

# VAIHARAI

(The Dawn)

A Theological Half-Yearly

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Vol.13 No.2

Jul - Dec 2008

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## Editorial

Down the centuries, priest and religious were viewed to be holier than the laity because of their very vocation to the priesthood and religious life. Priests in particular progressively assumed the role of the “dispensers” of God’s grace and the laity became the recipients. Consequently, laity were also looked down as less holy and spiritual than the priests and religious. Moreover, in the history of the Catholic Church the literature on evangelization was often written by the priest and religious missionaries. The very understanding of evangelisation also favoured considerably the efforts of the priests and religious to be counted as the evangelisation work. Because of these factors and other historical reasons, the tremendous role played the laity in the spread of the Gospel was eclipsed by the organized missionary endeavours of the priests and religious in the Catholic Church.

If we recast the very understanding of evangelisation and rewrite the history of evangelisation from the perspective of the lay men and women, then we will record innumerable lay personalities as the carriers of the Good News. In this issue of *Vaiharai*, an effort has been made to cast a retrospective glance at the history of evangelisation from the perspective of laity. We humbly concede to the argument that there is already enough body of literature on this perspective. The new dimension we add to this process is highlighting the unrecognised but indispensably vital role of the laity in the evangelisation history of southern Tamil Nadu.

To set the stage for the discussion on the role of laity in the recent history of Southern Tamil Nadu, Fr. Maria Stehen gives an account of the New Testament evidences for the claim that in the

early Church it was the laity who championed the efforts to spread the gospel to the ends of the world. This is followed by the article of Fr. John Kulandai in which he claims that the life and death of Mr. Devasahayam Pillai who lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the present district of Kanyakumari is a compelling evidence for the evangelisation done by the laity, for the laity and of the laity. He cogently argues that the life of Mr. Devasahayam Pillai is more evocative than the priest and religious missionaries and thereby he appeals to retrieve the lives of such personalities from the forgotten pages of the Church history.

Much in a similar vein, Fr. Alphonse Diraviam throws light on the missionary methods of the 17<sup>th</sup> century missionary, John De Britto who laboured in the South-East region of Tamil Nadu, currently comprising of the civil districts of Sivagangai and Ramanathapuram, and draws insights on the indispensable role of the lay leaders in the mission spearheaded by him.

The life narratives of Mr. Devasahayam Pillai and John De Britto are truly heartening us, because they reveal to us the missionary potential of the laity. At the same time these narratives are also painfully disturbing us as we reflect on the untapped potential of the laity today to spread the good news. The missionary methods of Devasahayam Pillai and John De Britto will have to make a claim on our conscience as to the importance we give to the empowerment of the laity today in our Church.

This issue also carries the first part of an article by Fr. Peter Roy. He writes on the theology of Fr. Amalorpavadass focusing on his effort to build human communities. In a broader perspective and in an indirect way this article also appeals for more lay ministries in the Church today, because Fr. Amalorpavadass is one of the courageous pioneers and path breakers in the empowerment of the laity.

Fr. P. S. Sebastian

Editor