

CHALLENGES TO THE BASIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Dr. N. John Damascene,
Director, Basic Community Task Force
Kottar

Introduction

Basic Christian Communities (BCCs)¹ are the new way of being the Church. They are the fundamental nucleus and the basic cells of the Church. Through them the laity finds self identity, self determination, a place to participate and a role to revitalize and rejuvenate the Church. The laity re-evangelises the Church by way of assuming different responsibilities in the Basic Communities viz: liturgy, catechism, health education, socio-economic upliftment, fighting for just causes, emancipation of women and so on. The Paschal Mystery i.e. passing from the state of darkness and evil to the state of light and good is enacted and concretized in the Basic Communities by way of taking decisions on issues touching the very core of their life having Jesus Christ as their yard stick. As the people of the Old Testament gave top priority to the indwelling presence of God in the arc of the covenant, so the BCCs attach utmost importance to the Word of God.² When the BCCs celebrate

¹ The right term is Basic Ecclesial Communities (BCCs). Since I am dealing with the challenges of the Basic Communities in the Church, I do not want to enter this theological problem and I use the popular name, BCCs.

² Cf. Mary Milligan, "The Bible Formative in a Basic Christian Community of Brazil," *Studies in Formative Spirituality* Vol.2 (1992) 156.

the Eucharist they draw inspiration from it to expend themselves at the service of the Kingdom. Thus the Eucharist becomes the focal point of their life.

A Bird's Eye View of the BCCs in the Diocese of Kottar

The Diocese of Kottar is one of the pioneering dioceses in India to have established Basic Communities. This diocese has given top priority for the formation of BCCs and Parish Pastoral Council (PPC). Ever since Fr. M. J. Edwin initiated the BCCs in the coastal parish of Kodimunai in 1978, the expansion of BCCs has reached almost all the parishes. The diocese of Kottar has 121 parishes and 215 sub-stations in which the BCCs are vibrantly active in 114 parishes and 204 sub-stations. In total this diocese has 2456 BCCS.

1. Positive Impact of the BCCs

1.1. The Participation of the Laity in the Liturgy

It is heart-warming to see different BCCs talking their turn to actually make the people participate in the Sunday liturgy, by way of presenting introduction to the theme of the Holy Mass, giving short commentary to the Word of God and encouraging the faithful to say the prayer of the faithful. As a result of the dynamic participation of the laity in the liturgy, they are no more dumb and mute observers but they have emerged as co-celebrants.

1.2. The Sacraments are Celebrated Meaningfully

The BCCs have paved the way for the communitarian celebration of the sacraments. In consequence, the traditional individual celebration of the sacraments of Baptism and First Communion is no more held and the communitarian celebration is in vogue.

1.3. The Leadership Quality is Growing among the Laity

The BCC sets a platform for each and every participant to take a leadership role in the different areas of their activities.

1.4. A Participatory Church is Emerging

The Church had so far a pyramidal structure, in which the priest was dominant and the laity was subordinate. Now the BCCs

have enabled the laity to have a say in all Church connected matters.

1.5. The Attitude of Helping the Needy

Sensitization about and the concern for the needy has become the regular feature of the BCCs. No single meeting misses the reference to the poor and towards poverty alleviation, eradication of illiteracy and other inhuman situations.

2. Challenges

2.1. The Challenge to be Recognized as “Basic Churches”

We were able to register so far the brighter side of the BCCs. One cannot rest on its laurels alone. Simultaneously we have to take stock of the difficulties and challenges that jeopardize the functioning of the BCCs. Many are of the opinion that BCCs are like one of the movements or pious associations of the Church which in turn downgrades their inner mechanism. The BCCs should become the springboard of all the diocesan activities, because they are the basic Churches in the Church of God. Therefore the BCCs have the challenge at this moment to be recognized as “Basic Churches” in the universal as well as in the local Church, so that all the diocesan activities flow from the BCCs.

The Roman Catholic Church recognises the separated Eastern Churches as Churches, because of the common heritage of the spirituality, liturgy, discipline, theology, valid Eucharist and above all the episcopal structure.³ Nevertheless, they are separated from “full ecclesiastical communion” with the Roman Catholic Church because they are separated from the See of Rome. The Roman Catholic Church recognizes the western separated Christianity as “ecclesial communities,” as there are ecclesial elements in them, such as the fact that Christ is the centre and source of their Church life, with the announcing of the Word of God, the celebration of the Baptismal liturgy and the extension of the Kingdom of God in the

³ Vat. II, *Decree on Ecumenism*, 15; *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 26 & *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church: on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion*, 17.

world.⁴ What the Roman Catholic Church proposes is the communion that ought to exist among the Churches. There can be different Churches with their heritages and traditions, but there should be an ecclesial communion with the Roman Catholic Church, which has St. Peter's successor as the head with the bishops, the successors of the Apostles. The Petrine ministry is the foundation of the unity of the episcopate and of the universal Church.⁵

The apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*⁶ and the encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*⁷ call the BCCs as basic ecclesial communities. However, we consider that the BCCs could be called Churches, because they have retained the apostolic succession, as they have the link-up with the hierarchy. Their eucharistic celebration expresses the universal communion, since it is celebrated by a legitimate pastor. The internal life of the BCCs is very profound, as they are guided by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God and they are the communities in faith, hope and love. Moreover, the BCCs could be called "Basic Churches", because the Church of Christ is present in any legitimately organized local groups. The legitimately organized local congregations are called Churches in the New Testament (Acts 8:1; Rom 16:1; 1Cor 1:2). The Church is manifested in some way, when the legitimate pastor celebrates the Eucharist with the faithful.⁸ However, the principal manifestation of the Church consists in the full, active participation of all God's holy people in the same liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in one prayer, at one altar, at which the bishop presides, surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers.⁹ If we say that the Church of Christ is manifested, when the local Ordinary celebrates the Eucharist with his priests

⁴ Cf. II, *Decree on Ecumenism*, 20-23.

⁵ *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church: On Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion*, 11.

⁶ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 58

⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 51.

⁸ Vat. II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 42.

⁹ Vat. II, *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 41.

and the faithful and in the celebration of the Eucharist by the legitimate pastor with the faithful, we can also say that the Church is manifested in the gathering of the BCCs, for they profess the same faith along with the universal Church and participate in the same Eucharist celebrated by a legitimate priest and thus can be called "Churches" in the Church of God. The recognition of the BCCs by the hierarchy as "Churches" is not for the sake of novelty. It is precisely for converting the BCCs into the convergency of all the diocesan activities, which is very essential to restore the image of the Church.

2.2. The Challenge to Enhance Men's Participation

On the one hand the participation of the women in the BCCs is excellent but on the other that of the men is deplorably limited. Hence, there is a big challenge on our shoulders to greatly intensify the participation of men. It is startling to see the men's participation being more than that of the women in PPC, Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) and in some other movements and associations. The reason behind this is the convergence of money and power in the above structures. Though the BCC is the fundamental nucleus of the Church which garners the active participation of one and all irrespective of gender difference, attracts the menfolk less for the simple reason that it does not provide room for dealing with money and power. Menfolk who are firebrands in political and day to day happenings of the society, consider it a triviality to come together along with the women and discuss in the BCCs the basic issues and dire needs confronting their own communities. It happened on a particular day when a priest went to celebrate the Mass in a parish, he found the participation of women very high while there was hardly any man's participation. He casually asked the altar boy why there were so few men present. The boy shot back that the men do not frequent the Church unnecessarily. For many men, authority, recognition, power and money have become primary and the service and religiosity are relegated to the backdoors.

2.2.1. Measures to Increase the Participation of Men

Unless and until the men come to know that efficient leaders are formed in and through the BCCs, they will not have any inclination towards them. To achieve this target, the BCCs must engage on a war-footing to give constant awareness programmes

to these men who are found more in PPC, DPC and Pious Associations.

It is recommended that in each village a small group of men numbering 10-12 is selected and given training on the importance of BCCs and thereby make them the leaven to accelerate men's participation in the BCCs.

The PPC and BCCs are complementary and intertwined. This has to be concretely realized in the following way. The representatives (normally men) of the PPC are democratically elected from the BCCs. They are, in turn, expected to disseminate the decisions taken in the PPC to the BCCs. The diocese should stipulate a disciplinary action cancelling their membership in the PPC and in the BCC, if they fail to attend the meeting of any of these bodies thrice consecutively.

2.3. The Challenge of Re-peopling the De-peopled of God

The word *people* is not a plural noun denoting more than one person, but a common noun denoting a community grouping. It does not mean a conglomeration of individuals with no essential relations of common interest or responsibility, but rather points to a complex of interrelationships in which the members serve each other's interest and therefore¹⁰ owe responsibilities to each other in the life of a community.

In this sense, each individual is fully respected and accepted as he/she is a constitutive member of the community and the community is seen as a group consisting of all the members with his/her self identity and dignity. The Church is basically the communion of communities wherein every member ought to be honoured as equal. Valuing any other element more than the human person is de-humanizing or de-peopling. The de-peopling process is at work in the Church. The members are discriminated on the basis of caste and gender. Hence the BCCs are impelled to take up the heroic task to re-people the de-peopled of God.

¹⁰ H.L. Perkins, *Roots for Vision: Reflections on the Gospel and the Church's Task in Re-peopling the De-peopled*, Singapore: Christian Conference of Asia, 1985, 4.

2.3.1. The Task of Re-peopling the Dalits

Human dignity is an inestimable, incomparable and unsurpassable gift of God, because everybody is created in the image and likeness of God. Every person is unique and sublime in his/her features and so is to be esteemed with dignity and honour in all walks of life. Unfortunately various negative factors have smothered such dignity which is the very core of his/her life. The most important factor which causes a slur to human dignity is "caste". When we turn the pages of history we come across so many cruel atrocities perpetrated on some sections of the society at the pretext of the caste. The Dalits are the ones that are at the receiving end. Incidents of dehumanizing the Dalits are rampant all over India. They are not only segregated in their socio, political, economic, cultural milieu but also in the religious sphere of life. They are considered as goods and chattels not only in Hinduism, but also in Christianity.

It is estimated that around 65% of the Catholics are Dalits in the Church of Tamil Nadu, but astonishingly only 3.8.% of the priests are from that community. There are only two bishops from this depressed community among the 17 bishops in the Church of Tamil Nadu. "The Christian Dalits are suffering from three fold discrimination: (1) along with all the Dalits in general, (2) on the basis of religion at the hand of the government and (3) from their fellow Christians belonging to the upper castes/classes."¹¹ Christianity preaches that there is no division or discrimination among the baptized and they are all sons of God (Cf. Gal 3:23-29). To preach the equal dignity of persons and to practice the contrary is a perversion and prevarication of Christianity. The Dalits have lost their human identity and dignity even in the Church. Therefore they are in a dehumanized and de-peopled state. Hence, the challenge at the doorsteps of the BCCs is to re-people these de-peopled of God in the Church.

The Church of Tamil Nadu has officially declared that the BCCs are to be established in all the parishes. An earnest

¹¹ James Massey, *Dalits in India: Religion as a Source of Bondage or Liberation with Special Reference to Christians*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1999, p.130.

endeavour has been made to launch the BCCs. Unfortunately it has not been able to make in-roads in many parishes due to the prevailing nefarious social structure of the caste system. BCC is the basic Church which invites everybody to sit together and discuss the issues and challenges touching them with the light of the Gospel irrespective of the caste barriers. It is an uphill task at this moment to bring together different caste people belonging to the one and same BCC. Therefore the prime task is to drive home the Kingdom values of equality, brotherhood, justice and freedom in the minds of the leaders of the parishes by conducting for them intensive conscientization programmes before organizing BCCs.

Once a conducive climate is created among people for active participation in the BCCs, equal importance is to be given to all to assume various responsibilities in the Church structures from the micro to the macro levels. This makes everyone feel elated that he/she is someone who is valued and considered a voice in the community. By this process the very stigma of the caste will be erased and there will be the blossoming of the Kingdom values.

2.4. The Task of Empowering the Women in the Church

The subjugation of women to men in all spheres of human life is a common phenomenon from the dawn of human history to the dawn of this millennium. There is no society on earth that is exempted from this pernicious practice of gender inequality. "Indeed, gender bias in higher education and professional training can be observed even in some of the richest countries in the world, in Europe and North America."¹² Nobel laureate professor Amartya Sen enumerates seven types of gender inequality viz: (1) mortality inequality, (2) natality inequality, (3) basic facility inequality, (4) special opportunity inequality, (5) professional inequality, (6) ownership inequality and (7) household inequality.¹³ I can add one more gender inequality namely, inequality of women in religion (religious inequality), which is, inflicted upon the

¹² Amartya Sen, "Many Faces of Gender Inequality," *Frontline* Vol 18:22 (Oct. 27-Nov. 9, 2001) 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.4-6.

women folk more virulently than any other inequality throughout the annals of the human history. All world religions are conspicuous in their attitude of segregating the women from power and authority. The Roman Catholic Church is no exception in this regard.

Negation of equality to women means negation of the dignity and honour rendered to them. Thus they are in a de-peopled state. It is one of the prime tasks of the BCCs to empower and emancipate the women who form half of human society. Indeed, the BCCs enable them to obtain good leadership qualities in order to assume responsibilities in the administration of the parish. Today, in most of the BCCs, the offices are held by women. Though they are the most suppressed people in all aspects of human life they are anxiously looking for liberation from their perennial hardships through their participation in the BCCs.

Despite holding most of the offices in the BCCs, it is rare to find women elected to any office in the PPC. Women are elected presidents, secretaries and financial administrators in the BCCs, but not in the PPCs in the diocese of Kottar. PPC is the decision making body of parish and so it is more power oriented. Where there is money and power, there will be men's domination and participation in abundance. As a result, very seldom women are elevated to positions of power in a parish. In some cases the women themselves are reluctant to assume such positions in the PPC due to their own lack of self confidence. Lack of self-esteem and assertiveness make them vulnerable and self-defeating like an elephant-cub chained to a tree. It tries to free itself again and again, but in vain. When it is grown up, it can break the chain and even uproot the tree, but dares not to do so, because it has already learnt to be in bondage.¹⁴

Women must not only liberate themselves from the hold of men's oppression and authority, but also ought to attain self esteem and self confidence to empower themselves in the Church. This is the two fold task that the BCCs have to undertake to

¹⁴ Matha Amirthananthamayi's speech as reported in *Kathiravan* (12-01-2002) 7.

enhance woman's emancipation. The BCCs ought to promote the cause of the women in collaboration with the women's commission of the diocese. It would be ideal, if every BCC creates a women's forum comprising of 3 to 5 committed and enlightened women to monitor the process of women's empowerment in the parochial administration.

2.5. The Challenge of Theologizing from Below

The Roman Catholic Church had given the impression that it is cult oriented and priest centred. Until Vatican Council II the priests were the sole agents of evangelization and the lay people were the recipients of it and the priests were the producers of the Sacred Liturgy and Sacraments and the lay people were the customers. The Church which is supposed to be the liberative instrument of God became the Church of triumphalism, clericalism and legalism. The ordinary people were considered mute spectators and voiceless subordinates in the Church and theologizing was done by the priests alone. Vatican II put an end to this triumphalistic model of the Church and its new vision namely the Church as the people God is being concretely realized in the Basic Communities.

The equal dignity of all the baptized has begun to blossom through the Basic Communities. The small people are empowering themselves through Basic Communities by way of assuming different pastoral responsibilities. They evangelize themselves by way of taking decisions on issues and implementing them on the basis the Gospel vision. They identify the pastoral needs and accordingly fulfill them through task oriented programmes. Thus the time has come for the lay people to assume leadership in the area of theologizing and the BCCs serve as the prime forum for the lay people to theologize from their concrete life context.

In fact the process of theologizing by the poor has already commenced in the BCCs. When many surrounding parishes engage in ostentatious celebration of the feasts of their patron saints a parish called Kurumbanai in the diocese of Kottar celebrated its feast in a simple but meaningful manner. This became possible because the parish priest called for a discussion about it in every BCC of the parish. The vast majority of the BCCs decided to celebrate the feast in a simple way and it was whole heartedly accepted in the PPC. In fact many parishes have spared

money to alleviate the burdens of the poor, educate economically poor students and some parishes have also rendered financial aid for the wedding of poor girls instead of celebrating the patron saint's feast in a pompous scale.

The celebration of some of the sacraments such as Baptism, Holy Communion and Matrimony has often become a symbol of status and prestige. Thus affluent people can afford to get individual celebration of the sacraments for their children, whereas the children of the poor and the downtrodden are administered the sacraments in the common celebration. If a priest's niece or nephew is getting married, there will be a solemn concelebrated mass with 20 to 40 clerics. At the same time a poor person is at times unable to find even a single priest to conduct the wedding of his daughter. The individual celebration of the sacraments seems to legitimize the status of a person. These are all the makings of the local priests and some rich people – the so called upper class of the parish. Such discriminations in the celebration of the sacraments was put to an end to by the assembly of the faithful represented mostly by the members of BCCs and the pious associations held on 28th to 30th December 2000 in the diocese of Kottar which made a declaration that not more than 3 priests should assist at the concelebration of any marriage mass.

These are simple phenomena, but they are the sure signs of the emergence of theologizing from below. It is the irrevocable challenge of the BCCs at this crucial juncture to provide opportunities to the ordinary people to theologize based on their need and reality in order to make the Church an effective instrument of the Kingdom of God.

2.6. The Challenge of Living the Word of God

One of the salient and indispensable features of the BCC is that it is a community centred around, rooted in and born from the Word of God. The members are expected to gather together once a week at a common place to read the Bible, to share their views on the passage read and to take decisions on issues in the spirit of the Gospel. The life of the members of BCCs is challenged by the Word of God.

The Gospel is the calling card of the base ecclesial community. The Gospel is heard, shared and believed in the community, and it is in its light that the participants reflect on

the problems of their life. This is a typical feature of the community, the gospel is always confronted with life, with the concrete situation of the community.¹⁵

In spite of this recurring emphasis on the intrinsic link between the Word of God and the day today life, categorically conveyed to the members and the leaders of the BCCs, many BCCs meet with power-hungry leaders, ego-centred office bearers and selfish members. The BCCs have the indubitable obligation to counter these anti Gospel values and to infiltrate the Gospel values in the minds of the members.

2.6. The Problem of Pride and Status

The full-timers of the BCCs in the diocese of Kottar have noticed the shocking reality that many teachers and other educated people are reluctant to come and sit with the other members of the BCCs. They consider it below their dignity and status to identify with the poor and the uneducated and they also feel perturbed to spend one hour in discussion and prayer with the ordinary people. Often they are the most fortunate beneficiaries among the Catholics to have jobs in the educational institutions run by the Church. However, they are not benign towards the needy and concordant with the Church sponsored programmes. Realizing this unpleasant situation, some of the zonal BCCs co-ordination committees have passed resolutions that in future the appointments in the Catholic schools should be given only to the regular participants in the BCCs weekly gatherings. Similarly another proposal is to conscientize the teachers in the school itself by giving them conferences on the values of the Gospel, goals of the BCCs etc.

2.7. The Problem of Ego-centrism

Before organizing BCCs in a parish, the people are taught about the Christ-centred leadership qualities. A leader according to the Gospel, is one who is service-minded and love-oriented; one who does not dictate but stimulates and allows the community to

¹⁵ Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism & Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1985, p.127

discover, to plan and to decide; one who builds up relationships; one who is humble, simple, patient, courageous, and ready to suffer;¹⁶ one who is a man of untiring industry, incessant effort and fervent prayer and one who is endowed with the attitude of Jesus towards others (Phi 2:1-11). In spite of the continuous formation given on being good leaders, we encounter selfish, ego-centred and dominating leaders not willing to share responsibilities and ministries with others in the communities. Some of the leaders are the real stumbling blocks to the genuine Christ-oriented growth of the communities, because they indulge in the practice of nepotism and favouritism and some others lack courage to stand by the decisions taken in the communities. Hence ongoing leadership formation should be conducted for the office bearers to shun such malpractices.

2.8. The Problem of Hyper-Criticism and Pessimism

One of the indispensable goals of the BCCs is to rekindle and implant the model life of the early Christians (Acts. 2:42-47; 4:2-38) in the hearts of the faithful. The Church with its huge structure and formidable hierarchy is in dire need of being renewed as the participatory Church of the lay people. Hence the BCCs are introduced in the parishes as a new model, a new experience and a new way of being the Church. "We are not dealing with the expansion of an existing ecclesial system, rotating on a sacramental, clerical axis, but with the emergence of another form of being Church, rotating on the axis of the Word and the laity."¹⁷ However many priests and laity are suspicious and pessimistic: Will the BCCs achieve their targets? Will there be further chaos and confusion in the Church? These people are all "prophets of doom" Pope John XXIII spoke of. What the church badly needs today are the prophets of "incurable optimism" who can bring into our Church the joy and the hope the Good News of Jesus Christ

¹⁶ Cf. *Growing up Towards a New Community*, Bangalore: Movement for a Better World, May 1979, pp.53-54.

¹⁷ Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, New York: Orbis Books, 1986, p.2.

exudes.¹⁸ The BCCs are embedded in Christian hope that forces of good will triumph and the forces of evil will perish. Thus, the BCCs have the duty to counter the people of hyper-criticism and pessimism who are blocks to the genuine renewal of the Church.

Conclusion

The renowned theologian Karl Rahner emphatically predicted, "The Church of the future will be one built from below by basic communities as a result of free initiative and association."¹⁹ His prophecy is becoming true, since the bishops of India as well as the bishops of Tamil Nadu have decided to embark on organizing BCCs in the parishes of their dioceses. Whether one wants it or not, the future of the Church will belong to the BCCs. The challenges and the difficulties that the BCCS encounter are the transitory obstacles that will surely be overcome in the near future. Challenge is the part and parcel of human life, without it, there will not be any dynamism in our life. By confronting the problems, the BCCs are more vivified to become the leaven and salt of the Church so as to transform it to be a participatory Church and a powerful instrument of Kingdom of God. Let us face the challenges and establish a new world filled with the kingdom values.

¹⁸ Cf. Felix Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hopes*, Delhi: ISPCCK, 2000, p.XiX.

¹⁹ As cited in *Growing – up Towards...* p.30