



Partnership of Men and Women in the Mission of the Church

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This article begins with a brief exploration of the mission of the Church. It goes on to investigate the kind of Church that is necessary to effectively and credibly fulfil its mission. By way of conclusion it describes some of the steps we need to take in order to create such a Church.

1. There has been an evolution in our understanding of the Church's mission. For centuries Christians thought that the purpose of the Church's mission was the salvation of souls. This was to be achieved by the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, especially baptism. This was based on the belief that the Church was the only God-appointed means of salvation and that there was no salvation outside the Church.

Gradually it dawned on Christians that God can save human beings without the help of the Church. Hence there developed a new understanding of the mission of the Church. Now the purpose of the Church's mission was to plant the Church in places and among peoples who did not yet believe in Jesus Christ. This was probably based on the growing conviction that the Church was the universal sacrament of salvation, even for those who did not belong to the Church. Hence it was thought necessary to plant the Church in different places and among different peoples in order to make this sacrament of salvation available to all people.

Even this understanding of the mission of the Church changed. It became clear to many Christians that the world, and not the Church, was the object of God's love (see Jn 3: 16). In course of time a kingdom – centred approach to mission developed. And Vatican II accepted this approach. In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church the Council declared that the Church has received from Christ the mission to proclaim and establish the kingdom of God on earth.¹ As George Soares-Prabhu has shown, the kingdom of God is Jesus' vision of a new society characterized by freedom, fellowship and Justice.² Taking into account all that the New Testament says about the kingdom of God, I wish to state that the kingdom of God is a new human society which is consciously rooted in God, which is characterized by equality, freedom, love, justice and peace and which lives in harmony and communion with the cosmos. This society has a three-fold relationship – relationship with God, relationship with the cosmos and relationship among its members.

The Church's mission is to work for the establishment of such a society.

2.1 But only a just, egalitarian and participatory Church can credibly and effectively work for a just and egalitarian society. In fact, the Church is meant to be the sacrament of the kingdom. If the Church is not committed to the values of the kingdom – equality, freedom, justice and participatory decision making – how can it promote a new society?

The early church was just and egalitarian. Jesus gathered together a group of disciples and formed them into an unstructured community without any differentiation of rank or ministry. This was a community characterized by "radical freedom, radical equality, radical sharing and radical service".³ It was this community of disciples which with the coming of the Holy Spirit became the Church of Jesus Christ. That is why Pentecost is considered to be the birthday of the Church.

During the New Testament times the Church was understood as the new People of God. According to St. Paul, it was a fellowship in which all racial, social and sexual differences were eliminated (see Gal 3:26-28). What Paul asserts here is that in the Church there is no place for the oppositions that prevail in the rest of society. Besides, the Christian community does not tolerate “domination and structures of domination which are customary in society. In the community of brothers and sisters, no fathers (or mothers) are permitted. The rule of God does not imply the rule of humans”.⁴ Jesus is absolutely forthright in the rejection of domination (see Mk 10:42-45).

In this egalitarian Church there are varieties of charisms which blossom into diverse ministries. The Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Letters deal with them at some length (see Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:28-30; Eph 4:11-13). Gradually, the ministry of leadership emerges. But it is clearly understood that the leadership ministry, like all other ministries, is for the building up of persons and communities. Paul speaks of the authority “which the Lord gave for building you up and not tearing you down” (2 Cor 10:8; see also 1 Cor 13:10).

The early Christian leaders thought of themselves as ministers of Christ in the service of the people (see 2 Cor 4:5; 1 Cor 9:19). There was no question of their lording it over the community (see 1 Pt 5:1-5; 2 Cor 1:24). Jesus, the servant, was the model for all Christian ministers (see Matt 23:15-27; Mk 10:42-45; Jn 13:13-17). As E. Schillebeeckx has remarked:

According to Paul and the whole of the New Testament, at least within the Christian communities of believers, relationships involving subjection are no longer to prevail. We find this principle throughout the New Testament, and it was also to determine strongly the New Testament view of ministry. This early Christian egalitarian ecclesiology in no way excludes leadership and authority; but in that case, authority must be filled with the Spirit, from which no Christian, man or woman, is excluded, in principle, on the basis of the baptism of the Spirit.⁵

2.2 The early Church was also a participatory community. In the Apostolic times, when the nascent Church faced a serious problem it called together an assembly of the faithful. The twelve apostles served as a kind of “ruling council” which presided over the assembly and facilitated the process of decision-making (see Acts 6 and 15).⁶ When there was some confusion caused by the charismatics in the Church of Corinth, Paul asks not the leaders of the Church (in fact we do not know if there were any leaders at the time in Corinth) but the community to regulate the use of the gifts of the Spirit (See 1 Cor 14:26-32). The practice of participative decision-making continued after the New Testament times. In the third century, St Cyprian declared: “I have made it a rule, ever since the beginning of my episcopate, to make no decision merely on the strength of my own personal opinion without consulting you (the presbyters and the deacons), and without the approbation of the people.”⁷

3.1 However, in course of time several significant developments took place which led to the shaping of a Church which was not at all egalitarian and participatory.

An important change was the gradual acceptance of the idea that the clergy had Christ-given power to fulfil certain functions.⁸ Till the twelfth century, the Church had a sacramental, iconological view of ministry. This view was based on the idea that God and the celestial powers were actively involved in the earthly sphere. But gradually a ‘possession-of-power theory’ came to prevail. According to this theory, Christ at the beginning bestowed his power on the apostles who transmitted it to the bishops, who in their turn shared it with the priests and the deacons.

During the 19th century it became quite clear how the idea that priests possessed sacred power aggravated the clergy-laity divide. In a schema on the Church prepared for Vatican I we find this statement:

But the Church of Christ is not a community of equals in which all the faithful have the same rights. It is a society of unequals, not only because among the faithful some are clerics and some are laymen, but particularly because there is in the

Church the power from God whereby to some it is given to sanctify, teach and govern, and to others not.⁹

This draft was probably never discussed at the council. Its only value lies in this that it reveals the theology prevalent at that time.

3.2 A second development was the undue importance given to the hierarchy. As Yves Congar has remarked, in course of time ecclesiology became “hierarchology”, a theological discussion of the hierarchy of the Church.¹⁰ For several centuries Catholic theology tended to look upon the Church as an institution. It held what Avery Dulles calls the institutional model of the Church – “the view that defines the Church primarily in terms of its visible structures, especially the rights and powers of its officers”.¹¹ In the heyday of the Counter-Reformation Robert Bellarmine maintained that the Church is a society “as visible and palpable as the community of the Roman people, or the Kingdom of France, or the Republic of Venice”.¹² For him, the State served as an analogy for the Church. Bellarmine had an enormous influence on the development of ecclesiology down to our own day. On the eve of Vatican II, Abbot B.C. Butler asserted that the Church was an institution, a concrete historical society, having “a constitution, a set of rules, a governing body and a set of actual members who accept this constitution and these rules as binding on them...”¹³

4.1 Because of the existence in it of a hierarchical structure, the Church is not a just, egalitarian and participatory Church. There are more than a billion people in the Church, but just 6000 men (the bishops) make all the major decisions in Church.

Men and women who get socialized in this Church imbibe the values and attitudes embedded in the structures of the Church. They develop a false consciousness. According to the *Gender Policy of the Catholic Church*: “There is also an overt recognition that the participation and commitment of men is required to fundamentally alter the social and economic position of women. Such an approach further recognizes the impact of gender inequality on men in terms of adverse effects on their psyche, behaviour, interpersonal relations, lifestyles and health”.¹⁴ As a

result men come to believe that they have to oppress women in order to be real men.

And women feel that they are second class citizens in the Church and the State. Hence the first step in the liberation and empowerment of women is to transform the false consciousness of women and men.

4.2 There is also need to change the inegalitarian structures of the Church. Power sharing is an important step towards the transformation of these structures. In many ways women are rendered powerless in the Church. They have no say in the making of decisions that affect them. The General Assembly of CBCI acknowledged that “woman is considered in many ways inferior to man.” This was in 1979. In 1992 the General Assembly CBCI held in Pune stated: “With a sense of sorrow we must admit that women feel discriminated against even in the Church.”¹⁵

4.3 But positive steps have been taken by the universal Church and the Church in India to make it possible for men and women to collaborate in the mission of the Church as equal partners. Vatican II has affirmed, in unmistakable terms, the equality of all in the Church: “And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, dispensers of mysteries and shepherds on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Christ.”¹⁶ What the Council says is this: There are functional differences in the Church, but all are equal in their Christian dignity and their call to fulfil their Christian mission. Vatican II has also condemned every form of discrimination based on sex, race, colour or religion.¹⁷ Besides, the Council has recommended the establishment of Parish Councils and Pastoral Councils to make it possible for lay people to participate in the decision-making process in the Church.

The Church in India is also interested in the Church’s becoming a participatory community. In 1996, the meeting of the General Body of the CBCI stated: “We reiterate our sincere desire to improve and to perfect the movement towards a truly participatory Church where all sections of the People of God

revitalizing their baptismal grace fulfil their vocation and mission. The CBCI will then be a Body that gives witness to unity in mission, achieved with a diversity of roles. In this context we resolve to emphasize the importance of involving all sections of the Church, especially the laity, and reposing greater confidence in them”.¹⁸ The Church in India will have to set up structures and organs of participation, for without them the desire for a participative Church will remain just a pious wish. In the *Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India* (2010) the CBCI has enunciated nine guiding principles in which the Gender Policy is rooted. Two of these principles are relevant to us here. Let me quote them in full:

1. Gender just structures are imperative to facilitate the equality of opportunities and justice for all. This requires the establishment of women inclusive, participatory, accountable, transparent, efficient and sustainable structural mechanisms within the Church and society. Women must be a part of decision making and their contribution within the Church and society must be formally recognized. Women’s skills and needs must be taken into account so as to promote familial, economic, social, political and religious equality.¹⁹

2. Gender equality can only be achieved through equal partnership among and between women and men. Equal partnership goes beyond numbers. It involves women’s equal right to articulate their needs and interests as well as their vision of society and the Church and to shape the decisions that affect their lives.²⁰

If these principles lead to the creation of structures of active participation and a real partnership between men and women, then a new Church and a new society will soon emerge in our country.

Notes

1. Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Rome, 1964, n.5.

2. G. Soares-Prabhu, "The Kingdom of God: Jesus' Vision of a New & Society" in F.X. D'Sa (ed.) *Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu*, Vol. 4, pp. 123-251.
3. G. Soares-Prabhu, "Radical Beginnings: The Jesus Community as the Archetype of the Church" in F.X. D'Sa (ed.) *Collected Writings of G. Soares-Prabhu*: Vol. 4, pp. 143-148.
4. G. Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, p.115.
5. E. Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face*, London: SCM Press, 1985, p. 39.
6. See R.E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop*, London: SCM Press, 1971, pp. 58-59.
7. As quoted by Y. Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965, p. 43.
8. See Y. Congar, *Power and Poverty in the Church*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1964, p. 62.
9. As quoted by A. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1974, p. 35.
10. See *Ibidem* p. 33
11. A. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, p. 31.
12. As quoted by A. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, p. 31.
13. As quoted by A. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, p. 31.
14. CBCI, *The Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India*, Delhi, 2010, pp. 1-2.
15. *Ibid.* p. 9.
16. Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Rome, 1964, n. 32.
17. Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Rome, 1965, n. 9.
18. CBCI, *Evaluation Report: Response of the General Body*, New Delhi, 1996, n. 7.
19. CBCI, *The Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India*, pp. 12-13
20. *Ibid.* p. 13 