

# **Social Dimension in Seminary Formation**

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## **Introduction**

Seminary formation had been one of the prime concerns of the Church leaders in India. For shaping the future of the Church will very much depend on the quality of the priests formed.

“A situation-oriented training of the seminarian and religious makes it necessary that the methodology of teaching theology and spirituality, as well as, the curriculum of the course followed now should undergo a radical change.”<sup>1</sup> Thus says the consultation on ‘The Indian Church in the struggle for a new society’.

In this short article a modest attempt is made to bring out the importance of social dimension in seminary formation. This does not in anyway downplay the other dimensions in formation. Even the social dimension, dealt with here, does not pretend to be exhaustive. Given the limited experience of the writer and his involvement in seminary formation and listening to several diocesan priests from different parts of India, he is trying to focus, as he thinks, on some main areas of social dimension in formation. Once again the writer confines himself only to diocesan major seminaries and particularly to theology.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anto Karokaran, “Seminary Formation in the Context of the struggle of the Indian Mass,” in D.S. Amalorpavadoss (Ed.), *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981, 966.

<sup>2</sup> The writer has taught for eighteen years in a major seminary. He has been working with the members of the Catholic Priests Conference of India for the last twenty years. Now he is the Laity Commission secretary of the Conference of the Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI, Latin Rite).

## 1. Insistence on Social Dimension

Impacted by Vatican II, an 'All India Seminar' was organised to imbibe the new vision and spirit of the Council. Among other things about formation it said that the seminarian "should not be isolated from the mainstream of life".<sup>3</sup>

After this there was an extensive consultation and emphasis on contextual formation in seminaries. It resulted in introducing subjects like pastoral exposure, social analysis, human sciences like cultural anthropology, psychology etc..

The latest revised Charter of Priestly Formation for India says: "An understanding of the Indian reality, particularly of the socio-economic, political, cultural and religious forces shaping the country today will equip seminarians to respond more effectively in the light of faith to the challenges that the society faces".<sup>4</sup> It insists further that "at every stage of their formation, the seminarians should be in touch with the societal, cultural, and religious realities in which they are... they should be enabled to have first-hand experience of the real conditions of the world and the expectations of the people".<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Statements and Reality

In spite of repeated statements and continuous instance on the social dimension of seminary formation, why is it that there is still a big gap between the statements and reality?

There may be many reasons for this gap. It is generally said that the statements are only inspirational and not operational. Besides, statements come from above. They do not sufficiently take into account the ground realities. Besides those who are to execute the decisions of the statements are not taken seriously in the very process of evolving the statements. This being said, now let us examine some causes for this gap.

<sup>3</sup> Church in India Today, New Delhi: CBCI Centre, 1969, 316.

<sup>4</sup> Charter of Priestly Formation for India (revised edition) CCBI, 2004, 18 (3.2.3(b)).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, (3.2.4.(c)).

First of all, the main purpose of seminary formation seems to prepare candidates to administer sacraments, run church-related institutions and to do some charitable-social work. Here the concentration is more on the Church and not on the Church being a servant at the service of the world so as to transform the world into God's reign. Only the world-centred formation will require a radical understanding of society and social involvement and not the Church-centred approach to formation. Both will have different vision, values, attitude and behaviour patterns.

An empirical study on the 'Vocation and Formation of Priests and Religious in India' was done by Fr. Paul V. Parathazham in 1998-99. It highlights that the seminarians and religious attached the greatest importance to 'doing the will of God (79.1%) and 'following Jesus' (76.1%) as the goal and motivation of becoming priests and religious. But this field study does not immediately spell out the inner content of what it means either to be doing the will of God or following Jesus in today's context of India. Yet one can still conclude that social commitment in formation does not seem to be that important.

For the same study states that "social goals that entail a preferential option for the poor like 'working for the downtrodden' and 'fighting for justice' are rated as very important by considerably fewer number of respondents".<sup>6</sup> Speaking about their spirituality the researcher says that the vertical dimension of spirituality appears to dominate the candidates. And hence he concludes that the present day formation is still geared to an 'other worldly spirituality'. He calls it 'sacristy spirituality'.<sup>7</sup>

The late Pope John Paul II stated that the social teaching of the Church is an essential part of evangelisation and a clarion call for

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<sup>6</sup> Paul V. Parathazham, "Vocation and Formation of Priests and Religious in India – An Empirical study" in *Shaping Tomorrow's Church: Formation of Priests and Religious for India* ed. by Kurien Kunnumpuram Mumbai: St. Paul's, 2006, 30.

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit., 31 & 56.

the Church to move out of the sacristy.<sup>8</sup> A spirituality that does not lead to social involvement after the example of Jesus in solidarity with the oppressed remains a sacristy spirituality.

The Survey of Parathazham is confirmed by another study of Fr. John Mello. He says that pastoral experience and social justice are missing elements in seminary formation and culture.<sup>9</sup>

The social teaching of the church seems to have little impact on seminary formation. 1971 Synod of Bishops on 'Justice in the World' says: **"Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel"**.<sup>10</sup> Curiously enough the compendium on the social teaching of the Church from Vatican does not even include this declaration on justice in it.

Secondly, social commitment and social intervention involves lot of problems and hardships. But the seminary training has created in the candidates a culture of safety and security and not one of involvement and risk-taking. The priestly and kingly ministries, as they are exercised today, chiefly contribute to maintain the status quo in the Church and society. They do not in any way disturb the Church or the society. Policies, guidelines and rules to be followed in these ministries are very clearly laid down, and one has only to conform himself to them. The candidates are well-trained in the seminary as conformists to follow rules.

But social involvement needs courageous and prophetic stand. It needs a holistic vision of the society from subaltern perspective, creative undertakings, imaginative skills and readiness to suffer misunderstanding and even loss of life. Not everything is clearly laid

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<sup>8</sup> Mechan, Francis X., "Spirituality and social justice: A Guide for Ministry," in Handbook of spirituality for ministers, ed. by Robert J. Wicks, New York: Paulist Press. 1995, 365-379.

<sup>9</sup> John D'Mello, "What Kind of Culture Are Our Seminaries Producing?" in *Shaping Tomorrow's Church*, 72-72.

<sup>10</sup> Synod of Bishops, Justice in the World, 1971, no.6.

down like a road travel map. It is like undertaking a journey on the sea. One has to always find one's way depending on the wind, the direction of the water, the moon and the stars etc. By and large priests who are so used to a settled and comfortable life by training in the seminary, do not venture into such social involvement and social intervention.

Thirdly, a few priests who had been socially involved, did not enjoy the support of the Church authorities. It may be an indication that the authorities together with many priests have reservations about action on behalf of prophetic justice and social transformation, clearly spelt out by the synodal declaration on 'Justice in the World'.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes the involved priests are harassed, taken to task and even suspended from ministries by authorities. This has been the experience of some priests who shared in a colloquium of alternative ministries for social transformation. Worse still, when they come to clash with the government because of their social intervention, they are left to the mercy of the corrupt government officials.

Some seminarians, in spite of the present seminary formation, still retain the spirit of social involvement. But when they see how the socially committed priests suffer, they often hesitate to forge ahead with the spirit.

### **3. Different Understanding of Social Formation**

What exactly do we understand by social dimension in seminary formation? There may be several understandings of social formation. Let us briefly spell out only three dimensions here for our purpose.

By social dimension, some think in terms of visiting sick people, helping poor people, educating poor and destitute children etc. Like good Samaritan, lot of helps and services are done to individuals in need. This service is definitely needed.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Ibid.

Some others take to building houses for the poor with aids from abroad and inside, start small business or industries for people, and do a lot developmental works etc. This is also needed.

A third level of social dimension is to get involved directly or indirectly in the life struggles of the oppressed poor and help them to fight for their human dignity, basic rights and social justice which are denied to them. This will need a scientific analysis of the society from the perspective of the exploited. It will also need tactics and strategies for empowering the people so that they may get organised to secure their rights.

Thus there are several levels of understanding social dimension. In the first two levels, we are benefactors of the poor who become beneficiary objects of our charity. These helps are needed. But this does not understand the function of the society from within and leaves the unjust functioning of the society as it is.

The third level understands the root causes of poverty, exploitation and unjust functioning of the society. It tries to bring about an alternative perception of reality from the point of view of the poor. It helps the poor to see their own history in the light of God's plan and his will to create a new heaven and new earth together with Him. People are empowered to struggle for their rights so that they may live a dignified life worthy of God's image and call. Under this umbrella of social involvement in people's life, the other two dimensions find their proper place. Is the social dimension in seminary formation geared towards the direction of the third level? You may answer this question for yourself.

What follows now are some concrete suggestions in four areas to make the social dimension in seminary formation more realistic and practical.

#### **4. Some concrete suggestions**

**4. 1. Immersion Social Exposure:** Against the background of globalisation and its consumeristic monoculture, an immersion based

social analysis with special reference to sub-altern cultures of the people should be given in a village context to candidates at the beginning of philosophy. This can be organised by philosophy department and guided by competent people from the field. Counter-cultures conducive to personal, communitarian and social transformation are to be highlighted, encouraged and supported at this juncture of formation.

Right through their philosophical formation, week-end programmes should be arranged to keep in touch with the poor and their life struggles. Some of their life problems can be discussed and analysed in class-rooms from philosophical view point. It has to positively aim at contributing towards the enhancement of the people's life on the one hand and a critical assessment of the students on the other.

After philosophy and before starting theology, one year free regency should be given to seminarians. During this time, they could be encouraged to take up some work (job), earn their livelihood and live in the midst of the ordinary working class people. This solidarity with the poor people will go a long way to understand people and their life and discern his own vocation before starting theology.

The candidates to theology may be sent to some mature grass-roots workers or people based movements for a month or so. They are expected to acquire a first-hand experience of how the economic, political, social and cultural structures and systems are functioning, what are their linkages among them and for whose advantage they are at operation. Some life issues, questions and problems they pick up from their incarnational exposure, should become the raw-material for theologising in the light of the historical Jesus' commitment and manifesto (Luke 4:18-19).

At this stage the seminarians can also be encouraged to take active part in human rights struggles for human dignity, ecological issues, gender justice etc. which are not controversial. This is very much in keeping with the expectation of the Church. "Throughout his formation the seminarian will be given the opportunity to interact with

and respond to the struggles of the masses for fundamental human dignity and justice".<sup>12</sup>

Group living both inside and outside the seminary in a rural area or urban slum with the guidance of a committed formator can also be tried during theology.

The aim of all this exposure is to understand human situation in all its complexities today and to respond to it from the point of view of the poor. The knowledge thus gained from such exposures and social analysis is neither to dominate nor to manipulate people but to transform ourselves, our communities and society. Hence it is liberative and salvific knowledge, confirmed by liturgical celebrations and spiritual exercises.

Giving a course on social analysis without immersion into social realities especially that of the oppressed, would be like teaching someone to swim without even taking him/her into water. Hence the need for immersion exposure.

**4.2. Active Participation of the Community in Social Formation:** As early as the fifth century, the Council of Calceden asserted that an absolute ordination that is, an ordination without any reference to a community is invalid.<sup>13</sup>

Vatican II understands priests primarily as community builders. Through the word of God and sacraments, they are expected to build contrast communities contributing to the transformation of the world into God's reign of justice in love.

Now, weekend ministries are being taken up by many seminaries. But how far does it actively contribute to and participate in the social formation of seminarians? The community to which the future priest is going to serve has to play an active role in formation. To listen to Fr. M. Amaladoss "when the community, where students

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<sup>12</sup> Ecclesia in Asia, 1.7.

<sup>13</sup> Council of Calceden, no. 6.

for the priesthood are going to work, begins to play a more active role in the formation of these students, then their formation is going to be more relevant more meaningful and more attuned to their needs".<sup>14</sup>

The revised charter of Priestly Formation for India also speaks of this dimension in terms of the laity. "The laity's role in the life and mission of the Church finds special expression in their participating in different capacities, in the formation of seminarians. They are called upon... to contribute to the seminarians' formation according to their charism (cf. PO.11). The participation of the laity in the administration of the seminary, teaching of certain secular subjects, offering counseling programmes etc., are other channels of involvement".<sup>15</sup>

Further it says that "The laity, especially the parents may be associated with the students' formation in different ways: for example, in matters concerning seminary policies, the evaluation of seminarians for admission into the seminary and their ordination".<sup>16</sup>

The active participation of the community, the laity and the parents will bridge the clergy and laity divide. It will bring down the anti-laity and anti-feminist mentality among some clergy members. The lay people, who are more in touch with the realities of life, will positively contribute from their native wisdom towards the social formation of seminarians.

**4. 3. Experience based Learning, Forming and Teaching:** Experience based learning will also demand experience based forming and teaching from formators and professors. The mere fact that someone has done his/her doctorate and is intellectually gifted, does not automatically qualify him/her as formator or professor.

Most of our formators/professors are trained abroad and they are the products of western universities' methodology and thought –

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<sup>14</sup> Amaladoss, Michael, Priestly Formation in Asia Today, in Tripod; Hong Kong, 1990, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Op. cit., Charter, 32 (4.7).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

pattern. The so-called perennial theology of the West has not helped to strengthen the faith of their own people. Hence there is no point in imitating them. As far as possible, higher studies should be done in our own land and in our concrete context.

Besides, academic excellence does not necessarily bring with it human qualities based on deep spiritual experience. Only those endowed with human qualities and resources can provide spiritual formation and leadership. This is the felt need of the Church in India today. People with such aptitudes should be chosen as formators and professors.

The formators/professors have to go through the immersion social exposure so that they may be able to guide the students. Concrete life issues that emerge from the exposure could be brought up for theologising and be integrated into spirituality. For spirituality is nothing but radical response to life.

**4. 4. Formation Centres (Seminaries):** It is true that after Vatican II, quite a few changes have taken place in seminary formation such as social exposure, contextual theology, use of vernacular as medium of instruction etc. Nevertheless, the formation centres by and large have not undergone any substantial change except for a few regional theologates on experiment. The Council's decree on the training of priests (OT) did not raise any question about the structures of the seminary.

It is our experience that the present setup of the seminary insulates and alienates seminarians from the real life context of the people. To listen to Fr. Sebastian Kappen: **"The first part of formation is creating a gulf between seminarians and the world, and the second part, in fact the rest of life, is an attempt to bridge that gulf".**<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Kuncheria Pethil, "Rethinking Theological Education in India: New Models and Alternatives. A Discussion with Sebastian Kappen," *Jeevadhara*, 14 (July 1984). 285.

Any change which is worth its name has to have two essential factors namely change of content and form (structure). Vatican II has brought about the change of content (new wine) but it has not touched the form (structures = old wine skins).

Small and apt structures of formation houses have to be tried in the midst of the poor people so that the seminarians may listen to the cries of the oppressed, feel their sufferings and get involved in their life struggles. A seminarian who is not in anyway affected and involved is not fit for formation. This involved experience should become a major theological source, following the theological method of experience, commitment and theological reflection in the light of the Word of God and the social teaching of the Church.

Without such a committed experience and solidarity with the oppressed in formation, one cannot expect the miracle of solidarity with the poor in presbyteral ministry. It is good to remind ourselves here that the option people of God's reign (Kingdom) namely the poor determined the very nature of Jesus' ministry and life.

### **Conclusion:**

In a way all theology is spiritual theology. Spirituality is the heart of Christian theology which is more an experience than an intellectual exercise. Hence all theology should spring up from an authentic God experience. For Christian faith is rooted and grounded in God experience – the foundational exodus experience of Israel, the Abba-experience of Jesus and the Pentecostal experience of the early Christian community.

This God-experience is not possible in the flight from realities of people's life. With commitment to people like Moses and Jesus, we need to enter into the cave of realities and experience the basic REALITY God – Yahweh asked Moses to get involved in the process of setting his people free. And in the process of liberation he will find Yahweh being with him and working through him.<sup>18</sup> Hence committed

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<sup>18</sup> Exodus, 3.7-12.

praxis first, and theological reflection next. Otherwise theology may become verbal orthodoxy. "It is quite possible for heresy to co-exist with verbal orthodoxy" – Karl Rahner. Correct words (verbal orthodoxy) have to become concrete and alive in action (orthopraxis). "For the demons also believe that there is only one God and tremble with fear".<sup>19</sup> But they do not act on their faith.

If theology, only aims at acquiring some knowledge and skills, with knowledge economy today, people have better knowledge and skill in many areas. We as priests may not have anything to offer them. But if we have God experience, we have something very basic to offer to their life. This is what the world and the Church in India needs most today.

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<sup>19</sup> cf. James 2:19