission of our foundress, Blessed Anne Marie Javouhey for the poorest of the poor is possible and could be undertaken by those who have experienced a call within their call. This conviction was born out of a strong urge from within some of us following many years of serious group reflection, sharing and discernment under the dynamic leadership of Sr. Theodore Isaac SJC.

This new way of living our charism was presented for the consideration of the General administration of the Congregation in the form of a proposal which was formulated at the end of a special retreat animated by Fr. Michael Jeyaraj SJ in July 1992 during which we clarified for ourselves how we wanted to live as Cluny Sisters in this new venture and involve ourselves in the life of the people following an incarnational spirituality. We named this new way of life *New Presence*, an expression, adopted from the Cluny General Chapter 1988, which called upon the members to live “*New Presences among the Poor*”. It took one whole year for the authorities of our Congregation to recognize, discern and finally approve this way of Cluny life. This period was truly a time of patience and perseverance, of humility and confidence convinced as we were that what we were asking for was in keeping with the gospel, the teachings of the Church and the Charism of our Foundress. Later on when we came in touch with and interacted with Fr. Thomas Kocherry CSSR of revered memory, Bro. C.M. Joseph sg, Fr. Philip Manthra sj, Sr. Noeline scc and Sr. Celestine sjt who had initiated alternate forms of religious living among the poor and the marginalised in different parts of the country, we were encouraged and enriched.

An extract from the proposal we presented to our Superior general for a “New Presence” – a new way of living our Cluny religious life - may give an insight into what we understand by creative fidelity to our charism in fulfilling the Church’s mission of witnessing to Jesus and his Gospel.

*“After many years of social service we realise that the need of the hour for our people are not projects and programmes and welfare services but a presence of hope and joy that is to BE ONE WITH them. It is our conviction that only in our authentic and joyous solidarity with the poor shall we give expression to a vibrant vision and way of life following the ever inspiring model of Jesus and our mother foundress, the Contemplative in Action. To be poor, to be with and for the poor are absolute requirements we feel for our credibility and relevance as Cluny Sisters engaged in Social ministry.”*

We had proposed that with the Congregation's support in every way, we be allowed to live in groups of 3 or 4 in one geographical area or block collaborating with other groups working with the same objectives. The short term plan would be for one year after which an evaluation would be made and the long term plan with modifications would be for 7-10 years after which we could move on to new areas. All the while we would keep in mind that our presence is to be like leaven in the dough fully immersed in the struggles of the poor for whom struggle itself is a way of life.

It was after much struggle with lengthy discussions with the Provincial administration and painful discernment that it was decided that for the moment only a group of 4 out of the 12 signatories of the proposal would embark on this new venture and I was one of them!

Like any other new movement which can only rely on God and the good will and enthusiasm of those committed to it, we too had only these resources and no real blue-print to go ahead. Although we wanted this initial experience of one year to be in Tamil Nadu as all of us knew enough Tamil, the decision of the Provincial was different. After considering a number of factors, it was decided that this new venture would be in the very backward part of north Karnataka, in the diocese of Bellary. Before long we recognized the hand of God in this decision because against our wish like the prophet Jonah we were brought to be among a people who needed us much and realised north Karnataka was the place chosen by God for our presence and ministry.

And so it was in 1993 that we pitched our tent in 'Burma camp' among the Tamil repatriates from Burma. From then on it was a journey forward. Together we reflected on how we should function effectively as a group and evolved certain essential principles for our living together based on our vision.

After having visited all the families in the camp and having interacted with individuals and groups esp. women we planned out a one year programme. Festivals, religious ceremonies, prayer, sickness and even death were all occasions of deep solidarity with our people irrespective of the community to which they belonged.

Our prayer-life through integration in the life-struggle of the people and our own became more alive and nourishing. According to Ng-Kzam-lin, "Living with people means struggle: both to struggle with them and to sustain an inner struggle with the self. Through these struggles one experiences new dimensions of spiritual renewal and I believe God is calling all of us to undergo that renewal. If we want to be one with the people, we must make up our minds to undergo a long and even painful process of tempering. (*Living with Christ among the people-The social activist's Bible* by Cedric Rebello, Claretian Publications, 1988). We realized that this is true as we have discovered a new and refreshing dimension of our spirituality in our encounter with the poor and the marginalized.

After a year of our stay in Burma Camp, we reached a little more clarity about our vision and mission and the movement nature of 'New Presence'. The essential characteristics we evolved during this time for our new ways of religious living were:

- That we who are called to this new way of life walk the same path as Jesus walked in complete solidarity with the poor.
- That we do not change our simple life-style as days go by with regard to food, clothing, and living quarters.
- That we do not establish ourselves in any place but move on and reach out to other places after a period of 3 to 5 years and in the meantime form committed cadres from among the people.



It was very heartening that for all the programmes there was good moral as well as financial support from the people in the Burma camp. Yet in our heart of hearts we knew we were more needed elsewhere. During the evaluation of the one and a half years of living in solidarity with the people in Burma camp, we put down the following criteria for our choice of a new place for our life of New Presence:

1. It would be a non-irrigated place where people are poorer
2. It would be an area untouched by any NGO
3. It would be an area where the church is not present so that the people would not be used to receiving handouts and expect the same from us.

And so in 1995 we moved out in two groups to Gurugunta in Lingsugur taluk of Raichur district of Bellary diocese and to Bijapur taluk in Bijapur district in Gulbarga diocese. The third New Presence community was formed in the year 2004 in Kundgol taluk of Dharwad district in the diocese of Belgaum.

We arrived at certain common principles of carrying out our work of Village Animation Programme in all three communities. These as well as our community living would be evaluated at the half yearly common meeting.

The question we are often asked is, “What is ‘*new*’ about the New Presence?”

**The new Presence is not new in *activities* but in the *process*.**

The main characteristics of this Presence are as follows:

- That the sisters called to it, walk the same road which Jesus walked in complete solidarity with the poor.
- That they do not change their life-style or make themselves more comfortable as days go by with regard to their food, clothing, living quarters etc.

- That they do not establish themselves in any place but move on and reach out to other people after a period of time, forming cadres or committed leaders from among the people as they move on.
- Participatory leadership will be practiced and all will take turns to animate the group as well as for other works.
- Contextualised and personalized community prayer.
- Regular evaluation and planning will be done.
- Each member will be ready to care front and be care fronted.
- Community discernment will be a must for every decision
- Transparency and accountability will be practised by all

We chose to continue to live in simple rented houses and took utmost care to see that the poor who came to our house felt at home just as they made us feel in their homes where we often shared their food and spent the nights after group meetings. We took care to avoid any kind of condescending and patronising attitude towards the people. And in all the activities of our animation programme they were equal partners with us. We had consciously taken a learning stance and were transformed by the poor whose life we shared. We were touched by their spirit of hospitality, fellow feeling, faith and resilience in very adverse situations.

The successes of an arduous and enduring conscientization of the poor people and their consequent transformation cannot be seen by someone who is not involved in the process of their transformation. Yet their empowerment was our joy and fulfillment in mission. How can we explain the feeling within when unlettered, poor, timid, marginalised rural women question with self confidence and courage an arrogant bank manager and demand services of the bank for their group or a rural boy who having been trained in the village night school takes on the bus conductor who tries to cheat him about the bus fare!

Although activities have been changed and external aspects of living have been modified, still the original vision has not disappeared. Most of the Sisters who have had an experience of this way of life for some time and have gone back to formal communities still carry with them

the values they imbibed during that experience. Appreciation and approval from the Congregation of our way of life found expression in the words our Superior General during one of her visits, “This is not only a good presence but a necessary presence ”.

‘New Presence’ way of life was a tiny step towards recapturing the original spirit of our Foundress for mission. May there be newer initiatives by younger members in every Congregation.

## CONCLUSION

On the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Council of Vatican II which in truth was a new Pentecost in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is opportune as religious *in* mission and *for* mission to recognise gratefully the presence of the Spirit in our lives and in the light of our past experiences to re-organise and re-equip ourselves. The same Spirit who was actively present at the Council of Vatican II needs to enable us to creatively respond in ever new ways to the complex situations of life in our society in fidelity to the prophetic mission entrusted to us looking towards the future with greater optimism. The words of Pope Francis both encourage and challenge us in this regard. “Today’s religious men and women need to be prophetic capable of waking up the world”

## A World without Nuns !

- Ms. Raynah Braganza Passanha

*Raynah Braganza Passanha is the Commission for Women in Poona Diocese and the member of the governing body of Caritas India. She has experience in working for the empowerment of women in Hongkong, Dubai and India, both in the Church and in society.*

Pope Francis calling attention to the 18th Day of Consecrated Life during his public audience on February 2, 2014, asked “*What would happen if there were no nuns in hospitals, no nuns in missions, no nuns in schools?*”

In his reflection on the day’s Gospel reading, which retold the story of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple, the Pope said that the incident is “*an icon of the giving of their lives by those who, through a gift of God, take on the typical traits of Jesus, chaste, poor, and obedient.*”

Emphasising that consecrated persons are a sign of God in the various contexts of life and “*leaven for the growth of a more just and fraternal society*”; the Pope repeated the need for these presences. He continued, “*Let us imagine a moment what would happen if there were no nuns in hospitals, no nuns in missions, no nuns in schools. Imagine a church without nuns! It is unimaginable. They are... the yeast that carries forward the people of God. These women, who consecrate their lives to God, who bring forward the message of Jesus, are great*”.

The Church and the world need “*this witness of love and of God’s mercy. Consecrated and religious persons offer witness that God is good and merciful*”.

Pope Francis indeed offers us a refreshing perspective of the importance and value of consecrated women and their contribution to the wellbeing and development of people, communities and the world. This positive viewpoint is different from the one projected by Church authorities and the media, the world over. In the past, nuns have been reduced to strange, superficial stereotypes. Either they are projected as the stern and cold Mother Superiors, or literal saints on earth like Mother Teresa, or women devoted to prayer and sacrifice. This portrayal of nuns sadly masks the stories of amazing, human beings in real life involved in living out their love for God in their love of neighbour.

There was a time when nuns “knew their place”. They ran schools, hospitals, orphanages, and homes for unwed mothers. They wore black and white habits, wooden rosaries dangled from their waists, and silvery crucifixes hung from their necks. They were missionary sisters, in far-off places. The Church and women religious were better at welfare and charitable support services along with traditional ministries such as education and healthcare, rather than confronting fundamental gender- and justice-related issues.

Then came the Second Vatican Council. In 1962, Pope John XXIII spearheaded the process of Vatican II which pointed to the importance of ‘reading the signs of the times’. The rights-based approach which situates human rights at the very center of its processes and focuses attention on combating issues of injustice, conflict and marginalization, began to slowly gain momentum.

Consecrated women, who number 702, 529 worldwide [almost double the number of priests - 414,313]<sup>1</sup>, are the major arm of the Church as they authentically witness Christ and his healing, comforting, supporting, challenging and transforming presence in the world through their involvement in social, economic and political concerns the world over.

To consider just a few of their involvements: besides the educational and medical institutions that they run, the unacknowledged and un-

acclaimed works across the globe include caring for the neglected and those on the margins of society, challenging unjust structures and supporting the voiceless in their quest for a humane and just existence. They run safe houses for victims of trafficking, work tirelessly to raise the children of mothers who are incarcerated in prison and when these women get out of prison, help them get rehabilitated into society. The nuns work all across the globe to make corporations more responsible to the human race, working for the rights of workers and against the exploitation of labour, especially the abolition of child labour. They work against the proliferation of nuclear weapons, for the rights of those with different sexuality, and are activists against torture and injustice. One would expect that during a time when the Church has suffered from great criticism and weathered very public scandals, it would be celebrating these incredible achievements of the nuns but sadly it had occasioned the official Church to sanction and attempt to clip the wings of these consecrated women who undauntedly seek to live like the Christ of the gospels not by the limiting rules or guidelines the authorities of the 'Church' attempt to impose on them. Today's nuns are simply too progressive for Church authorities who choose not to acknowledge and celebrate nuns and their work or to empower them and support the work they do in concretely striving to bring about the reign of God.

A majority of the nuns of today are fiercely dedicated to the concept of social justice and doing good in the world. They want to be of service. They want to authentically represent the Christ of the gospels who proclaimed his mission "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has sent me to bring Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, to give sight to the blind....*" To the consternation of the religious leaders of his time, he put compassion above the law, even above the religious laws and policies of his day. By his life and his teachings, Jesus revealed the heart of God. He was not limited by barriers of religion, race, sex, or morality. To know his priorities, is to take to heart the Beatitudes, his parables, the Last Judgment scene in Matthew 25. "What you did to the least, you did to me." For the vast majority of consecrated women, God's cause is the only concern of their hearts.

The recent travails of the LCWR in the USA speak of a male dominated Vatican desperately trying to retain power and control over a shrinking Church...which has little to do with the gospel and Jesus. Adherence to the Church authority is seen as supreme while adherence to the gospel and care for the poor and disenfranchised are given lip service but sadly, little action by the Church hierarchy. That this action contravenes the God whose hallmark is permitting 'free will' of all children of God is of little concern to those who retain the privilege of being '*alter Christus or another Christ*' in rituals rather than 'being like Christ' in reality. Why would a generation of young women raised to believe that they can be anything join an institution that pre-determines their identity and living out of their vocation and tells them there is something they absolutely cannot be, that there is a certain level they will never reach?

However, Religious Women must respond to the call of Christ. In the words of Paul VI in *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Vatican II document on the adaption and renewal of religious life: *The purpose of the religious life is to help the members follow Christ and be united to God through the profession of the evangelical counsels. It should be constantly kept in mind, therefore, that even the best adjustments made in accordance with the needs of our age will be ineffectual unless they are animated by a renewal of spirit. This must take precedence over even the active ministry. ... Let all religious, therefore, rooted in faith and filled with love for God and neighbor, love of the cross and the hope of future glory, spread the good news of Christ throughout the whole world so that their witness may be seen by all and our Father in heaven may be glorified (Matt. 5:16).*

In a recent book '*If Nuns Ruled the World*', by Jo Piazza, the author emphasizes that: 'If more Christians followed the example set by nuns, this world would be a much better, safer, and kinder place. Christianity would be in a much better place...because who lives the teachings of Jesus Christ more fully and authentically than nuns? They fight for the causes and the people Christ himself did and would today if He walked the Earth. They care for those considered "less than," they model kindness and charity, and they work to support peace, love, and understanding....Nuns live their lives as if they're on a mission...because

they are. They lead Christ-like lives because that's what their faith directs them to do.

The only problem is that nuns are a diminishing group as their life of chastity, service, and asceticism isn't for everyone.

Sisters contribute to human development through their spiritual witness and service to those in need. They are recognized as resourceful, efficient, and powerful agents of social change, with over 700,000 Sisters around the world educating our children, caring for the vulnerable, standing with the oppressed, promoting peace, and advocating for justice.

It is important that the official Church recognize the need to enhance the vitality of congregations throughout the world, enabling Sisters to advance human development more widely and effectively by developing their capacities essential to the on-going vitality of congregations, *Leadership*: exercise leadership effectively and develop new leaders and *Resources*: attract and steward resources (not only physical and financial capital, but also knowledge and social capital).

## **Nuns in India – source of hope**

The flourishing Church in India is destined to play a leading role in ecclesial affairs in the 21st century. At the end of 2007, India's Catholic population ranked 16th in the world, yet more than the faithful of any other nation, India's 18.6 million Catholics have fostered a culture in which priestly and religious vocations and Catholic institutions flourish. India has more nuns than any other nation (except Italy), and will soon rank first in the world if trends continue. Between 1999 and 2007, the number of professed women religious grew by 19 percent, from 79,608 to 94,450.<sup>2</sup> Latest figures on the CCBI website put their numbers at 95530. Four of the nine largest women's religious communities, are Indian.<sup>3</sup>

In order to respond to the need to vitalize the congregations of women religious, the Institute Mater Dei, housed in St. Monica's, a 450-year-old former Augustinian cloistered convent in Goa, India, is the bold statement by the women's section of the Conference of Religious India that not only priests and brothers should undertake advanced studies in theology, philosophy and leadership, but that nuns, who outnumber



male religious 4-to-1 in this nation, not only can but will forge a new role for women, both lay and religious. Today, the convent of St. Monica is a hotbed of feminist theology and one of South Asia's foremost centers of graduate education for religious women. The young sisters who attend classes here are encouraged to speak up forcefully and act boldly to not only to serve God's people in their various ministries, but to redress India's endemic male-dominated culture, both in secular society and the church itself.

In their late 20s and 30s, these sisters who never knew a church before the Second Vatican Council are being formed to carry out the council's mandate to bring the church into the world, and not to serve as handmaids to priests. "The Second Vatican Council challenged the religious to enter into a dialogue with the postmodern, globalized world," the institute's informational booklet reads. "The radical interpretation of religious life demands from us entirely new and courageous initiatives." Theirs is not so much the rage that fired the women's movement in the West, but a steely determination to not only stand with poor and oppressed women to redress the dominant role of men in the society, but also to break through the top-down governance they see in their own congregations, so that younger sisters will have a voice.<sup>4</sup>

India has a tiny Christian minority (2.3 percent, including Catholics) and yet has 10,240 Catholic elementary schools with more than three million students—more than any other nation in the world; more hospitals (754), medical dispensaries (2,504), leprosaria (220), and orphanages (2,327). The Missionaries of Charity, renowned the world over for the sanctity of their founder, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta (1910-97), serve the poorest of the poor in 133 countries. The Missionaries of Charity have grown to 5,128 members, an increase of 236 between 2006 and 2009.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to realize that through their varied ministries religious women have access to women, children and families to whom they can lend a listening ear, offer help, support, comfort or even offer a new way of living and being. Young women are helped to become critical thinkers who can then address issues of patriarchy both in the Church and society. While it is true that the resistance they will undoubtedly face in the world may deter some of them, it is also true that some will

address unjust structures with courage and the conviction knowing God's will for the dignity and fullness of life for all.

*Sr. Gretta D'Souza, an Ursuline Franciscan, who teaches a course on the Gospel of St. John in Mater Dei is reported to have said:* 'women's ordination is not the issue, the attitude of men is the issue and it must change. It's as if when we speak up, we are not for the church. Of course we are for the church; do you see the kind of young women who come to Mater Dei? Tell me they are not fired with the Gospel message. But it cannot be a Gospel message as only mandated by men, interpreted by men, legislated, controlled by men. . . Our students will go out equipped to preach and teach a new way to women — let me correct myself — it is really an old way, as this is the Gospel, that their place is not only stitching and cooking and keeping their heads down, but that they have dignity and worth in the eyes of God. Their Lord is the Lord and he sets them free, He does not keep them fettered by our Indian traditions. I firmly believe these sisters can be the role model for oppressed women. We already are oppressed women; we know this role very well. We are oppressed by our culture, the culture of our church and by ourselves.'

She continues 'We religious women have been taught if I am proper, then I am good. But what is holiness, what is wholeness? Is it only this? "Be holy as your father is holy" says far more than that. Are we authentic and not just efficient? Can we show a compassion that then turns into an active mode to help the oppressed?'

She calls on women religious to break the perceived stereotypes of 'holiness' by looking for inspiration to Jesus. She emphasizes that the sister praying her rosary all day in the chapel — but escaping the work of the community while people suffer, is not her idea of holiness. Rather it is a delicate balance, between properly understanding and living the vow of obedience and just being mindless. She says that it is not the freedom to do anything one wants to do but the freedom to act on the demands of one's conscience.<sup>6</sup>

The nuns in India work in institutions as well as in distant villages and tribal areas often without their communities or structures to support them. That is where the gospel of Christ is lived out. They know they

are called to dialogue within their own communities to see how they can make their apostolate more relevant to the present times.

There are several examples of nuns fearlessly being at the forefront of being a voice for the voiceless: Sister Sharmi D'Souza, a member of the Sisters of Mary Immaculate, told journalists on December 2014, at a Vatican news conference that presented Pope Francis' World Day of Peace message, which urged everyone to fight modern forms of slavery how the sisters had put 30 human traffickers behind bars in the last four years. "In one night, we saved 37 girls," she said, adding that 10 were minors. The sisters take the women to safety and offer them support and assistance. She spoke of the need for pastors to come along, for the support of bishops, and priests, as with them much more can be done.<sup>7</sup>

Sister Valsa John of the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary, 53, was hacked to death in November 2011, for her work to help impoverished tribal peoples against exploitation by the coal-mining industry in Jharkhand state in eastern India.<sup>8</sup>

Salesian Sisters at Marialaya Children's Home in Chennai, India help to rescue young girls from the sad reality of child trafficking and child labor. Every single day, all over India, hundreds of young girls are taken from their homes and families, forced into child labor or to be beggars on the street, or sold to be domestic help. Since Marialaya was started in 1990, the sisters have rescued more than 2,000 girls from child labor, prostitution and begging.<sup>9</sup>

Sister Lucy Kurien of the Holy Cross of Chavanod founded Maher, a shelter for survivors of domestic violence outside of Pune. In the nearly 17 years that she has been welcoming battered women and children—as well as women at risk for street violence and trafficking—Sr. Lucy has known thousands of women whose families were shattered by violence and poverty.<sup>10</sup>

Sr. Julie George a human rights lawyer and a member of the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit in India, is director of *Streevani* [Voice of Women], a women's empowerment organization. This NGO has religious women lawyers/activists

committed to informing, educating and empowering the poor, especially women, on their legal rights. They offer legal services and engage in policy-level interventions and public interest litigations in order to help women access justice.<sup>11</sup> Streevani also reaches out to women domestic workers enabling them to organize themselves for self-help and collective action. Counselling, legal aid, promotion of women's participation in Panchayati Raj, environmental awareness, gender sensitization are some of the projects they are involved in.

For these nuns who are actively engaged in reaching out to the marginalized they all speak of their motivation and strength coming through prayer and their deep relationship with Jesus. Committed to their calling they reach out in the name of Christ to the most vulnerable in society sharing Christ's love by offering practical, emotional and spiritual care. Jesus' mission mandate found in Luke is what helps these nuns put their work in perspective. They see that 'giving good news to the poor' does not always have to refer to the economically poor. The poor can be those who have suffered tremendous injustice. God's reign is about bringing peace and justice to people and they work towards providing that. These women devote their time and energy to make other people's lives better and to bring about a change in the world often through an institution that at times, does not even support their work.

The instances of these nuns who tirelessly tend to struggling people and are seen fighting on the frontlines of social justice for the people who live on the margins of our society rarely get banner headlines or magazine covers or even recognition from their male peers, but they do it anyway. They are catalysts of change and are absolutely inspirational regarding how faith can be a tool to do some good in the world.

## **Hope for the world**

Pope Francis has on a number of occasions called for the development of a theology of women. . . .for their Feminine Genius to lead the Church into uncharted territories . . . for more women to be visible in the Church to bring the feminine perspective to spirituality and faith.

The Final Report of the Apostolic Visitation of Women Religious in the United States was positive, realistic, and hopeful, giving Sisters and the

whole Church reason to hope. The report also points to possible pathways to a more hopeful future. Three of the “calls” of the report give women religious and the whole Church reason to hope: The call for dialogue with the Church, the call for an increase in decision-making roles for women in the Church and the call to update the Vatican document, *Mutual Relations*.

**First, the call for dialogue.** Throughout this process, Sisters have been engaged in dialogue with members of other religious congregations and with the laity. The report also lists a further call to bishops and clergy: “[The Sisters] noted the ongoing need for honest dialogue with bishops and clergy as a means of clarifying their role in the Church and strengthening their witness and effectiveness as women faithful to the Church’s teaching and mission.”

**Second, the call for roles in decision-making.** The report states: “We will continue to work to see that competent women religious will be actively involved in ecclesial dialogue regarding ‘the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church’s life.’” This quote is taken from Pope Francis’ *Joy of the Gospel* and brings both joy and hope to many women and men in the Church.

**Finally, the call to update the 1978 document, *Mutual Relations*:** “It will certainly be of interest to all that Pope Francis has asked our Dicastery, in close collaboration with the Congregation for Bishops, to update the curial document *Mutuae Relationes* regarding the collaboration among bishops and religious, in accord with the Church’s resolve to foster the ecclesial communion which we all desire.”

The final call must ensure that women religious are involved in the process of updating the document from the beginning, and will be given the support needed to ensure that the voice and experience of women religious throughout the world is integrated into the document’s reformulation.<sup>12</sup>

These pathways will hopefully result in more women engaging in the life of the Church, and some discerning a vocation to the vowed religious life.

To go back to Pope Francis: *A world without nuns – it is unimaginable*. Truly, these agents of change, voices for the voiceless,

are role models for *faith in action*! Their contribution to spreading God's reign by enabling 'fullness of life' to be enjoyed irrespective of race, colour, creed, gender etc is commendable and must be acknowledged and celebrated. Church authorities needs to acknowledge religious women and their work as part of the 'body of Christ' with more respect. They will need to be given more power and leadership roles in the church and their contribution cannot be trivialised, minimised or taken for granted. One cannot deny that their unique way of life leaves them unencumbered with the attachments of spouse, or children. It is this that allows them to live this very authentic life dedicated to the people who live at the margins of society and the causes they are fighting for.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Source: Statistical Yearbook of the Church 2012
- <sup>2</sup> Source: [http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/609/a\\_source\\_of\\_hope.aspx](http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/609/a_source_of_hope.aspx)
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid
- <sup>4</sup> Source: <http://ncronline.org/news/liberating-nuns-india>
- <sup>5</sup> Source: [http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/609/a\\_source\\_of\\_hope.aspx](http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/609/a_source_of_hope.aspx)
- <sup>6</sup> Source: <http://ncronline.org/news/teacher-and-her-students>
- <sup>7</sup> <http://www.ucanindia.in/news/catholic-nuns-lead-raids-on-brothels-in-india/27212/daily>
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/nun-serving-tribal-peoples-killed-in-india>
- <sup>9</sup> <http://thecatholicspirit.com/special-sections/world-mission-sunday/indian-nun-works-save-children-trafficking/>
- <sup>10</sup> <http://www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/after-this-indian-nun-witnessed-a-womans-murder-she-saved-thousands-more-from-domestic-violence>
- <sup>11</sup> Source: <http://globalsistersreport.org/blog/q/q-sr-julie-george-7626>
- <sup>12</sup> <http://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/vatican-report-gives-sisters-and-whole-church-reason-hope>

## Ongoing challenges in the life of the consecrated in the soil of India

- John Dayal

*John Dayal is a journalist and civil rights activist who supports minorities such as Christians and Dalits. He is appointed as the member of the National Integration Council (NIC) of India in 2013, He is the Secretary-General of the All India Christian Council and a past president of the All India Catholic Union.*

Nine years ago, in 2006, I wrote a Public Note, by way of a statement to the media and to the lay leadership in India when the Bar Council of India moved the Supreme Court of India, opposing the admission of Catholic consecrated women and men practicing as lawyers in various courts of law. As many others, among them Hindu and Muslim jurists, I too was shocked at the approach and perhaps even implied bigotry in that organisation managing the professional aspects of lawyering. The matter had been adequately settled in the Bombay High Court many years ago when it upheld the marked difference between the vocation of a priest and a nun and their specialized secular profession. The matter was later upheld once again in the Kerala High Court.

I asked, “If the Bar Council feels it still needs to agitate the matter in the highest court of the land, it will have to explain itself to the common people. What does it oppose – the entry of highly committed and deeply religious activists with a social conscience seeking legal redress for the common people, the poor and the marginalized, demanding equity in

law, and providing a voice to the meek? Is it opposed to low cost and free legal aid available to gender victims, to Dalits and the starving? Does it not like commitment and excellence?

Theologically and under legal definitions, the vocation of a religious is very different from his or her professional career. A priest or nun, after years of theological, philosophical and spiritual training – apart from secular studies – makes a commitment, even a covenant, with God to serve his people to the end of their lives, making sacrifices most humans would not. Many of these priests serve in parishes in religious duties. Many others trained as teachers, social workers, doctors, scientists, and even motor mechanics and serve their local brothers and sisters. If the Bar Council is making a difference between professionals – the Advocate Act bars even law degree holders in a full time job in industry or education from practicing in courts – it needs to be remembered that when nuns and priests are employed in the university or hospitals, they get full salaries as given to their secular colleagues. It is another matter that most of them deposit this salary with their congregations. Therefore nuns and priests are not employees of a Church organisation or of a bishop or superior. Nuns and priests, who are lawyers, whether in Mumbai, Pune, Allahabad, Lucknow, Calcutta or Delhi, have done a tremendous job in legal aid and civil society. This I can vouch for by my personal and experience in long years of working with them. They must be accepted as lawyers and allowed to practice in court in the defence of the poor.

I have not always been a practicing Catholic, spending as an avowedly left-wing writer and activist almost my entire youth and two thirds of my professional life as an investigating journalist, editor and documentary film maker reporting on political, economic and development issues relating to farmers, labourers, religious minorities, tribals, dalits and others forced to live on the margins of government and public consciousness in the country, and other parts of the world. This is an ideological battleground, and those witnessing it cannot remain untouched with the hidden and open violence against the poor and the weak, with the state complicit, and impunity rampant. This also gave me an opportunity to



see the rawness of life at the grassroots, the victimization, and the terror. It helped me to understand the political economy, and the lack of social interventions by civil society. Above all, it helped me see the nexus, collaboration and conspiracy between big capital, politicians, the bureaucracy and the criminal justice apparatus - block level judicial officers, all the way to the high courts and the capricious lawyers –as it operates in real life.

The Church: The Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecost, were among the few organisations present at the grassroots, sometimes even where the government instruments and personnel were absent, such as in health and education, and there was no civil society, no non-Governmental organisations, and in the early years, not a single member of any of the Sangh Parivar organisations. It was not that the Church presence was always useful. Sometimes it was just one person, and while he or she could take a ill person to the nearest dispensary, there was little else that was done, other than perhaps a basic evangelisation, and that too not in a very enlightened manner. And sometimes, the Church presence became just another part of the formal structures, the Church personnel doing the bidding of the local political and administrative bosses. In effect, they became little more than service providers.

But even in the 1970s in my travels in areas that were forested, or were populated by tribals and dalits, as they are now generally known, I would meet Catholic consecrated men and women - I would much rather call them Brothers, Religious Sisters or Nuns and Fathers – working deep in the hinterland, in areas inhabited by the poorest of the poor.

And they were often working in politically and physically hostile areas long before the hoodlums of the Sangh Parivar sought to make these areas more inhospitable to anyone who challenged their divisive and hate-filled ideology. Even during the terrible days of the Emergency imposed by the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi during 1975-1977, when all voices were stifled and police and bureaucracy ruled as petty dictators in some banana republic, there were men and women bringing solace to the victims, it was actually challenging the czars of

the ruling structure. I do not know if any priest or nun was arrested by the police those days. Perhaps not, but many surely would have been warned off, and told to stop their activities.

Many years later, I had another cathartic, even shattering experience that confirmed my oft-articulated sentiment that Catholic nuns are ordinary women challenged to do extraordinary deeds, that they voluntarily identify themselves entirely with the fate of the poor and marginalised who are at risk of life, liberty or dignity. Some of these religious women dedicated their lives for the cause. This was my visit to the small hut that Sister Valsa John of the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary called home in a distant village in Pachaura, in Pakur in Dumka district of Jharkhand, and where she was brutally murdered late at night on Tuesday, 15th November 2011. She had been attacked by a group of about 45 men armed with swords, axes and other weapons. Her head was nearly severed from her body. Some Maoist literature and a spade were left behind. The immediate suspicion was that she was killed for she had taken sides with the local tribals in their long standing confrontation with the corporate sector mining the area for coal. Years later, the suspicions of a conspiracy remain in the public mind, and in mine.

Valsa's death and the impunity of the state, has made me to ask many questions of myself, the laity, other religious, and of course of the Church hierarchy. Why are these people honoured, often in a token gesture, after their death by violence or in God's own time of old age, but never celebrated when they are alive, and why is their work never really acknowledged unless it is in their role as principals and teachers of popular "convent" schools and colleges in metropolitan cities. Above all, where would be the Catholic Church in particular, but without its consecrated people, followed by the next question why despite a couple of hundred thousand trained and untrained pastors and bible teachers, the protestant and independent Churches have not been able to get trained and committed people who are not mere employees, but the very soul of the social and evangelistic outreach of the faith.

There is no doubt in my mind that the future of the Church in general, and its evangelistic and social outreach, beyond the homilies and the

rituals, depends on its consecrated personnel. The Lay component of the Church does not lack the zeal, nor the divine calling, to be of use and help to his/her fellow human beings. Their limited potential of this intervention despite their more intrinsic “dialogue of life” with people of other religions and social identities in the neighbourhood, is because of the nature of the Church in India and the demographic and economic, social and caste compulsions of the people. The membership of the Church is largely dalit, tribal, peasantry and what can be called the lower economic strata, or at best the lower middle class. There are very few people who can really be counted as economically well off, or rich, despite the high visibility of some tokens of wealth, specially jewelry and large houses on small plots of land, that one gets to see on the western coast of India or in some urban pockets. The issues of living an every day life of survival, trying to eke out a livelihood in an economically hostile ecology looms large on the common Christian. Add to it the vagaries of development in the areas which much of the Christian community lives in, the forested rural hinterland of central India, the plateau of south India, the dalit hamlets and the mission compounds of north Indian states, there is little surprise that Christian youth find themselves sucked early into the rat race, with no time to cater to their evolving social consciousness. Outside Kerala, perhaps, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland, the Christian presence in trade unions, political parties and other mass organisations is small, and often all but non-existent.

This in many ways also shows itself in the lack of political training, if not illiteracy, in the community, despite the thesis that those in some southern and north eastern states play an important role in the political processes of their regions. This is largely because they have large concentrations of populations in limited areas or pockets. This stratification may give them an enviable presence in the electoral politics of their districts, but still keeps them far away from influencing the national political discourse.

This political emasculation, if one can so define it, makes the community very helpless in a rapidly changing political and economic discourse which is marked by extremely right wing, casteist and communal politics on the one hand and a development model propounded not just by the

Bharatiya Janata party and the Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi, but also by regional parties which govern various states specially those rich in natural resources such as Orissa. The recent legislative “economic reforms” that the government has brought in, many of them through ordinances as they could not go through the Rajya Sabha where the BJP still does not have a majority of the vote, make it easy for government to transfer tribal and forest lands for industry, risking not just the life and livelihood of the common people but the security, of a very fragile ecology and a rapidly depleting forest cover. The only beneficiaries are crony capitalism.

Some would argue that even more critical predation is that of the mind, specially of the very young. The secular and tolerant fabric of society is sought to be changed by that old fascist trick of indoctrination of the pliant psyche and intellect, catching them young, so to speak.

The fact that the Sangh Parivar runs over 57,000 ideology based schools for children in villages across several states, and specially in areas populated by tribals and the dalits, groups once called untouchable, makes available a cadre of youth and their parents ready to do their bidding in unraveling the secular heritage of the country’s freedom struggle. The stage is being set for this. The government’s senior minister, Mr. Venkiah Naidu, a former president of the BJP, has called for a national law against religious conversions. These laws exist in six states, and have been passed by two more states but not yet cleared by the Governors. It is a matter of a few months before they too are brought into force. These laws have also led to some considerable violence against religious groups in the years they have been in force. United Nations Human Rights Special Rapporteurs for Religious Freedom have slammed these laws as infringing the basic rights of freedom of faith and belief, enunciated in the UN Bill of Rights, and in fact, an important part of the Indian Constitution.

Other ministers have suggested an immediate enactment of a Common Civil Code, seemingly a good thing, but rooted in the unsubstantiated premise that Muslims can marry four wives at a time, are breeding too fast, and will outnumber the Hindus soon. The law will also impact on

Christian personal laws and customs, particularly in rural populations where tradition and custom are the glue that holds their society together.

Mr. Modi's minister for education, a former TV actor Mrs. Smriti Boman Irani, who has ordered a revision of text books, particularly of history, to incorporate more of ancient Indian traditions including references of Hindu sacred texts. Various important councils in the ministry are now chaired by luminaries wedded to the thesis that India is the fountainhead of all knowledge in the world. The BJP and the Minister hold that Hindu sacred texts are the 5,000 years old source of knowledge on such diverse subjects as plastic surgery, aviation, nuclear weaponry and genetic engineering.

How are these to be questioned, and the trends reversed? The Church no longer runs the most educational institutions in the country, with the RSS, the corporate sector, and the government which too is now almost entirely in control of the Sangh ideology have collectively overwhelmed whatever were the values that the Catholic and Protestant schools sought to teach for almost a century and a half through much of the landmass, reaching deep into remote areas.

This massive education system, and the growing population of the rural and urban marginalised, therefore pose a tremendous, even an exciting, challenge to the Church in general, and in particular to its fighting arm, the consecrated men and women. It remains to be seen if they will rise to the occasion as they have done in the past in the pioneering tradition of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara and Mother Euphrasia. There is the other nagging question wheather the lay community will be able to continue to give of its sons and daughters to the church in terms of local vocation. The focal points of such a calling have always changed with the times, and new areas have emerged to help change the ethnic profile, but not the strength of character and tempo, of those who seek a future in the service of the Church and the people.

The growth of the Church in India, and its ability to help change the welfare and human rights discourse in India to the advantage of the common people, I feel confident is safe in the hands of these brave and committed men and women.

# Foreword to the Norms

– Astrid Lobo Gajiwala

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On the 15<sup>th</sup> August, 2010, feast of the Assumption of Mary and the anniversary of India's Independence, 24 women and men concerned about the unprecedented crisis in the Universal Church triggered by revelations in the media of numerous episodes of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, responded to the call of *Streevani*, Pune, to 'ponder' like Mary and discern the liberating voice of God's Spirit, by coming together for a National Consultation on "*Gender Relations in the Church: A Call to Integrity and Justice*".

The Statement issued by this National Consultation sought to initiate a dialogue with the Bishops of India towards providing a safe and secure environment not just for children but also for women, in all institutions of the Church, to provide a pastoral and just response to victims of sexual abuse, their families, the accused, and the community. The participants recommended that a code of professional ethics be articulated for pastoral workers including priests, and a Policy to address sexual abuse from the perspective of the abused be put in place in every diocese and congregation, with structures set up to ensure its implementation.

In 2011, as a follow-up to the first Consultation, 43 women and men including theologians, psychologists, lawyers, sociologists, academicians and activists, gathered at a second National Consultation organised jointly by *Streevani*, *Satyashodhak*, Indian Women's Theological Forum (IWTF) and Montforte Social Institute (MSI), to reflect on

*“Gender Relations in the Church: A Call to Wholeness and Equal Discipleship”*. This Consultation sought to deepen the discussions begun at the earlier Consultation by analysing the structural implications for the church in promoting gender just relations, the moral and legal consequences of sexual abuse, and the psycho-sexual paradigm that supports clergy sexual misconduct. Once again the participants advocated that a Code of Conduct for Church personnel be drawn up, circulated and implemented.

To facilitate this process, the participants drafted a document titled *‘Policy Regarding Sexual Misconduct, Sexual Harassment and Sexual Abuse’*. This draft was submitted to the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) through the Office of the CBCI Commission for Women on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2012, with a request to place it on the agenda of the 30<sup>th</sup> General Body Meeting of the CBCI to be held in February, 2012.

In August 2013 the vigorous public discourse and protest following the brutal gang rape of a 23 year old woman in Delhi sparked off the third National Consultation, this time on *“Living Nirbhaya: Towards a Violence-free Society”*. Since the earlier Policy had not yet been taken up by the CBCI, the participants who also included Bishops, Priests and Religious decided to further revise it. The new version was presented as *‘Norms for Dealing with Cases Involving Sexual Abuse by Church Personnel’*.

These Norms were submitted to the members of the CBCI Standing Committee on 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2013, the birthday of Mary, our mother, a day which the Church in India celebrates as the Day of the Girl Child, with the request that the Committee review and revise them if necessary, and take the required action to ensure that they are placed on the agenda of the CBCI Plenary Assembly, 2014.

It was proposed that these Norms be used to complement the existing CBCI *‘Norms for Dealing With Cases Involving Sexual Abuse of Minors’*. Since a Code of Conduct for all Church personnel and procedures for redress of grievances are clearly set out in the proposed Norms, they will emphasize the Bishops’ seriousness about implementing their “Gender Policy for the Catholic Church of India, 2010” which

mandates “zero tolerance” of violence against women. The Norms will also serve as a visible sign of the Church’s proactive approach towards preventing and addressing sexual misconduct, its pastoral concern for all the affected, and its commitment to promoting justice in the Church. In addition they will indicate the Church’s support of recent progressive legislation, namely, The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, and The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013.

At the practical level, the Norms will go a long way towards speedy justice for victims of abuse and help to reduce such offences by creating awareness about what constitutes sexual misconduct. By publicising the strong measures that will be taken to address these crimes, the Norms will also act as a deterrent. Further, they will help to prevent matters from spinning out of control and generating negative publicity that results from delayed and confused action, or inaction when such episodes occur. They indicate the proper procedures to follow and the committees who will be responsible for providing justice and healing. If the structures are put in place for implementation of the Norms, they will provide religious authorities with the support and guidance needed for taking difficult decisions.

Despite the repeated efforts to draw attention to the urgency of the matter, to date the CBCI has not issued any Norms or Policy to prevent and address sexual abuse in the church. Since the reasons for the formulation of such Norms still remain valid however, it was decided to publish them under the banner of *Streevani*, a prime mover in this cause.

Inspiring this publication is a teaching of the Synod of Bishops, 1971: *“The Church, indeed, is not alone responsible for justice in the world; however, she has a proper and specific responsibility which is identified with her mission of giving witness before the world of the need for love and justice contained in the Gospel message, a witness to be carried out in Church institutions themselves and in the lives of Christians”* (Justice in the World, #36). Hopefully dioceses and congregations will take up this challenge and adopt and implement the Norms offered here, fruit of continued and intense reflection and love for the Church.



# **NORMS FOR DEALING WITH CASES INVOLVING SEXUAL ABUSE BY CHURCH PERSONNEL**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Catholic Church in India deeply cherishes the bond of sacred trust among its people, the clergy, religious and lay ministers. It acknowledges the inherent worth and dignity of every person as created in the image and likeness of God. Sexual abuse violates this sacredness of the human person and the trust persons place in Church personnel. It is contrary to God's intent and purpose and therefore a grievous sin.

In recognition of the sinful and criminal nature of sexual abuse particularly of minors, in a letter dated May 3, 2011 and released on May 16, 2011, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith mandated that before the end of May 2012 all regions develop policies to prevent the abuse of minors and hold the perpetrators accountable.<sup>1</sup> As a follow up of this, the Catholic Bishops Conference of India has prepared *Norms for Dealing with Cases Involving Sexual Abuse of Minors* which have been approved by the Holy See. The present *Norms for Dealing with Cases Involving Sexual Abuse by Church Personnel* (hereinafter referred to as the Norms for Church Personnel) go a step further to include not only minors but all whom Church personnel come into contact with in their work situation, pastoral or non-pastoral.

Already in 2010, the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) issued the Gender Policy of the Church of India (hereinafter referred to

as the CBCI Gender Policy) which advocates zero tolerance to any act of violence not only against children, but also against women. The CBCI Gender Policy further states that the Church will “set up structures and evolve mechanisms for effectively combating violence and sexual harassment against women in families, workplaces and Church institutions” (GP, Part III, Section XI, 5(iii)). These Norms for Church Personnel are a step in the implementation of the CBCI Gender Policy, and as bishops we declare that we will:

- show zero tolerance towards sexual abuse
- take necessary disciplinary action against the offenders
- constitute an appropriate mechanism with necessary infrastructure and time bound procedures to redress cases of sexual abuse
- not shield any instance of abuse from prosecution by civil authorities
- do our best to safeguard the complainants from any retaliatory acts.
- respond with compassion and care to victims of sexual abuse
- take care to address the critical component of prevention
- ensure dissemination of these Norms for Church Personnel to all in the Church.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

These Norms for Church Personnel are rooted in the following principles which also provide direction for their implementation:

### a) **Meaningful consent is not possible in unequal power relationships**

In cases of sexual abuse as defined in these Norms for Church Personnel, a central issue is that of ‘consensus’ on the part of the adult victim. ‘Consent’ is not valid when there are undercurrents of coercion in a relationship such as employer/employee, counselor/client, retreat director/retreatant, parish priests and parishioners. In all unequal power relationships, it is presumed that the consent on the part of the victim was not free.

In the Church these social hierarchies are compounded by the fact that many people assume or think that they owe unquestioning obedience to priests. Such obedience can be misused, making women who are

dependent on priests for spiritual and/or emotional counselling particularly in times of personal crisis or difficulty, especially vulnerable.

It is important to understand that the label of “consensual sex” serves too often to fix the responsibility of abuse on the victim rather than the perpetrator. This adds to the victim’s guilt and trauma. Such labels also leave the door open for questions about the intentions of the accused which are irrelevant since it is the experience or perception of the victim that is crucial. To prevent this, the focus must always be on evaluating the impact on the victim, and questions about whether the behaviour of the accused was intentionally offensive or not should not be admitted.

**b) Maintaining appropriate professional boundaries is always the responsibility of the Church personnel in authority.**

During retreats, and spiritual and/or emotional counselling maintaining appropriate professional boundaries is always the responsibility of the Church personnel in authority. A professional code of ethics makes this true for all in the caring professions, including doctors, therapists and nurses, and is applicable more so to priests who enjoy a unique relationship of trust by virtue of their priesthood.

**c) Sexual abuse by the clergy, constitutes a grave breach of trust in ministerial relationship.**

Sexual abuse by an ordained minister is more than a violation of a code of individual sexual morality. Since it involves betrayal of trust by one who stands as an ‘*Alter Christus*,’ it results in not just profound psychological trauma but also spiritual crises for the victims, their families and frequently, the faith community.

**d) Patriarchal attitudes and values are the biggest challenges in the implementation of any law concerning women.**

Combating the patriarchal attitudes of men and women and the personnel involved /responsible for implementation of these Norms for Church Personnel is most crucial in the prevention of unwanted sexual behaviour. Dissemination of these Norms must therefore be accompanied by programmes to change discriminatory behaviour and attitudes towards women.

# CONTENTS

These Norms are divided into three parts.

I. Code of Conduct

II. Redress Mechanism for Grievances

III. Care and Healing for those involved in cases of sexual abuse.

## **I. THE CODE OF CONDUCT:**

All Church personnel shall sign an agreement to the effect that they are aware of these Norms for Church Personnel and will adhere to the following Code of Conduct:

- 1 Church personnel are required to treat with respect those to whom they minister or work with.
- 2 All Church personnel shall not engage in sexual harassment (as defined) and are bound to report to the concerned authorities such harassment by other Church personnel.
- 3 Church personnel must assume full responsibility for establishing and maintaining clear, appropriate boundaries in all professional, pastoral and work related relationships.
- 4 Church personnel must not, for sexual gain or intimacy, exploit the trust placed in them by the faith community.
- 5 Church personnel shall ensure that their work environment is professional and free from physical, psychological, written, or verbal intimidation or harassment.
- 6 Church personnel should always meet with people in areas that are visible and accessible.
- 7 Teachers, Catechists, Doctors, Counsellors, Pastoral Counsellors and Spiritual Directors will be governed by the professional code of ethics of their profession and civil laws where these exist.
- 8 Church personnel should not undertake any service, work or pastoral ministry while they are under the influence of alcohol or of prescribed/non-prescribed drugs that hamper cognitive function.

## **For Clergy:**

9. Church personnel who are committed to a celibate lifestyle are called to be an example of celibate chastity in all relationships at all times.
10. Clergy should not allow anyone to stay overnight in their private accommodation or residence.

## **For Healthcare Personnel:**

11. Pastoral Counsellors and Spiritual Directors are required not to step beyond their competence in counselling situations and are required to refer clients to other professionals when appropriate.
12. Church personnel in pastoral and professional relationships should be aware of the dangers of dependency/transference and counter transference and seek advice or supervision when these concerns arise. They must encourage self-determination, independence and choice in those to whom they minister.
13. Counselling sessions should be conducted in appropriate settings, and at appropriate times. No sessions should be conducted in private living quarters or in places or at times that could cause confusion about the nature of the relationship for the person being counseled. Pastoral Counselors and Spiritual Directors should maintain a log of the times and places of counselling sessions.
14. Doctors should adhere to their professional ethical code. No female patient should be examined in the absence of a nurse.

## **II. REDRESS MECHANISM FOR GRIEVANCES**

This section deals with the setting up of a mechanism which receives complaints, investigates them, gives a hearing to the parties concerned and authorises disciplinary action proportionate to the seriousness of the offence committed. These Norms for Church Personnel mandate the setting up of Redress Committees with the aforementioned mandate, in all dioceses.

### **1. Composition of Redress Committee**

The Redress Committee should have at least 5 members not less than 3 of whom should be women, with a woman Chairperson, and at least

one woman member from an NGO active on issues under consideration. The desired qualities of the members would be an empathetic attitude and the ability and the orientation to look at issues from the perspective of the victim.

The Chairperson convenes and chairs the Hearings of the Committee. The Assistant Chairperson would fill-in for the Chairperson in her absence. The Redress Advisor, who could be the Chairperson or any other woman<sup>2</sup> in the Committee, is the one-point contact for all complaints. The Secretary minutes the proceedings of every meeting and is responsible for sending out communications in relation to the hearings. The women members should be appointed by the Bishop/ Provincial Superior handling this issue, in consultation with the diocesan Women's Commissions/Cells, giving due importance to the credentials and expertise that the persons possess with a view to ensuring justice.

The Redress Committee must be formed irrespective of whether any complaint has been received. The tenure of the members of the redress Committee may be decided by the diocesan Bishop / Provincial of a religious congregation but should be not less than 3 years.

## **2. Investigative Procedures**

- 1) The first requirement is to create awareness of the church's policy of zero tolerance towards sexual abuse. These Norms for Church Personnel along with the name and contact details of the person receiving complaints should be given adequate publicity through posters displayed in prominent places such as church notice boards, community centres, rectories, retreat houses etc. This gives a strong message to victims, particularly women, that their complaints will be taken seriously. Knowing where to go and to whom to complain to, will also minimize delayed justice, confusion and negative publicity.
- 2) The clergy, religious staff, employees and persons holding functional roles in ecclesiastical institutions have a duty to report to the redress committee any sexual misconduct that is observed by them.
- 3) The Redress Advisor will receive all the complaints and advise the

complainant on the procedure for filing the complaint and subsequent redress. All complaints handled by the Redress Committee should be in writing to ensure consistency and accuracy in the complaint being lodged.

- 4) It is important that all complaints are treated with the highest level of confidentiality. However, information may have to be disclosed to those officials and/or Church Personnel in order to carry out the purpose and intent of these Norms for Church Personnel.
- 5) When a complaint is received, the Redress Advisor will forward the same to the Chairperson who will convene a meeting of the Redress Committee within a week of receiving the complaint.

At the meeting the Chairperson will nominate one or more persons from the committee to carry out a confidential investigation to ascertain facts. The report of the investigation should be submitted to the Redress Committee a week before the committee convenes for a hearing. The seriousness of the complaint as decided by the committee will dictate the subsequent course of action.

- 6) The Chairperson will issue a written notification to the complainant and the accused to present themselves separately before the Committee for a hearing on a specified date and time within two weeks of receiving the investigative report. A copy of the statement of the complainant should be given to the accused who will be allowed a week to seek advice before appearing before the Committee.

If acceptable to the complainant, a joint hearing with the accused may be held. The complainant and the accused will be allowed to bring to the hearing, one person for support who will not be permitted to interfere directly with the proceedings except to advise each party privately. Additional hearings may be held with witnesses or others who may be able to assist the enquiry.

- 7) The decisions taken by Committee are to have the backing of at least 50% of members, including the NGO member.

- 8) The Minutes of the proceedings will be recorded by the Secretary of the Redress Committee.
- 9) The conclusions of the Committee will be communicated to both parties in writing within a fortnight following the hearing.
- 10) The Committee will also recommend action to be carried out by the concerned authority. The whole process of reaching a decision and communicating action to be taken should take not more than three months since the day of receiving the complaint.
- 11) The action to be taken with regards to the accused must reflect the recommendations given by the Redress Committee. Action must be taken within one month of receiving the recommendations of the Redress Committee, and action taken must be communicated in writing to the Redress Committee.
- 12) At the conclusion of the redress process a copy of the documentation (the log of complaints and the action taken to redress the complaints) must be kept in the diocesan archives/ Generalate of the congregation.
- 13) In the event that the conclusions of the Diocese/Provincial/ Congregational level redress Committee are unsatisfactory to either individual, an appeal in writing should be forwarded to the next level of authority.
- 14) If the offender is to be reinstated as a member of the Church personnel, the Redress Committee must ensure that there is written certification to do so by at least two, independent, qualified professionals.
- 15) The Redress Committee will also serve as the Follow Up Committee and will be responsible from the start of the investigation to the implementation of its recommendations.

### **3. Redress Procedures**

During the course of the investigation, if the redress committee should deem fit, the accused may be sent on administrative leave to ensure that further harassment does not occur.



### ***1) When an accusation is substantiated:***

When an accusation of sexual abuse of a person is proved before the Redress Committee, the concerned person will be immediately relieved of the exercise of any function or responsibility of ministry and/or employment. Further action will be determined by the gravity of the offence. Substantiation is determined by following proper enquiry and due process of law. If the problem should entail the transfer of one of the people involved, it needs to be ensured that the harasser rather than the victim is required to move.

### ***2) When an accusation cannot be substantiated:***

When an accusation cannot be substantiated by diocesan authorities, the accuser and the accused need to be immediately informed of the results of the investigation and offered pastoral assistance as necessary. The diocese/congregation shall decide on whether any restrictions of ministry are called for.

### ***3) Civil Procedures:***

Nothing in these Norms for Church Personnel is intended to prevent or relieve any church personnel as defined herein, from reporting any allegation of sexual abuse to the proper civil authorities as mandated by law. No attempts must be made to shield the perpetrators of sexual misconduct nor should the victims be in any way dissuaded from approaching civil authorities. The Church will cooperate fully with any investigation by civil authorities and will also thoroughly investigate all allegations to ascertain the truth.

## **4. Commitment from responsible authority**

Commitment to justice and pastoral care must be shown by the responsible authorities through proper enforcement and action. Even the most comprehensive sexual harassment policies and procedures are bound to fail if a diocese does not enforce them quickly, consistently, and with determination. To be effective, all in the Church must be committed to zero tolerance of sexual harassment. Diocesan Bishops and Provincials must make certain that persons responsible must conduct prompt, thorough, and documented investigations of all complaints, even

those that appear trivial. The authority of the local church must act on the recommendations of the Redress Committee.

## **5. Transfer Policies**

No priest /deacon/employee who is proved to have committed act(s) of sexual abuse may be transferred for ministerial assignment or residence to another diocese/eparchy or congregational province.

Before a priest or deacon is accepted for assignment or residence in any diocese, the Bishop or his delegate will obtain a written statement from the Bishop of the diocese and/or the religious superior from whose jurisdiction the priest/deacon is seeking transfer, regarding the existence of any proved instance of sexual misconduct. In a similar fashion, the Bishop or his delegate shall provide a written statement indicating the above, to any Bishop or religious superior who is receiving a priest or deacon from his diocese.

## **6. Binding Agreements**

A copy of the Norms for Church Personnel shall be distributed to every minister/member/employee/volunteer of the diocese. All Church personnel, either employed or volunteers or ordained, must sign an agreement to the effect that they are bound by the Norms for Church personnel.

With regard to employees and those who offer volunteer service, as a condition of employment or volunteer service, they must sign a card at the back of a copy of the Norms for Church personnel indicating that they have read and understood the aforementioned Norms and that they agree to abide by the Code of Conduct contained therein. This card shall be maintained in the personal files of employees and in a general file for volunteers.

## **7. Communications Policies**

While the privacy and confidentiality of the victims and witnesses must be respected, the faith community must be warned about erring Church personnel, to prevent a repeat sexual offence being committed on unsuspecting, trusting persons.

### **III CARE AND HEALING FOR THOSE INVOLVED IN SEXUAL ABUSE**

Sexual abuse when it involves Church personnel, particularly the clergy, has pastoral and spiritual dimensions. While the issue is one of personal integrity before God and the Church, integrity in ministerial life and relationships is demanded also for the good of the Church community. The Church is harmed and wounded when Church personnel and especially pastors, are abusive in their behaviour.

When sexual abuse involves Church personnel, the following pastoral and spiritual concerns must be addressed:

#### **1. Care for the *victims and their families*.**

Pastoral care must encompass justice, compassion, protection and restitution for the victim. The diocese/congregation must provide medical, financial, spiritual and any other necessary help to the victims and their families to gain back control of their lives. Believing in their story and ensuring that the provisions of civil law are implemented, is the first step to begin caring for them.

#### **2. Care of the *hurting community* (whether a parish, a diocese, or a congregation).**

The communities where the violations occurred are also wounded and need healing. For a parish community the pain lies in the violation of trust. Efforts must thus be made to restore the faith and confidence of the victim, as well as of the community. This must be done by:

- a) informing the community of the facts thus setting aside any rumours or gossip that may surround the incident/s;
- b) communicating empathy with the victim and the hurting family;
- c) ensuring that justice is done to the victim;
- d) indicating zero tolerance for sexual misconduct.

In the absence of these the community may feel that the Church simply does not care for them.

The process should involve providing avenues for people to voice hurts, to grieve, to understand, to heal, to forgive, and to move on in hope.

### **3. Care for the *offender*.**

The offender is usually initially in denial and needs help, especially from experts, to understand and evaluate his situation. This is true of any offender. Subsequently he may feel lost, confused, and shamed.

The best way to care for the offender is to make him face up to the misconduct with fairness, truthfulness and compassion. In the case of a priest, he should be made to begin a process of reflection on whether this an isolated case or a signal of the incapacity to continue as a celibate. He must be made aware of ecclesiastical and canonical processes governing his particular case. The bishop/ superior must carefully observe the procedures especially when the grave matter could lead to dismissal from the clerical state. The offender must be allowed to return to active ministry only if he has been certified in writing to do so, by a qualified counselor and his spiritual advisor.

If the offender decides to be dispensed from the obligations of the clerical state, then the diocese or the religious order must help him to start a new life.

### **4. Care of the *offender's family*.**

The offender's family may also initially be in denial and later feel lost, shamed and confused. The family members may also feel anger at being betrayed by their child / sibling / parent / spouse, and may even blame themselves. Though seldom verbalized, they can be filled with guilt, causing them to withdraw from the community and suffer in silence.

Counseling and therapy along with spiritual healing need to be offered to the offender's family by the diocese / congregation.

## **ANNEXURE 1**

### **STATEMENT OF AGREEMENT**

I promise to strictly follow the rules and norms in this Code of Conduct as a condition of my providing services to the parish/Institution of the Archdiocese of Bombay.

## **I will:**

Treat everyone with respect.

Comply with the mandatory reporting regulations of the Archdiocesan Policies and Procedures to report sexual abuse. I understand that failure to report suspected sexual abuse to Church authorities is against the law.

Cooperate fully in any investigation of abuse of any person in the parish/Institution.

## **I will not:**

Touch or speak to anyone in a sexually inappropriate manner.

Inflict any physical or emotional abuse such as striking, slapping, humiliating, ridiculing, threatening, or degrading persons.

Possess, or be under the influence of alcohol at any time while on duty.

Possess, or be under the influence of illegal drugs while on duty.

Use profanity at any time.

Indulge in viewing pornography or indecent humour.

My signature confirms that I have read the “Norms For Dealing With Cases Involving Sexual Abuse By Church Personnel” and the Code of Conduct contained therein and I agree to abide by them.

I understand that any action inconsistent with the above mentioned Norms and Code of Conduct or failure to take action mandated by them may result in the discontinuation of my services / employment.

Printed Name:

Signature/Date

## **End Notes**

- 1 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter of Cardinal Wiliam Levada on the Occasion of the Presentation of the Circular Letter to Episcopal Conferences Regarding Guidelines for Dealing with Cases of Sexual Abuses of Minors Perpetrated by Clerics,” [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20110503\\_levada-abuso-minori\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20110503_levada-abuso-minori_en.html).
- 2 It is advisable to have a woman as an advisor since most complaints are from women and they would hesitate to confide in a man.

# *Birthing a New Vision*

# **Indian Christian Women's Moment (ICWM)**

## **Introduction:**

We, 113 women and 7 men participated in a National Conference on the theme “Paradigm Shifts in Vatican II and its Impact on Women” co-organized by Streevani Pune, NBCLC Bangalore, ISI Bangalore, Montfort Social Institute Hyderabad and CBCI Office for Women at the NBCLC from 8-11 January 2014. The women and men present especially noted the theological and ecclesiological shifts that form a solid basis for equality and mission. As People of God we dreamed about a new way of being Christian wo/men in the future – as mystical prophets, theological critics, political activists and religious who live a deinstitutionalized form of consecrated life. We shared and discussed intensively on various aspects of the theme and validated our own narratives of discrimination and abuse, resolved to act to reclaim the sacredness of our bodies, our lives, our suffering and ministries, our callings, and individual charisms. The presence of an ecumenical sister as a resource person, who also voiced the need for a common body of Christian Women in India, helped to consolidate our decision to birth the Indian Christian Women's Movement (ICWM).

## **VISION:**

A sisterhood of solidarity across boundaries to change unjust beliefs, practices and structures that perpetuate patriarchy and accentuate the exploitation of women at various levels.

A discipleship of equals as a gospel imperative, that will work towards

solidarity and sisterhood to be a voice for Christian women at the National level.

## **OBJECTIVES:**

As a dynamic movement, we are committed to:

1. Be an advocacy group that can speak out with one united voice against violence, for the protection of the rights and dignity of women in civil and ecclesial structures.
2. Promote capacity-building for women's social, cultural, political and ecclesial leadership.
3. Partner with existing Christian women's organizations in order to create a joint perspective on gender justice and feminist theologizing, strategies for ecological restoration and social transformation, and large scale campaigns of resistance against policies and power games that lead to the diminishment, humiliation and even death for women.
4. Support justice issues of dalits, tribals and other subaltern, marginalized groups, even to the point to providing emergency services in terms of ideas, referrals, protests, solutions, finance, legal helps, shelter, etc. in times of need.
5. Establish a bridge between women's organizations and Church organizations as well as interfaith initiatives.

## **STRATEGIES:**

**To achieve our objectives we will:**

- Work towards gender sensitization and gender justice in Church and society.
- Reclaim the mystical prophetism of women
- Study and research issues of women's oppression
- Engage in on-going communication among ourselves,
- Celebrate and promote women's contributions and achievements,
- Create resources for women's empowerment and gender sensitization of institutions and systems,
- Provide spaces for women to freely express themselves,



- Build solidarity and networks of women cutting across denominational and faith boundaries,
- Facilitate and promote the leadership of sensitized women at all levels in church, society and government,
- Work to critically engage with unjust practices which exploit women and promote justice in employment, education, funding and opportunity, especially for those from historically excluded and marginalized communities.

## **MEMBERSHIP:**

Any Christian woman who shares our vision can become a member. Membership fee is Rs.50/- per year. Each region will conduct a membership drive. For membership the person named in the region can be contacted or the Secretariat at the email address: [icwmjan14@gmail.com](mailto:icwmjan14@gmail.com)

Men are accepted as associate members.

## **Adhoc Committee:**

Ms. Raynah Braganza Passanah - Convenor

Ms. Virginia Saldanha - Secretary

Sr. Julie George SSpS - Treasurer

Ms. Aruna Gnanadason

Ms. Pearl Dreger

Sr. Stella Baltazar FMM

Sr. Noella De Souza MCJ

Sr. Celia Kananaiakal UMI

Ms. Lily Thomas

Sr. Manjula Bara HM

Ms. Cynthia Stephen

## **The National Secretariat is at:**

**Streevani,**

1&2 Lotus building, Neco Garden,

Viman Nagar, Pune – 400 014

[Streevani@gmail.com](mailto:Streevani@gmail.com)

[www.icwmindia.org](http://www.icwmindia.org)

# Women Religious Lawyers Forum

Exactly 7 years ago around 30 women religious lawyers responded to the invitation of Streevani to gather in Pune to reflect on the theme "Pursuit of Justice: a Prophetic response of Women Religious in India". Thus the Women Religious Lawyers Forum was initiated in 2008 to provide a platform for all of us to come together, reflect and build a support group under the theme **Pursuit of Justice: A Prophetic Response of women religious in India**. Since then, we have had 6 annual meetings of the Forum co - organized by Montfort Social Institute, Hyderabad.

The central mission of the Forum is to continue to develop thoughtful and comprehensive learning in jurisprudence, through our annual workshops and publications. Our yearly gatherings helps us to accomplish visible progress in the profession, including increases in the number of women religious lawyers who will take up law as a profession and respond to the call of justice ministry in a radical manner.

## MISSION STATEMENT

Empowered by the Spirit of God, we are committed to create a just society by promoting justice, equality and dignity of all, especially women.

## OBJECTIVES

1. To facilitate solidarity among Women Religious Lawyers
2. To equip and empower women religious lawyers through workshops and conferences on issues related to their profession
3. To network and collaborate with other organisations, peoples movements and professionals
4. To engage in advocacy for change in laws to promote the rights, dignity and justice for all, especially women
5. To be change agents in demystifying law and its delivery, making it user friendly, easily accessible and available to people
6. To promote legal education at the grass roots level

**For further details contact the National Office at:**

**Streevani, Pune**

E-mail: [streevani@gmail.com](mailto:streevani@gmail.com) Website: [www.streevani.org](http://www.streevani.org)

*Blessings and Challenges*

*at our*

*Grassroots Interventions*

# Maharashtra Gharelu Kamghar Union, Pune

Streevani began working with domestic workers of Pune city in 2008. In February 2014, our domestic workers movement was registered as a union called Maharashtra Gharelu Kamgar Union, Pune. Though our movement has over 4000 members, around 2500 members are already registered under the Union and the union organizes and unites the domestic workers to redress their grievances and to secure their rights. Attempts are made to amicably settle disputes between employer and employee, to find relief against sickness, unemployment and to provide legal assistance to members with respect to matters that are incidental to their employment etc.

## Abki Baar, Hamara Adhikar...

There cannot be an India without us or without our issues, says the poor and oppressed people of our land who gathered under the banner of “Abki Baar, Hamara Adhikar”, in Delhi. The rally witnessed eminent social activists Aruna Roy and Medha Patkar in the lead. Our Union collaborates with such movements to get the rights of women domestic workers.

**Solidarity Groups and Self Help Groups (SHG):** Members are formed into solidarity groups and self help groups. Women come together under these banners once a month to talk, discuss issues, plan strategies, to gain knowledge on various issues, especially for their socio-economic empowerment. Presently we have **66** such solidarity groups and 43 self help groups.

**State Welfare Board:** Most of the members of Streevani Domestic Workers Movement are enrolled in the State Welfare Board of the Domestic Workers. Considering the fact that the domestic workers are not covered under any Labour law, the Government of Maharashtra has enacted Maharashtra Domestic Workers welfare Board Act 2008. This provides recognition and identity to the domestic worker, financial assistance for the education of children, maternity benefits and assistance in case of accident, etc. and other benefits as may be decided by the Board from time to time.

# Streevani Legal Cell

Every woman who comes to us has a story, a story of pain, abuse, separation, rejection and humiliation. Every painful story is told and retold with the hope of seeking justice and human rights. The present situation in our country, especially increase in violence against women and children compels us to reach out to these women in a very concrete manner. We connect with all those women who suffer and defend their human rights. Hence, our justice ministry has become a very relevant and much needed one.

Our Legal Cell has completed eight years. The advocates of Streevani legal cell assist women in the police station, provide legal counselling, legal literacy and intervene in the Court on behalf of them to obtain justice. The beneficiaries of our legal cell are victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse, matrimonial disputes and other forms of abuse. During the last one year alone we had 168 new cases registered with us. Streevani defends and supports women domestic workers at the Police Stations and Court when there are cases filed against them. We prepare affidavits and other documents required by women to qualify for pension, ration card and other welfare schemes of the government. The economic dependency of women on her natal family, when she is abandoned by her husband makes life difficult for her and her children to survive. Going to the court is not encouraged. Often we have to be the voice and support for such women and we are their voice.

# Streevani Domestic Workers Movement's Anthem

- Composed by Sr. Reena D'Souza SSpS

*Every meeting of the movement starts with this Anthem.*

*Originally composed and sung in Marathi.*

**Ch.** We are women domestic workers (2)  
Cleaning, cooking, washing dishes is our work

Listen to our story

We are women domestic workers

No education, we are illiterate

My mother, her mother did this work

Only hard work no money

No money.

During the whole day

Listening to the employer

Insulting and abusing

At night insult and abuse at home

Use of washing machine

All the new technology

Threatening our work

Leaving no job.

Overcoming every difficulty

We work from morning till evening

He keeps watching me

She keeps watching me

Injustice everywhere

No one to ask

Is keeping quiet only solution?

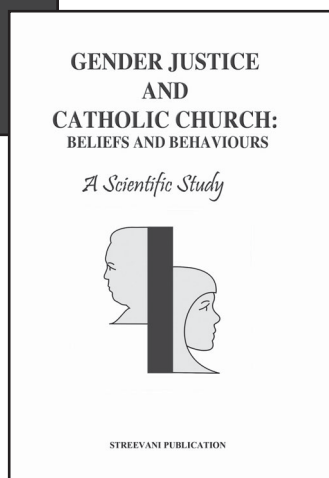
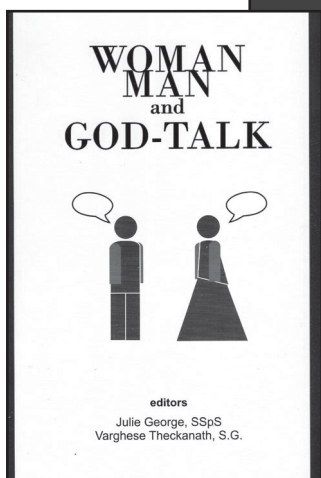
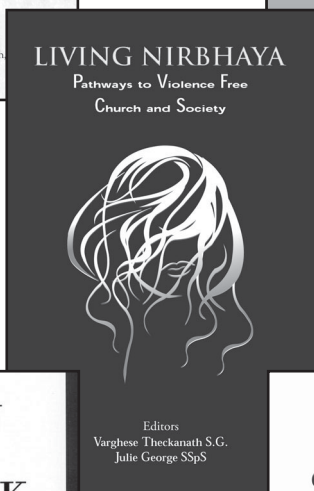
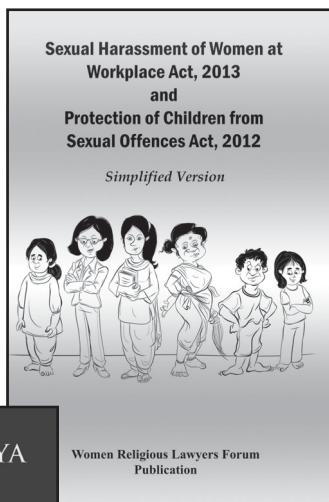
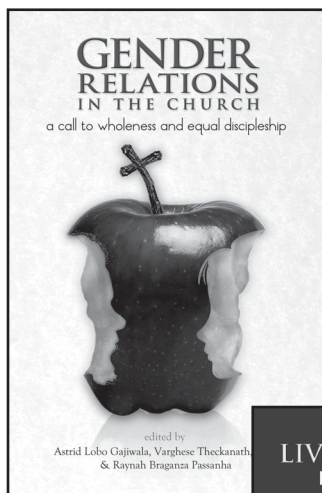
We ask you all?

We are uniting, we are uniting

To demand our rights, our rights

\*\*\*\*\*

# Publications



## *Tribute to our Founders*



**Dr. Fr. Engelbert Zeitler SVD**



**Dr. Frances Maria Yasas**

“Last century the Church lost the workers. This century it is going to lose women, unless something is done soon. It was in this context I first started some sort of an Institute, from where I hoped a movement for women could originate. After a long period of trial, error and failure ultimately were able to establish what is today called Streevani in Pune”.

**Late Rev. Fr. Engelbert Zeitler SVD**  
**10<sup>th</sup> February 1984**