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## **CHALLENGES TO MISSION TODAY**

Editorial

The Christian missionary enterprise in India evokes rather mixed reactions. On the one hand, it has won the deep appreciation and gratitude of so many people. Closely associated, as it is, with so much of dedicated service by many heroic missionaries in the areas of education, health care, relief and developmental work and more recently, conscientization of various oppressed and marginalized groups, its shining examples and successes have aroused in others a sense of admiration and in some quarters even envy. So much so, the word 'mission' is getting increasingly accepted and adopted by some non-Christian service organizations and institutions as well.

On the other hand 'mission' also stirs up in some a profound sense of anger and resentment at what they see as the arrogant and aggressive attempt by Christian missionaries at proselytization by means and methods that at times in the colonial part bordered on coercion, but now are far more subtle. Faced with this resentment and ever growing opposition many Christians in India have hesitated to use the word 'mission' and resorted to terms such as evangelization that they see as innocuous and far less burdened with any unsavory association from the past.

Whatever be the reaction of the non-Christians and whichever be the terminology we adopt, mission never ceases to be essential to the Church. To be Church is to be in mission. Mission is never just one of the activities of the Church among many. Rather, it is constitutive of the Church's very being and its sole *raison d'être*.

The Church is not a supernatural castle perched firmly on the rock of eternity offering a safe and secure haven away from and untouched by the tumultuous and ever-changing ebb and flow of humanity's history. It is rather a people on the march, a movement inaugurated by Jesus, constantly striving to realize in itself and in the whole of human society genuine fellowship and brotherhood through which the parenthood of God will be historically experienced and expressed. This is the kingdom of God that Jesus envisaged as his life's

ideal, elaborated in his teachings and enacted in his acts of healing the sick, sharing the bread with the hungry etc. and above all in his death and resurrection.

The Church's mission is nothing else than to continue the very work of Jesus, that of bringing life to all in abundance (Jn 10:10). He did not go about appealing to people to change from one religion to another. Nor did he attempt to annihilate the much cherished values and the long standing traditions of the cultures and religions in and around Palestine. He did preach conversion - that of minds and hearts, attitudes and life. True conversion meant for him a turning away from self to the other particularly the poor and the victimized, from greed to sharing, from domination to service, from a mere legalistic and ritualistic holiness to a spirituality of compassion, and from mammon to God. This and this alone can be the motive of the mission of the Church.

The prime purpose of the mission of the Church, therefore, is not self-propagation and the resultant removal and replacement of other religions though the Church, by God's grace, will always have enough members to fulfill its mission. It is to build up new communities and thereby a new human society in which divine life and grace would be incarnate as human brotherhood in genuine freedom, equality and justice.

In so far as such a mission takes place in concrete human societies with their particular socio-economic-political and cultural conditions, it is not only universal but also always local and contextual. So the Church that is authentically missionary is also truly local, i.e. incarnate in the given culture and context. Becoming such a local Church with its associated processes of inculturation and contextualization involves a critical identification with the people not only in their culture but also in their current aspirations and struggles.

The Church in India exists not only in the context of a confluence of cultures but also of a plurality of religions. Such a wealth of pluriform cultures and religions is today coming under serious threat by the mono-cultural thrust of globalization and the mono-maniacal fundamentalist forces in the different religions. Nationalism is another guise under which such mono-cultural and mono-religious imposition is often sought to be made. Fostering multiculturalism and promoting interreligious dialogue, collaborating with people belonging to other religions and ideologies to remove the dehumanizing poverty and marginalization of the masses, are essential dimensions of the Church's mission in India today. These are some of the issues addressed by the different articles in this issue of Vaiharai.

**D.ALPHONSE**