

# **Serving God and People: Challenges and Opportunities for the Indian Church**

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## **Introduction**

Service is a word used in different senses in our ordinary conversation. For example, a person is called a Civil Servant if he/she is an employee of the government. We have the Service sector, which includes the Customer Service. We have the domestic Servants who help out in the household chores. Military Service is serving in a country's armed forces. Table Service is the food served by waiters and waitresses and Voluntary Service is an action taken to benefit others for no benefit to the one performing the action. In Christian perspective the word Service has many meanings too. For example, 'Service' or 'Divine Services' are used to speak of worship. A formal or organized prayer programme may also be called a 'Service' or a 'Prayer Service'.

When dealing with the word Service in this essay we shall limit ourselves to the meaning of Service as - *A loving action for one's neighbor which is derived from divine love and is an expression of fellowship*. True Service is voluntary, not forced. One must be willing to serve and willing to place oneself at the disposal of others.

## 1. How Does Christianity Understand Service?

We can understand the spirit of Service in the Church by focusing on Jesus, the early Church, the documents of the Church and the various institutions in the Church that are dedicated to Service of the people of God.

### a. Jesus: The Model of Service

The Evangelists present Jesus as one who serves. Jesus himself saw his mission as Service. He spoke of Himself: *“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.”* (Matt 20:28). His Service sprang out of his compassion to the sick and suffering. Jesus showed himself as a servant in a very important way when he washed the feet of his disciples at the last meal with them and asked his disciples to follow his example of humble of Service (Jn 6:3-5). Jesus made Service an important aspect of his teaching: The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37); the commandment of love God and love neighbor (Mk 12: 28-31); on the Day of Judgment, one is judged on the Service one renders to the needy (Mt 25: 31-46).

### b. Service in the Primitive Church

The New Testament attests that Service of one another was a hall mark of the life of early Christians. Those who had would share with those who had needs. Service as material assistance extended from the Church in one place to churches in other places which needed help. The book of Acts describes how the Christians in Antioch extended help to Christians in Judea during a famine. (Acts 11:29)

### c. Service in the Church

The spirit of Service was concretized in many creative expressions in the history of Christianity. Many religious institutes of priests, and lay persons emerged within Christianity which cared for the sick, supported widows, orphans and refugees, looked after the welfare of prisoners, and educated boys and girls. An iconic figure in recent history, St. Mother Teresa of Kolkata, dedicated her life serving the destitute, poorest of the poor rejected by families and society.

Following are the various documents of the Church that expresses its social concern towards the service of the poor and promotion of human dignity:

- *Rerum Novarum* is an encyclical issued by Pope Leo XIII on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1891 that addressed the condition of the working classes. It focused on the rights and duties of Capital and labor.
- *Populorum Progressio* is the encyclical written by Pope Paul VI on the topic of “the development of people” and that the economy of the world should serve mankind and not just the few. It was released on 26<sup>th</sup> March 1967.
- *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, “The Social Concern”, is an encyclical promulgated by Pope John Paul II on 30<sup>th</sup> December 1987. It deals with development on two fundamental lines: The failed development of the Third World and the conditions and requirements for a development of a worthy person.
- *Evangelium Vitae*, “The Gospel of Life”, is an encyclical promulgated on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1995 by Pope John Paul II. It deals with issues pertaining sanctity of life.

## 2. The Church in India

Although India is a secular society, religion is publicly manifested on the streets. Hinduism has made the most profound religious imprint on Indian society but India is tremendously pluralistic, and there are significant numbers of Muslims in India. In contrast to many western countries that privatize and interiorize religion in order to cope with religious pluralism, pluralistic India puts religion in all forms very much in public view, in vivid color for all to see.

Catholicism in India is characterized by intense devotional practice that draws from Hindu, Syrian, colonial Portuguese and contemporary Catholic practices. The connections between Indian Catholicism and the rest of Indian culture are often on display, and at times the boundaries between these practices can seem thin. One maybe a Catholic but at the same time he/she is also a citizen of India and holds a responsibility towards one's motherland. When Jesus says: "*Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God that are of God.*" (Matt 22:21). Jesus teaches that we as Christians enjoy double citizenship: we are citizens of our country as well as citizens of Heaven. That is the reason, though Catholicism is very much a minority religion, it is quite visible in India. Catholic schools, hospitals, and colleges are widely revered in India, sought after by Hindus, Muslims and Christians alike. Christian communities run 20 percent of the private educational institutions and more than 30 percent of the private medical Services in the country.

There have been significant political efforts by Hindu nationalists to marginalize Catholicism as "foreign." This is not true at all! India is an integral part of Asia. In *Ecclesia in Asia*, Pope John Paul II speaking about the wonders of

the land of Asia says that Asia is a land of great importance as Christ was born, lived and died in Asia along with the entire History of Salvation taking place in Asia. Missionary work began in Asia and then spread out to Europe and America. St. Thomas, the Apostle came to preach in India, especially South India, as early as 52 AD. That's the reason Catholicism is more a part of the social, religious and political order in the south of India. The Church is not foreign on the contrary it is totally at the service of the Indian society and I substantiate this claim by enumerating the contribution of Christianity in India.

### **3. Contributions of Christianity in India**

The Vice President of India, Venkaiah Naidu, in a meeting organized by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), expressed appreciation for the work of the Church, emphasizing that Christians are a peaceful community, whose work represents a great contribution to the nation's growth. Following are enumerated a few of the numerous contributions of the Church in India -

#### **a. Contributions of Christianity to Reformation, and Modern Democracy**

We can document the contributions of Christianity even before India was united as a country and when she existed only as different princely states. For example William Carey, a British Christian missionary, studied the Indian languages and translated the Bible. He did not stop with the Bible only; in 1802 he published the Bengali translation of Mahabharata and Ramayana. In 1818 the Bengali newspaper was published in vernacular language as a means of social education. He pioneered the movement that led to the abolition of the inhuman practice of Sati and relentless-

ly fought against other social evils such as infanticide and caste system that plagued the Indian society.

There is a false notion of identifying the Church in India with the Westerners. On the contrary, we would be surprised by the fact, which is mostly ignored and overlooked, that during the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Bombay Christian Movement in its first resolution stated that members of the Indian Christian Community were one with other communities in their desire to win complete *Swaraj*! Swadeshi Movement of 1905 and Non-cooperation movement of 1920 were supported by Christians heralding that, *"It is not religion, but human values and Patriotism stand first."*

#### **b.Contributions of Christianity to Social Education**

The Educational Service of Christianity has been admitted as a highly valued Service to the nation. Many of the Christian schools and colleges mainly cater to the children of the migrants and the poor. In addition to that there are 1,524 Technical Training schools and Polytechnics run by the Church in India. There are thousands of schools and hundreds of colleges run by the Church. The Christian mission in the education sphere helped in elevation of the status of women by being the pioneers in female education.

#### **c. Contributions of Christianity in Uplifting Tribals and Dalits**

Most of the tribes were exploited due to their ignorance and were under the clutches of money lenders causing them to forfeit their land and lose control over their community. The scene changed by the arrival of the missionaries who focused on formal education, alternative employment and introduced many socio-economic measurers such as estab-

lishing Catholic co-operative credit society, cooperative societies, and mutual help societies, which made the tribes self-sufficient.

#### **d. Contributions of Christianity to National integration**

Christianity has helped to lay the foundation for a wider and deeper fraternity based on love, justice, forgiveness and solidarity. In the Archdiocese of Goa and Daman, as also in the other diocese across India, various Inter-Religious programmes are organized both at the state as well as at the parish level, to promote religious harmony. These inter-religious activities effectively serve in building bonds of love, understanding and fraternity in the society at large.

The Church tries to reach out and help the people who are neglected and are utterly vulnerable. They include the migrants, refugees, orphans, destitute, old age people rejected by their families, mentally and physically disabled persons, those affected by HIV/AIDS and street children. Thus I state that when one serves the Church one serves the nation as the Church is an integral part of India.

### **5. Issues Confronted by the Church in India**

A desire to serve others is not free from difficulties and challenges that thwart one's path. There are several types of needs and situations which the Church may respond to in its desire to serve-

#### **a. Inequality, Poverty and Social Exclusion**

Social exclusion refers to the exclusion of groups of people from access to such things that are considered normal or taken for granted by others in society. Divisions are drawn on lines of caste, religion, and gender; it includes discrimination against minorities, Dalits, tribals, widows,

sex-workers, migrants, nomadic tribes, etc. Exclusion is also the fate of the communities displaced by pro-business development projects, the slum-dwellers, the poor, the homeless, the child labourers, and the street children. A recent estimate put the number of street children in India at 15 million – 15 per cent of the global count!

### **b. Urban and Rural Poverty**

Earlier, poverty was only looked upon as a rural phenomenon. However, India faces problem of both rural poverty as well as urban poverty. This was one of the grounds on which Rangarajan Committee reported on urban poverty and rural poverty separately. The Committee estimates that the 30.9% of the rural population and 26.4% of the urban population was below the poverty line in 2011-12. The All-India ratio was 29.5%. In 2011-12 363 million were below poverty.

### **c. Lack of Sustainable Development**

India has not been successful in carving a sustainable path that leads to development. India's developmental policies have resulted in degraded soils, depletion of water tables, increased floods, desertification, waterlogging and salinity, pollution of water and air, loss of biodiversity. The recent Kerala flood that killed at least 360 people and caused damage of property worth crores of rupees is an indicator of the rampant ecological damage as it was mostly caused due to rampant and ill planned quarrying, mining, illegal repurposing of forests, and high-rise building constructions.

### **d. Violence against Women**

Women suffer domestic violence which largely goes un-



reported. Apart from this, women are also victims of public violence like gang rapes etc. Rapes are not just the individual act of a man against a woman but they also manifest the hegemony of the patriarchal mindset in the society.

### **e. Mob Lynching and Vigilantism**

The judiciary system has taken a backseat in India as now justice is being delivered by the anti-social vigilantes. *No FIR's, No Arrests, Faisla on the spot!* This appears to be the new judicial justice system. "Justice" is delivered within seconds just by a click of the WhatsApp message! This sickening act has already claimed 27 lives in 9 states in one year! The law enforcers appear to be mute spectators or silent participants in this drama. More often than not they arrive for the clean up after the stage is empty when only the mangled body remains.

### **f. Drug Culture Among the Youth**

The menace of drugs and alcohol has woven itself deep into the fabric of our society. More Indian youngsters struggle with addiction than ever before. Peer pressure, adolescent immaturity and irresponsible parenting are the three-headed monster luring teens towards addiction and a life of suffering and regret. In Punjab nearly 75% of its youth are severely addicted to drugs. Mumbai, Hyderabad and other cities around the country are quickly gaining a reputation for their drug usage.

## **6. Future Prospects of Service in the Church and India**

- The Youth are the living force of our Church and the society. We need to empower our youth to play an active role in the Church by equipping them with the knowledge of the Word of God and with the teachings of the Church.

As well as, encourage them to involve in important areas of our national life such as politics, Civil Services, defense, law and judiciary. All religions must encourage and inspire their young adherents to imbibe the spirit of Service to humanity. The youth have great potentials and can bring much positive change in society.

- The Church cannot go a long way if it goes alone. Wherever possible, it must serve with other religious groups and secular agencies. For example, opening orphanages in collaboration with NGO's, and other state agencies who work for similar causes.
- We ought to continue our work in the field of education and health services despite the numerous oppositions. Being the voice of the voiceless is one of the important missions of the Church. We should work for and stand by the farmers, fishermen, migrants and other deprived and exploited communities by providing care, comfort and hope to them in their distress.
- We are the stewards of creations and so we should make people aware of the importance of ecology through our preaching, catechesis and by organizing an ecological drive in the parish. This will help to educate people about caring for the nature which is an integral part of our Christian commitment and spirituality as beautifully enumerated by Pope Francis in his Encyclical, *Laudato Si*.
- We should seize every opportunity to promote dialogue across religious boundaries. Visiting our Hindu and Muslim brethren during Ganesh, Diwali, Eid are some of the means to build fraternal love in our societies. I can proudly say that in our Seminary we make it a point that all of us go to visit the Hindu brethren on Ganesh

Chaturthi. As it has been a few years since we have been doing this; the Hindu brethren eagerly wait for our visit. This is a pleasant and very effective way to build a bond of love and compassion in our society.

## 7. Conclusion

Service is a universal principle and cuts across religions and societies. All religions and religious beliefs have the potential to curb sufferings and conflicts in the society. But sadly, religions often add to social conflicts and human suffering. The vision of equality and universal fraternity which religions espouse is not empirically realized in the world.

This must change. Followers of different religions and ideologies must find areas of common purpose where they can work together. The Church in particular should live in the spirit of Service to one another and be a beacon of hope and light to the Indian society. Though some

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may differentiate between 'Serving God' and 'Serving people', in the perspective of Jesus, both are closely and inseparably linked. Thus, when the Church becomes a symbol of Service as Jesus himself, then we can all work together to build our nation because *in Serving the Church we will be Serving the Nation!*