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EMPOWERING WOMEN

Editorial

The June - September combined issue of Vaiharai deals with issues concerning women, with the particular focus on women's empowerment. The oppressive structures of patriarchy and the resultant discrimination, subjugation and oppression of women are a matter of fact. Several international and national programmes aiming at women's emancipation and empowerment - like the celebration of 2001 as the year of empowerment of women by the Government of India - have had little effect. The laudable policies and high sounding speeches have become a routine. They remain only in paper. Governments are not serious enough; society at large has been a silent spectator and the religious organisations are mostly in the clutches of taboos and patriarchal structures. The Church which is also responsible for the present state of affairs by legitimising and perpetuating the subordination of women has done little for women's emancipation.

But a change must come. A change will come. This situation cannot continue like this. It is a situation of sin. For a change involvement of every one concerned is needed. First and foremost, the victims, the women themselves must enter into the arena ready to fight against discrimination and oppression. They must actively participate in the struggle for their liberation. Women's movements, quite a few of which are slowly turning out to be merely 'Self Help Groups' must rediscover their focus. Civil society must see, speak and act. Governments must have the clarity of vision and commitment for the cause of women's emancipation. The Church should remove the 'patriarchal veil' that blocks its vision and come forward with the liberative commitment of Jesus to redeem the world from this sinful situation of half of its citizens being subjugated, discriminated and oppressed.

In this background, the present issue of Vaiharai comes with several articles which deal with this painful situation. Dr. Mary, the well known social scientist and theologian in her article "Women Empowerment: A Fact or A Farce?" says that women empowerment, which is a process wherein the powerless and vulnerable women are enabled to act, react and transact in economic, social, political and cultural spheres, has been more a farce than a fact. However, it should not lead to despair but to a hope that it will become a fact. Sr. Stella Baltazar, a recognised woman theologian, in her article "Eco-Feminist

Quest: An Indian Appraisal" says, that the rapid expansion of patriarchy and exhaustion of resources along with the global population growth are the causes of the present day ecological catastrophe and this can be avoided only by enhancing the power of women by enabling them to protect and promote the natural wealth with all its diversity, allowing human beings to take from nature only what they need. Sr. Metti a young dynamic person and a theologian with liberative thrust, writes the article "Women Movements in India: An Appraisal". According to her women movements have a long way to go; they have to challenge the age old myths, theories, stereo-typed ideas and conventional methods of action which keep women under subjugation such as the myth of the feminine and masculine, myth of motherhood, myth of marriage etc.

Dr. T. Victor, professor of Moral Theology in St. Paul's Seminary, in his article "Health Care of Women: A Pie in the Sky", after giving a detailed explanation with statistics on health care, deals with specific areas such as health of expectant mothers, prostitution and women health, women and AIDS, trauma of rape and the stigma of prostitution and concludes that hundreds of thousands of persons, mostly women, die of malnutrition and official apathy.

Dr. Decla, Professor in St. Mary's College, Tuticorin, has an article on "Magnificat: A Feminist Perspective". Magnificat, she says, proposes a fourfold - cultural, political, social and economic - revolution and it is the ultimate proof of Marys' realisation that it was not the disorder, but the order that was menacing and that the present socio-economic order has to be changed.

The last article is that of Dr. S. Devaraj, Professor of Systematic Theology in St. Paul's Seminary. In his article, "Church: A Discipleship of Equals: Ecclesiology from the Feminist Perspective" he says that it becomes clear that for a long time the Church has discredited and defamed women both in theory and practice and forced them to remain voiceless and faceless. It has to get liberated from the oppressive structures of patriarchy and emerge as a community of equals.

As the new editor of Vaiharai, it is my pleasant duty at this juncture to express the heartfelt gratitude of mine and that of St. Paul's Seminary to Dr. D. Alphonse who had been the editor of Vaiharai for the past 3 years. During his term as editor he gave clear focus and new direction to Vaiharai. He made each Vaiharai issue to deal with one contemporary and relevant topic. He brought out issues on themes such as 'Globalisation and Justice', 'The Eucharist for a New World', 'Dalit Emergence in Society and Church', 'Children, Our Future', 'Human Rights and the Church', 'Challenges to Mission Today' and 'Basic Christian Communities'. Through his tireless efforts he has made many in India and abroad to reflect on some of the urgent and relevant issues. Our sincere thanks go to him. I wish the readers of Vaiharai all the best.

Cruz M. Hieronymus