

Religious and the Pastoral Ministry

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Introduction

The Year of Consecrated Life is almost drawing to an end. The purpose of this special year of consecrated life is to renew, reorient and recast the life and ministry of the Religious, so that they may wake up the world. In this article, I reflect on how the Religious in India can wake up the society in our country. Drawing inspiration from the life and ministry of Pope Francis, Firstly I reflect on the present situation of the Catholic Church especially in Tamil Nadu and what the Religious can do to awaken the Church here in our country. This article is purely a personal reflection of a diocesan priest on the mission of the Religious especially in Tamil Nadu. In the light of the ecclesial and secular contexts, I reflect on the factors that constrain the Religious in their prophetic ministry. Finally, I also suggest a few important areas of focus for the fruitful ministry of the Religious.

Ecclesial Context

Catholic Church has been doing its mission in Tamil Nadu over four hundred years. It is running many prestigious schools and colleges. Next to government institutions, it is the Catholic Church, which has been running more number of educational institutions. In fact, we have done more than what we are expected to do as a minority group. Yet, there are some questions to be answered: How is it that even after four hundred years we have many catholic boys and girls who have not completed higher secondary education? How is it that there is a good number of Catholic families whose members have not stepped into the colleges? In nutshell, even the formal education has not reached all the Catholic families. The Catholics who have had access to the formal education have not diversified their professions; much less is their presence in the civil services such as IAS, IPS, IFS and so on. Ironically, those who made use of our educational institutions have reached the higher echelons of the society and they are present in the policy-making bodies of the nation. But the presence of the Catholics in such nodal bodies is deplorably wanting. In comparison with the laity in the other sister Churches, the presence of the Catholic laity in the civil services, other lucrative jobs, and business is much less.

One of the reasons for this state of affairs is that they are unable to see the wider horizon of possibilities in the

world. Even if they are aware of such possibilities, they lack confidence to compete with others, because they have not acquired necessary competency in the area that one has qualified. Lack of confidence and competence has made our people more inward looking. They look at the Church as an employment bureau. Everybody thinks that it is his/her undeniable right to be employed in the Church-run institutions.

Likewise, the Church does not have much success stories of creating entrepreneurs at micro and macro levels in the country. Even those who are engaged in business are running mostly petty shops and retail shops.

Moreover, how is it that there are so many Catholic families that live in sheds with thatched roofs? How many Catholic families are reeling under poverty? We, as a Church, are not able to ensure even a decent living to our people. What impact has our mission created in the quality of the life of the people?

The Secular Context

It will not be an exaggeration to say that our country is at cross roads. The growing religious fundamentalism fuelled by the vested interests for their social and political ends is endangering the basic democratic fabrics of our country. Religion becomes militarised, politics criminalised, economy marketised, education saffronised and culture hegemonised. By and large the political class exploit these developing trends to amass more and more wealth. The

bureaucrats in India toe the line of the politicians. Many are insensitive to the social and ethical demands of their offices. Therefore, they do not take serious efforts to transform the ineffective systems and outdated structures. It is, however, heartening to hear about a handful of officials who challenge the existing exploitative structures. The tragedy is that such officials are either sidelined with insignificant assignments or threatened by the goondas, or harassed with frequent transfers. Sometimes they are also done away with. The need of the hour is formation of leaders who will uphold the values enshrined in our Constitution; who will take risk to transform the society from the perspectives of the poor and the excluded. The well-known Mr. Sahayam I.A.S and Justice John Michael D'Cunha are shining as exceptional examples of such dedicated and committed Catholics. There are of course some more but unknown to us. Now the Church should spend more of its energy and resources to train and animate Catholics who will bear witness to their faith in Jesus in the society. Thus the Church has to creatively respond to these emerging contexts.

The Identity of the Religious

One of the ways the Religious live out their consecrated life is by playing a luminal role in the mission of the Church. They are at the threshold of the institutional Church and the secular world outside. That is why they are to be at the frontiers and peripheries of the mission. They are to

effectively present the face of the Church to the outside world and preach the gospel. But at the same time they are rooted in the mission of the local Church. Their one foot should be in the Church and the other foot in the outside world. Therefore, as they are at the threshold of the institutional Church and outside world, they cannot also forget their role in the formation and development of the local Church. They should be rooted in, committed to and cooperate with the local Church. Participating in the preparation and implementation of the pastoral plan of the local Church is essential on the part of the Religious to their commitment to the local Church.

Emphasising such collaborative role of the Religious with the local Church, particularly in participating in the pastoral plan of the local Church, Paul Puthanangady in an unpublished article titled "Charism of the Religious and the Animating Role of the Hierarch" affirms: "The religious are, therefore, bound to look at their life and mission in the light of the mission of the Church. They should be involved in planning, they should act in complementarity and not in competition with the other members of the community, they should function in a spirit of co-responsibility, they should evaluate from time to time both their role in the implementation of the project as was that of the others within the total context of mission." Thus, the Religious should be committed to the local Church and to its pastoral plan.

The Role of Religious in the Mission of the Church

Pope Francis envisions the Church as a 'field hospital.' "I see clearly that the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the heart of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a *field hospital after battle*." The metaphor *field hospital* also refers to the presence of the Church at the peripheries. It is closer to the wounded, bruised, maimed and lame. Commenting on the present state of the Church, Pope Francis pointed out in his three minute speech in the conclave held prior to his election as the pope that the Church has not reached out the peripheries effectively: "It [the Church] needed to surge forth to the peripheries, not just geographically but to the existential peripheries where people grappled with sin, pain, injustice, ignorance and indifference to religion. But the Church had got too wrapped up itself. It was too navel-gazing. It had become *self-referential* which had made it sick. It was suffering a *kind of theological narcissism*." Thus, the mission of the Church today is to be like a mother, a field hospital, manifesting its closeness and proximity to the victims of the society.

Now the question is who is to engage in such Mission of the Church? Is it merely the bishops, priests and the consecrated persons? Should not our laity be in the forefront in such missionary activities? If we do not build and navigate their capacities systematically, concretely and concertedly, how will they be effective missionaries? We are already

experiencing vocation crunch. The number of young girls and boys joining the religious congregations is steadily coming down. This trend will in fact nose dive unfortunately in the coming years. In such contexts, after a couple of decades, what will happen to our institutions that we build today? Who are going to animate and lead our institutions in future?

To meet the future challenges, the Church has to design programmes first to meet the existential needs of the youth. From there it should move forward and motivate them to involve in the mission of the Church effectively. We can have committed lay people who can participate in the mission of the Church only if they are touched and transformed at their early stage of life. Peter Drucker, an authority in the management studies, in an article titled "Managing Oneself" says that if someone is not involved in some sort of mission along with his first career before reaching 40, it is not possible that person to commit in his/her latter part of life for any mission: "If one does not begin to volunteer before one is 40 or so, one will not volunteer once past 60." Therefore, it should be at the prime of their youth.

My main contention, therefore, is that we should train the laity, particularly the youth, in a more systematic manner to send them as evangelisers in the secular world, so that the Good News may be announced with its prophetic content. This should not be a mere wish. It should be

transformed into time-bound programmes and achieve concrete results. It is a task of people-building. It is a long process. Pope Francis wants us to engage precisely in such people-building task: "What we need, then, is to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events. Without anxiety, but with clear convictions and tenacity" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 223). Engaging in such people-building process is a difficult job. We can easily be discouraged and frustrated, because it does not yield immediate results. Yet the Pope urges us to involve in people-building process: "Sometimes I wonder if there are people in today's world who are really concerned about generating processes of people-building, as opposed to obtaining immediate results which yield easy, quick short-term political gains, but do not enhance human fullness" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 224).

The Religious in India have all types of resources to "generate this new process," to "generate a process of people-building." They can spearhead such programmes. Some programmes can be taken up by individual Religious Congregations; some programmes by a few Religious together as a team. Some programmes could be done at the State level; some at the zonal level and some at the diocese level. When Religious congregations involve in developing and organising people-building process, in turn

they will also benefit: "the participation of the laity often brings unexpected and rich insights into certain aspects of charism, leading to a more spiritual interpretation of it and helping to draw from it directions for new activities in the apostolate" (*Vita Consecrata*, 55). If Religious want to initiate the process of people-building as envisioned in this article, they should transcend the following concerns which are in a way hurdles for forward movement.

Areas of Concern in the Ministry of Religious

In my analysis, there are three concerns which the religious will have to address with urgency. These are not independent and disconnected concerns. These are closely linked to each other.

1. Less Pioneers

The Church owes a lot to the religious congregations for its growth and spread. Ever since the religious congregations came into existence, the religious have been the pioneers in the mission. They were very proactive, innovative and creative in responding to the pastoral needs of the local Churches. They set new trends in education. They manoeuvred new grounds in the health care ministry. They paved new ways in the social apostolate. The secular society, the State, the people of other religions were looking up to the Church for models. They saw the Church as a source of inspiration. They copied our models. They imbibed our spirit. They emulated our commitment. Even corporate

companies could learn management principles and administrative nuances from the Church.

This was possible, because, for many centuries, pioneering work with prophetic commitment and ministry at the peripheries, went hand in hand. One nurtured the other. The joy of working at the periphery transformed the Religious into fearless pioneers. So also the joy of being courageous pioneers inspired them to be ever creative in mission and to identify new boundaries and cross over them. Thus, the pioneering work at the peripheries engaged the religious in a ceaseless and joyful journey. In this journey, they found everybody as a co-pilgrim. Whenever the Church worked at the periphery with pioneering spirit, it was a *filled hospital* as our beloved Pope wants the Church to be.

When the religious people were filled with pioneering spirit and are drawn by the periphery, they were happy, content, creative, spontaneous, ever ready for any mission, less divisive, less power conscious, always conscious of truth and justice and at home with the poor. When the pioneering spirit was at its low ebb and periphery became unattractive and at times repulsive, all sorts of dangers crept in. Joe Mannath, in his book *A Radical Love: A Path of Light*, identifies the following dangers in religious life which are both evident and lurking: "The pursuit of power and comfort and upward mobility rather than of service; the cult of mediocrity; divisions based on region, language, caste or tribal often promoted by senior members; forgetting the mission and

seeking our comfort zones; mutual indifference or rivalry in communities; the quest for numbers in the place of genuine vocational discernment; anaemic spiritual life leading to superficiality, boredom and unworthy compensations." This is because we have stopped being pioneers and we have lost sight of the peripheries. We are frozen in our institutions. Let us defreeze ourselves from the institutions. The more settled the institutions are, the better the careerism in the Church is.

2. Exclusionary Autonomy

Today we are in an interdependent world. No nation is independent, no discipline is independent and no culture is independent. A healthy dependency is essential for survival, let alone for successes and achievements. That is why networking is one of the catchwords today. It is talked about in every sphere. In technology, business, politics networking has become an essential way of operation. For example, today the mobile phone is not simply a phone to communicate. Many other applications are uploaded in the cell phone and they all work in synchrony to the extent that big businesses are done with small cell phone. Take for example the ATM cards. With an ATM card from one bank, one can have access to his account through the ATM machine of another bank. In one machine, many banks are synchronised. But the Catholic Church is moving in the opposite direction. There is a strict compartmentalisation in the Catholic Church. Every

Religious Congregation enjoys autonomy in its governance and ministry. They need autonomy for effective functioning. Therefore, it has to be encouraged and emphatically affirmed. At the same time, every Religious Congregation has its own charism. Sometimes charisms become stumbling blocks for the religious to synergise their resources and competency. It becomes virtually impossible sometimes to work together, because the charisms are different. The autonomy they enjoy does not bring them together in the mission. In fact, it becomes an alibi for not collectively engaging in the mission where it is required.

Similarly, the relationship between the religious fraternity and the diocesan fraternity is not very encouraging. By and large the diocesan priests' perception of the religious personnel is coloured by envy, indifference, suspicion, threat and at times competition for various reasons. It is also not without evidence that the perception of some religious personnel of the diocesan clergy is influenced by some sort of superiority and indifference. Despite such perceptions, at personal level there exists some cordiality between the Religious and the Diocesan Clergy. Even such occasions of cordiality remain at the level of social gatherings on the occasion of feasts and jubilees. This spirit of togetherness is not translated in its collaborative mission. There does not seem to take place seminars and workshops in which the Religious and the Diocesan clergy together participate. After all, the diocesan

CRI will invite the bishop for a Christmas gathering or a bishop will invite all the religious working in his diocese to congratulate and appreciate them on some festive occasions. During the Year of Consecration more celebrations have been organised at the diocese and vicariate levels to honour, appreciate and encourage the Religious. But how far such occasions were transformed as starting points for greater collaboration in mission in future remains a question.

3. Random Services

The service done by every congregation is almost a *random service and not a focused service*. The concomitant result is that there is a random impact and not a focused impact on the society. Random service means that we do our service without being aware of or without concentrating on our primary constituency, that is, the Catholic Community. We claim that we are for all and we should serve all irrespective of caste and creed and we are doing so. We should continue to serve all, because in the Kingdom of God everybody is our brother and sister. We should not exclude others. But in the name of inclusiveness we have deprived of our own people of their legitimate right to get our services and to get involved in the mission of the Church. The Church as the servant of the Kingdom of God should produce more labourers to gather the harvest. The Catholic community should be transformed as labourers in the vineyard of God. Only with this perspective, I propose the

Catholic Community as the primary constituency, not merely as rightful beneficiaries.

The New Direction

1. Strengthen your Expertise

In my analysis, the root of these dangers is that we stop being pioneers, because we are not drawn by the peripheries. Our mission is universal, that is, building God's kingdom. The particular manner in which this mission is carried out by a religious congregation is called charism. In this way education is the charism of many men and women congregations. Once we were the pioneers in this field. We opened institutions in the remote areas which are called the geographical peripheries. Now the State and private agencies have entered this arena. The State has opened many educational institutions. The private agencies have commercialised it. In this context what is the uniqueness of our ministry in the educational field? Do we have pioneers and experts in this field who have come up with new educational pedagogies? For example, we all start English medium schools everywhere. Have we ever experimented that in vernacular medium schools we can successfully teach English and make the students speak and write in English? Can we not create some model schools, which the government can emulate? Family apostolate is another important area of concern. For many Religious the family apostolate starts and ends with visit to the families. How many professionally trained Religious

personnel we have in our regions to deal with the issues and problems of the families?

2. Synergise your Efforts and Resources

As indicated already, networking and coordination is the mode of operation in all areas of life today. Networking synergises the efforts taken by different agencies and brings out qualitatively and quantitatively better results. It optimally utilises the available resources. Now the time has come for the Religious congregations to enter into networking with one another in order to strengthen the services they do individually; in order to collaborate with one another to discern new ministries and execute them. I propose two examples here as models for synergising the efforts and resources of the Religious Congregations. First, the concept of *Lead Congregation*. In the banking sector, there is a concept of 'Lead Bank.' In a locality, there may be many banks. But only one is authorised to give loans for particular purposes. That bank is called 'Lead Bank.' All other banks will collaborate with the Lead Bank for effective services. Similarly we can also have a *Lead Congregation* in each diocese for a particular apostolate, for example, for educational apostolate. This Congregation will coordinate all the efforts of other Congregations working in the same diocese and the efforts of the diocese in the ministry of education. The burden and the privilege of ensuring that all Catholic boys and girls complete higher secondary education. In case a few are incapable of reaching that

stage, the *Lead Congregation* will have to help them with job opportunities.

Second, all women religious congregations can synergise and synchronise their resources and start a *Women Empowerment Centre* in each state which will train the Catholic girls very systematically for civil service exams and motivate them to become civil servants. This Centre should ensure that at least 50 women become civil servants every year. The regional CRI women wing can take up such ventures. The institutes like *Lumen Institute* at Dindivanam in Tamil Nadu can emerge and evolve such centres. So also, the men Religious Congregations together can run a centre for Catholic boys. Thus, the Religious should develop joint programmes and joint strategies

3. Synchronise with the Diocesan Fraternity

Charisms of the religious congregation are transformed into a programmes and activities only in the local Church. Such programmes and activities should dovetail into the pastoral plan of the local Church. Thus, the Religious fulfil the pastoral needs of the people in a local Church and synchronise their ministry with the ministries done in a diocese. To do such ministry effectively, there should be first of all a cordial relationship between the Religious and the Diocesan clergy. In additions, there should be structures that would ensure periodical planning and reviews. These structures should be both at the regional and diocesan

levels. It is not enough that only bishops and major superiors alone meet and discuss on the issues and problems. At the regional level, there should be sufficient representation from the diocesan clergy, religious and the laity. This body should meet at least three days in a year and deliberate on the important issues the Church is facing in each state. There should also be a similar structure at the diocesan level. This body is more important than the regional one, because only this forum reads the signs of the time in the context of the local Church and responds to it creatively. Cordiality and solidarity among the Religious working in a local Church and the Diocesan clergy should thus emerge in the context of mission.

4. Systematically Focus your Service

Our primary constituency is the Catholic Community. We have to empower this community so that they may become informed and enlightened missionaries in future. Again, I reiterate my position that I am not proposing an extraordinary agenda. No! Our services should be open to all, particularly to the oppressed, marginalised and excluded. There is no compromise on this stand. However, we should give priority to the Catholic Community, because it is they who will have to spearhead the mission of the Church; it is they who can effectively evangelise the secular fora. Therefore, it is the duty of the Church to empower the laity by giving special priority to them in its services.

Conclusion

The time has come to put an end to mutual blaming. We should no more say, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep" (Lk 8:32). Drawing inspiration from the secular world and responding to the invitation of the Pope to wake up the world, the Religious and the Diocesan Clergy should collaborate with each other as complementary poles to empower the laity in their place in a more systematic manner. We have to pool together all our resources and synergise our efforts with crystal clarity as to our primary constituency, so that the laity may emerge as the champions of the mission of the Church, the Herald of the Good News, advocates of the poor and crusaders of social justice. The effectiveness of the mission of the future Church depends much on the enlightened, informed, committed and spirited laity. Keeping this as our primary focus of our mission, the entire Church in India should move forward.

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