

**JPJRS 3/2 (2000) 105-117**

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4289818  
Stable URL: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4289818>  
Keywords: Religious Formation, Religious Leaders, Training of Religious Leaders, Religious Women Leaders  
Abstract: See below

## **Formation of Women Religious in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**Evelyn Monteiro, SC**

*Dept. of Systematic Theology, JDV, Pune 411014*

“The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect, and a power never hitherto achieved” (*Mulieris Dignitatem* 1). This reality is evident in the exceptional prominence that the subject of the dignity, status and role of women has gained in recent years. In women religious circles, ripples of awakening to this reality are also seen and efforts are being made towards empowering ourselves to acquire ‘an effect and a power’ in the Church and the world. But these efforts are too small to have a significant influence on our rapidly changing and challenging times.

Conscious of this overwhelming change in the society, the Major Superiors Conference of India emphasized that “to live fully our consecration we need new models of religious life for our times and in the context of the Indian and Asian reality” (CRI 1993). In the light of this imperative for new models of religious life, we shall endeavour to re-structure its foundation, the formation of women religious. To be true to our prophetic calling in this period of profound transformation, religious formation will have to be “in the forefront of the creative ferment which is

shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (CRI 2000, p. 51).

Our main sources for this task are the reports of the CRI National Assemblies that bear years of painstaking search for how to be relevant disciples of Christ, women set apart for a radical commitment to His people.

### **What do the CRI National Assembly Reports say?**

Scanning through the CRI Reports of the past 15 years, dating from the historic Vijayawada Assembly of 1986 where the CRI made a significant breakthrough to commit itself to liberation, to the Jubilee Year 2000 Assembly that makes a renewed call for prophetic discipleship in pluralistic India, one observes two distinct elements emerging and recurring. The first is a call to radical discipleship of Christ which determines our Christian identity as consecrated women and the second is how this discipleship which is in and for mission in pluralistic India affirms our Indian identity. Our Christian and Indian identities must have a bearing on each other and only a healthy fusion of both will see us as committed, consecrated Indian women. If, however, any one identity seeks to dominate over the other then alienation and superficiality in religious

life will follow, for “the religious is not an aspect or dimension apart, but is the Godwardness and the humanness of all the facets of liberation and life”.<sup>1</sup>

The varied themes of the CRI selectively chosen during this span reveal a paradigm shift in awareness from being inward-looking women, withdrawn from the world, to women with a global vision for a prophetic mission; from being an appendix-daughter of a colonial-mother to being consecrated women of and for our motherland. This new thrust in vision and goal, viz., to be radical disciples of Christ in and for mission (cf. CRI 1991, p. 13) has initiated a slow but progressive movement towards a new thinking about religious formation and its structure.

All Christians are called to be disciples of Christ. What challenges does this radicality of Christ’s call pose to Indian women religious in our present times? What demands does the *Yesu-Krist Jayanti* wake-up call to be Prophets, Pilgrims and Pioneers make to the entire formation system of women religious? Together with my sister-religious, I would like to think aloud of a probable pragmatic direction our formation could take. We shall engage in some re-searching and reflection to revamp our prophetic presence as consecrated women in India. This attempt is not an offer of a new brand of formation but rather a reinforcement of the key elements that have consistently emerged at the annual CRI Assemblies in the light of the new openings available to us since the eventful Council of Vatican II.

The revolutionary statement of the 1986 CRI Assembly generated appre-

ciable interest and was a great sign of hope to the life and mission of consecrated women in India. It spoke about the force of liberation and affirmed that freedom empowers us to love all as children of God. Its manifesto included listening to the voice of the poor, immersion in the lives of the people, experiencing and struggling with them in their joys and sufferings, questioning the existing order and identifying means to change unjust structures. Taking off from this vision of radicality, successive CRI Assemblies have endeavoured to articulate the prophetic nature of religious commitment (cf. 1988, 3:8, p. 6). It was also urgently felt that a fundamental change had to be effected in the method of training, especially of young religious, if the seed of radicality sown in 1986 and watered at the subsequent yearly assemblies was to bear fruit in the life and mission of women religious in India.

Consequently, the 1989 CRI Assembly in Goa undertook the vital task of shaping this vision of prophetic radicality more concretely by focusing on the ground base of religious life, namely, religious formation in the context of India’s pluri-religious and cultural heritage and the multi-faceted forces that dehumanise our people. To be a leaven in society and the Church, a restructuring and revitalizing of formation in faith at all levels was felt necessary. Religious formation must promote rootedness in the revolutionary Jesus “through a gradual identification with Him in His total self-giving to the Father” (*Vita Consecrata* 65). It must also encourage a readiness for creative and challenging responses for his Kingdom

mission (cf. Lk 4:18-19, CRI 1989, p. 10) for “radicality is the readiness to take risks and live without securities in a life-style which is envisaged as being outside of the traditional structures of religious life”, affirms Samuel Ryan.<sup>2</sup> Several guidelines were offered. We shall highlight some important points that may be pivotal to our new search for a relevant formation of women religious in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (cf. CRI 1989, pp. 10-11).

- Commitment to put on the mind of Christ
- Awareness of the areas of unfreedom and efforts to remove blocks that hinder growth
- Encouraging critical thinking, creative action, initiative and personal responsibility
- Importance of the personal and communitarian significance of vowed life
- Strengthening a genuine Indian Christian identity
- Growth in attitudes characteristic of our Indian heritage - detachment, simplicity of life-style, asceticism, etc.
- Providing exposure – immersion programmes among the poor and the marginalized
- Developing an incarnational spirituality with a focus on the poor

The above signposts to re-define our identity, life and experience of God as Indian consecrated women underscore the need for a contextualized formation in and for mission. The persis-

tent call in the yearly CRI statements to mobilize inculturation in formation and life-style would further testify to this. This incarnational approach necessitates a re-structuring of formation in mission (CRI 1991, p. 13) in order to create a new consciousness and motivate religious for inserted and involved commitment (CRI 1993, 6:3). Formation in institutionalized structures and a programmed life-style runs the risk of preparing alienated religious for mission. This is confirmed by the findings of a National Survey of religious vocations in India that states: “for a large number of students life in the formation house is an alienating experience”, for the life-style and environment alienate them from their native culture and life-style and do not help them to identify with the people.<sup>3</sup> With this backdrop of the radical vision, thrust and direction of religious formation that the CRI has painstakingly drawn out, we shall attempt to articulate some concrete ways to realize the dream of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Towards an Incarnated Formation**

### ***1.1. Retrieving the Strength and Beauty of Indian Women Religious***

If women religious are to be committed to liberation, the primary step is to be liberated women for commitment. In response to the call of the universal Church to review our consecrated life “with continuous attention to the changing historical and cultural conditions” (VC 71)<sup>4</sup>, the CRI Assembly of 1996 reflected on the vital theme of our identity as women religious for a creative participation in social transformation in India. It suggested some introspection

concerning our role, dignity and consecration as women religious. This introspection would do well to commence with a metanoia of attitudes, beliefs and perception of our womanhood. For this the process of formation would have to possess the character of wholeness and involve the whole person, in every aspect of the personality, behaviour and intentions, to bring about the transformation of the whole person (VC 65).

Areas of unfreedom and blocks that hinder growth are given priority in most formation programmes with adequate psychological help. However, an area of oppressive unfreedom not yet attended to is the societal and ecclesial patriarchal control that has not only stunted our womanhood but deprived us of fullness of life. The domineering patriarchal and hierarchical structure and tradition of the Indian Society and the Church has deprived us of our human dignity and rightful status as women. The caste culture of the Indian society with its powerful overtones of patriarchy has also ingrained a sense of dependency and subordination in the woman's psyche. The depletion of our natural gifts of sensitivity, intuition, foresight, aesthetic sense, and home-making in the exploitative service of the male hierarchy has led to the dehumanization women religious, lowering our status with stereotyped tasks in the Church, drying our wells of innate feminine potentiality and the desertification of all initiative.

Besides, forgoing marriage and maternity, consecrated virgins have developed and reinforced masculine qualities of efficiency, achievement, disci-

pline and control that are geared to developing competence. This male system stifles our feminine ethos of compassion, tenderness, endurance, gentleness, caring concern and understanding and blocks the process of developing our personal identity as women and of becoming a full person. The present formation structure still bears overtones of colonial times with the hand of patriarchy continuing to guide and influence (at times, even control!) the religious women in the planning and execution of the formation programmes.

Though much has changed since Vatican II, our formation system, initial and ongoing, continues to generate anxiety, guilt and fear, producing en masse infantile consecrated women who are docile, passively obedient, unquestioning and voiceless. Formation programmes must help release our femininity from the imprisoning shackles of patriarchy and maternalism characterized by the male ethos of authoritarian control. Formation must have the woman's hand and heart in re-structuring it if 'feminineness' in the religious life of consecrated women is to be restored. A personal responsibility to mature in one's vocation as adult women is the inescapable duty of all (VC 65), if we want to invest our natural instincts of nurturing life, fostering growth in persons and building human communities and of caring concern for effective mission.

In this regard, women religious can be inspired by eco-feminism that affirms the principle of concern for life in all its forms. Life is sacred and a sacrament and, therefore, must be lived in its full-

ness (CRI 1998, p. 59). Formation houses and formative communities, their set-up, programmes and personnel must provide an environment that will enable the formees to discover their inner potential as women and unearth their innate power. However, to discover one's inner potentiality, women religious must experience genuine inner freedom. It is noteworthy that the findings of two surveys on religious vocation and religious life reveal the stark reality that religious life is not a liberating and growth-promoting experience for many women religious. The findings of Rekha Chennattu indicate that many women religious lack true inner freedom and the courage to hold and assert their own convictions.<sup>5</sup> By and large, they are low achievers by nature, lack emotional maturity and rate their peers outside as having greater initiative, self-reliance and self-confidence, according to the survey reported by Paul Parathazham.<sup>6</sup>

This reflects a serious lacuna in religious formation. A formation that does not encourage inner freedom and foster emotional maturity is questionable. Such a formation will only produce infantile and mediocre religious who are motivated by a passive spirituality of 'doing God's will' in back-stage tasks for God's Kingdom. That perhaps answers why the nearly 80,000 women religious are mostly unheard and unseen on the Indian ecclesial front. It also explains the shocking dearth of women religious leaders, women theologians and women canonists in the Church. To encourage inner freedom and initiative in the initial years and to foster emotional maturity at all other stages of religious life must be given paramount

importance if women religious of today are to be empowered women for dynamic leadership in the Church and society of tomorrow.

Empowering women religious, especially the rural, tribal and dalit girls, will, therefore, have to be the primary agenda of formation programmes at all levels if women religious are to be liberated women for effective mission in India. Empowerment will also urge women religious to enter into new forms of gender relationship and of partnership for mission. It will spur us to break through traditions and cultural practices that keep us bound to stereotyped gender roles and to break out of stereotyped images pre-determined by society and the Church.

Jesus, the master Formator, first liberated his women disciples from social and religious pressures of discrimination before empowering them to be his witnesses. We have examples of the Samaritan woman "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did" (Jn 4:29); the prostitute woman "your sins are forgiven" (Lk 7:48); the polluted woman "who was it that touched me?" (Lk 8: 45) and the bent woman "you are freed of your infirmity" (Lk 13:12,16). He restored their brokenness: "your faith has made you whole" (cf. Lk 7:50; 8:48) and wounded human dignity; "woman, daughter of Abraham" (Lk 13:16) before entrusting them with respectful roles of being partners in his Kingdom mission: "Go in peace" (Lk 7:50; 8:48; cf. Jn 4:28-29). He affirmed the full personhood of women as being created in God's image, a concept that culture, traditions and even religion may

distort and so cause women to be seen as less than human.<sup>7</sup>

### ***1.2 Body Care - a religious taboo?***

A related area of concern is the formation of the body for often times we may find ourselves existing as living carcasses rather than living temples of the Holy Spirit. Body care is respectful love for our body, created in the image and likeness of God and a recognition of the beauty of our womanhood "God created the human, male and female he created them". But beauty is temptation and vanity in the world of religious women. Yes, cosmetic beauty is, but not the beauty of womanhood. All beauty comes from God who is the Creator of all that is beautiful and He found it all very good (cf. Gen 1:31). If beauty is not perceived in oneself, it is not likely that one can perceive it outside in people, world and God. Aristotle rightfully said that the main attributes of God or of a being are: a being is one, good and beautiful.

Formation of the body should, therefore, include spending moments of leisure and relaxation with our sister-environment to replenish our drying wells of inner strength and vigour and of hope and life. In the human quest for meaning in life, women and nature nurture and promote life from within, allowing life to grow according to the true purpose of creation (CRI, 1998, p. 59). Well aware of the conditioned life-pattern of most religious, I would also strongly recommend the need to retrieve our youthful formative years at all stages and engage in energetic physical exercises and games rather than seeking

comfort in what the consumeristic society drives us to desire (CRI 1998, p. 60). What stops us from indulging in these little niceties of life after the official Religious Commitment - the religious garb? life-style? vows? Though the evangelical counsels requires the renunciation of certain values, they do not detract "from a genuine development of the human person" (PC 46). A healthy body and a relaxed mind fosters a sound relationship with the human and cosmic world and spurs us to be fully human and fully alive consecrated women.

### ***2. An Inserted Formation System***

A liberated woman religious can venture forth to commit herself to liberation in India only if she is of India. Therefore, the next step for an incarnated formation is to possess a genuine Indian Christian identity. The Indian formation system must be exorcised of the ghost of colonialism that still hovers around with its subtle but powerful influence. An incarnated formation can be facilitated only if it rids itself of the western mould and is immersed in the various dimensions of the Indian ethos: cultures, ancient religious traditions, myths, beliefs, folklore, literature, philosophies, religious and secular pilgrimages.<sup>8</sup>

This inevitably requires a radical change in the method of training, in particular through a constant interaction with the lives of the poor (cf. CRI 1986 4:2). Experience of the Indian people, participating in their life struggles and interacting with other cultures and religions will be the most potent means of inculturating formation. Furthermore,

formators who have not had an experiential knowledge of the ground realities of India will not be adequately equipped to undertake such a task for “how can colonized minds decolonize formation in an ex-colonial culture that is almost being swallowed by neo-colonial invasion via economics and the media?” rightly queries T.K. John.<sup>9</sup>

Since 1986 there has been a movement towards re-structuring religious formation in response to the call for a renewal of religious life. This renewal insinuates a constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the Religious Institutes according to the changed conditions of our time (*PC* 1; *VC* 71). However, it is important to note that this ‘constant return’ does not suggest restorationism that evokes pious conformism to the existing status quo. It is rather ‘re-founding’ religious congregations, which is “a faith journey into the paschal mystery for mission today according to the Spirit of the original Founder, Jesus Christ”.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, to effect this faith journey for our prophetic mission in pluralistic India, an oft repeated call is the urgency to be immersed in the lives of the people. It has been proposed that the location and setting of formation houses, life-style and outlook of formation should facilitate a constant interaction with the grassroot realities of the poor. Following the footsteps of Jesus, the Prophet, and strengthened by the evangelizing power of the poor, we strive to be inserted consecrated women in and for mission.

This implies an inserted formation at all levels which means entering into the mind-set, thought pattern, world-view and life-style of the Indian poor and experiencing and sharing God the true Indian way, as the genuine Bhaktas of old, who broke through social and caste barriers and helped transform society (*CRI* 1990, 3:6, p. 4). It would also include a sound theological formation and some basic knowledge of the social teachings of the Church and the social sciences with exposure programmes to actual involvement situations to foster a communitarian solidarity for justice action. The need to get to know other religions in order to be instruments of inter-religious dialogue and harmony cannot be overlooked. An inserted formation would thus evolve a way of life and spirituality that will bring about and nurture an integration of life of faith and action for justice (*CRI* 1992, 4:7).

From all that has been underlined, it is obvious that there is no dearth of suggestions on the question of evolving a contextualized formation. Involvement and participation in justice action are recurring key-themes in the *CRI*’s search for a relevant way of being prophetic consecrated women. Much has been discussed and written over the years on this vital need. We seem to have reached a stage of bankruptcy of ideas. There also appears to be a wide chasm between talking and walking the new way. There is not much evidence of concrete headway in the implementation of the many pious and even radical *CRI* statements which perhaps are often ‘inspirational and not operational’ (*CRI* 1988, p. 161). This new approach in most congregations has been effected

only in part. There is a humble admission of the slow pace of bringing about this transition (CRI 1990, 5:4). Most formation programmes are still searching for a fuller understanding of the implications of this transition.

A pertinent question to raise is whether the formation system of most women institutes is still governed by the culture of prudence and caution while the lives of our contemporaries outside are directed by risk-taking, initiative and creativity. Cardinal Suenens' pointed remark explains well our present state: "Caution is everywhere, courage is nowhere; and we shall all soon die of prudence". One wonders if the slow pace to change is due to a lack of courage and conviction and the fear of losing one's religious security in the process of launching into the deep (CRI 1988, 3:5, p. 5). Among the many obstacles cited by the CRI that block any effective change is the inward-looking and cocooned set-up of formation houses that stifles the daring and zeal of young and generous persons. They often get domesticated to a rigid set of rules and norms which make them fit only for risk-free and routine tasks.

This calls for some introspection: do we encourage originality in formation for creative and risk-involved ministries or an option for the beaten path that perpetuates the religious status quo? Are we promoting houses of formation (experience-based) in and for mission or houses of information (knowledge-based) for apostolic works? True, information is needed but information that in-forms and trans-forms. Information that makes sense to the head as well as

the heart, to our knowing as well as our being.<sup>11</sup>

To bring about any transformation we need an attitudinal and structural change in a spirit of faith and conviction, dialogue and discernment, daring and dynamism. The Gospel is full of challenges and sets on fire the disciples of Christ to be a leaven, a counter-culture, a sign of contradiction (CRI 1998, 4:c, p. 15). To ground the work of formation concretely, we have to go forth into the milieux around us and in the process become really incarnated consecrated women in the intercross of time, place and people which constitute this moment of history.

### ***3. 1. Towards a Cross-Cultural Formation***

Pluralism is the rich heritage of the vast sub-continent of India. Diversity is not merely the spice of life, it is also the essence of life. This holds true for religious formation that possesses the character of wholeness and includes every aspect of Christian life: human, cultural, spiritual and pastoral in order to bring about a harmonious integration of every area of life (VC 65). Formation today needs to be programmed in the context of diversity not uniformity, of creativity not exclusivity. Consequently, a formation in and by the pluri-cultural and religious context of India will enrich our life, mission and spirituality. It makes us searchers and not settlers. Since inter-relatedness is the hallmark of Christianity, 'plurilogue' becomes an essential mode of formation where contact with the community, society and the world is always on-line.

Our formation houses today are often a microscopic mosaic of the cul-



tural diversity of India. We are aware that the glory of the Churches of Kerala, Goa and Mangalore as feeders of vocation is past history, and to speak of one Indian Church is a misnomer. Today the harvest is reaped from varied soils. We have recruits from rural hinterlands, tribal belts and dalit and other socially backward communities which comprise the bulk of the Catholic population of India. Further, migrant Catholic settlers who criss-cross the country also offer vocations from different regions, cultures and rites. Hence, it is essential to consider the varied socio-cultural factors that make each local Christian community distinct from the other: its history and tradition (Syrian, Padroado, Propaganda), ethnic and caste backgrounds, language and culture, geography and environment, economic conditions, etc. The important question to ask ourselves is: do we continue with the system of formation that is often a mere clone of some foreign Congregation with cosmetic adaptations to the Indian way of life or do we dare to be innovative in planning or re-formulating a formation that is incarnated in order to render an Indianness and a nativeness to religious life in pluralistic India?

The tenet of Acts 2 “one faith, one baptism, one Lord” would be the foundational experience of realising cross-cultural formation houses and formative communities where the language of love would reign supreme. This would create an environment in formation houses and communities where the young formees are formed from their nativeness, recognizing and respecting the cultural uniqueness of each. In their psychological and faith formation one

would have to consider their cultural roots, family background, traditions, customs, beliefs and myths that they have grown up with. The spirituality and charism of the congregation and the Gospel values would have to be communicated in a manner that is understandable. For instance, an emphasis on the ‘acceptance of the will of God’ and humility for the dalits would be aggravating their subordinate status and low self-worth. Insistence on silence goes against the culture of spontaneity of the tribals. Popular religious expressions like ‘worldly’ and ‘worldly ways’ may send confused messages to the same tribals for whom the world/the earth is permeated with God’s own life. We would have to find new ways of communicating the Gospel values rather than using them as spiritualized whips to discipline and shape the formees for religious life. If doing God’s will is understood as cooperating and participating in God’s plan of salvation, women religious would appreciate their special role and place as co-partners and not sub-workers in God’s work of restoring wholeness of life to our fragmented and wounded world.

### ***3.2 Formation Houses – Homes of Communion***

In this era of pluralism and diversity, there is an increasing awareness of the need of the other. Communion is God’s vision for the human and cosmic world. It is dynamic and pluralistic and demands breaking down caste, regional, cultural and religious walls that divide human communities (CRI 1997, pp. 3-4). This implies that the spirit of communion must be first and foremost in-

stilled in today's pluri-cultural formation houses so that from the earliest stages of religious life we learn to accept difference, pool in talents, work in collaboration and interdependence and live in harmony.

In today's pluri-cultural houses of formation particular attention must be paid to invest the strengths of each group to build *koinonia* communities of fellowship and mutuality. We shall cite a few examples of how we can concretize this principle of communion in formation houses and formative communities: the tribals are gentle, polite, sensitive and like the dalits have a strong sense of community and endurance. Both groups, however, are not achievers and lack leadership and a sense of self-worth which may not be innate but historical, enforced by social structures. The Malabar Catholics, on the other hand, are endowed with leadership, initiative and are efficient, hardworking, disciplined, achievers, dignity and status conscious, independent and rational. The Padroado Konkani Catholics are leisure and pleasure oriented, community minded, hospitable, generous and faithful to traditional religiosity. The Tamils are highly community minded and emotional, dependent but hardworking.<sup>12</sup> A similar study of the characteristics of other regional or caste groups would be a fitting preparation and ground work for how to instil a spirit of communion in houses of mixed cultural groups.

An inter-cultural formation would foster communities of one class of women where persons of varied cul-

tures, castes, tribes and rites would be distinct with regard to the diversity of works (*PC* 15) but united in heart and mind (Acts 4:32). It would also facilitate a communion for mission to bring about in fuller measure the communion of the Kingdom in the Church and society where divisions fragment life (CRI 1997, 3, p. 4). It would inculcate a spirituality of communion that sustains us on our journey and enables us to live the demands of this communion in seeking communion with the crucified and risen Lord. This call to communion is a challenge to explore new ways of being religious. It would encourage open communities of inter-dependency, collaboration and cooperation with all people (CRI 1997, 8, p. 6). It would build up a communion for mission and the mission of communion if every formee's unique personhood is recognized and respected and her unique charism is acknowledged, developed and effectively utilized (cf. *Ecclesia in Asia* no. 25).

The formators, therefore, would have to bring out the best of every culture and not merely cast them in enneagram slots of 1,2,...or attach labels of paranoid, dependent, compulsive, schizoid personalities. A synthesis of faith and culture that John Paul II speaks of would also enable us to tap the innate or hidden resources for leadership roles. Thus, the formation house or formative community is not only the womb of conceiving and nurturing an incarnated religious life for pluralistic India but also the cradle for empowering women religious for their prophetic mission.

### 3.3 Community as Formator

Formation within and by the community is communitarian in approach. The general trend of the 'incubator-system' of formation is to exclude the formees from the larger religious community. The community is excluded lest it 'contaminate' the young in the infancy stage of religious life. The community must be trained and trusted to offer constructive accompaniment with its rich variety and experience. But in the absence of a formative community, the formees may find themselves under the constant scrutiny of the CBI (Community Bureau of Investigation!) which will impede all growth in freedom.

The community is the natural locus where the young formee is planted, grows and matures for communion in mission. A formative community is a rich reservoir of lived formation and should have a sense of participation in the formation of the young. The community should feel responsible for it or else it becomes the exclusive business of the formators. Formation within and by the formative community also schools the formees to develop a sense of understanding, tolerance and adaptability. It is reciprocal where all, irrespective of age, learn from each other. It encourages a climate of openness, respect and mutuality, initiates team-work and fosters harmony in difference. It, no doubt, throws an added responsibility on the formator who will have to work in collaboration with the other sisters of the community. But that is the price of team-work and communion for mission.

This communion implies that formation becomes a work of partnership.

A partnership in which all – the formators, the professed sisters and the formees – have a contributory role to play. Communion calls for a co-ordinated approach to formation, for consultation and greater involvement of the community in the planning of the programme. Communion for mission is strengthened when all work together with the formators in a spirit of charity for the good of all (cf. 1 Cor 1:10. *Ecclesia in Asia* no.26). This participatory approach would also take care of the risk of formation functioning as an autonomous department of the congregation with minimum communion with the other apostolic communities. The basic principle of ecological unity "everything is connected to everything else" will throw light on the principle of communion that we are speaking of. The interconnectedness is a bond of strength. Control of any kind adversely affects the growth of the other and of the whole body (CRI 1998, p. 60). The principle of independent control, a characteristic of the male ethos, must give way to mutuality, inter-dependency and partnership that will impregnate growth and fullness of life

The mystery of God's loving design is made present and active in the community of men and women so that they might walk in newness of life (cf. Rom.6:4. *EA* 24). At the heart of this mystery is the bond of communion which unites us to Christ and to one another. This living and life-giving communion creates a sense of belongingness to the religious congregation and the Church. It is also a sign and sacrament of our communion with God and with the whole human race.

#### 4. An Emmanuel Spirituality

We now come to an important area of our search for an incarnated formation. The CRI statement of 1986 speaks about evolving an inculturated spirituality. However, this can not be one that is drawn from established and clearly enunciated principles and applied to concrete life situations through accommodation and adaptation. Neither is it one that is drawn from pious spiritual exercises and devotional practices that often devoids our spiritual life of creativity and newness of God's life.

An inculturated spirituality for us women must be an emmanuel experience, a God-with-women experience. This would inevitably imply exploring women's unique experience of God in the realities of her life and discovering her unique relationship with the divine. Here, the formator would have the task of demythologizing a package of concepts, images and beliefs of God that is a product of a patriarchal culture and in which the dominant categories by which the activities of the divine and its relationship to the world and people are described are male.<sup>13</sup> Thus, right from the initial years of formation, the formees would have to be initiated to develop a keen sense of awareness of who is God to them and the image they have of Him/Her - as Father/Mother, Divine Master, Lord, etc. Accordingly, they would grow in consciousness of how they relate to God and the language they use to communicate with the divine and to speak of it.

This incarnational God-experience evolves, grows and is sustained from within and by the life situations unique

to women. It is discovering the human face of God as revealed in women's experiences. It is a personal as well as a communitarian God-with-women experience. This unique experience of the divine would inspire us to break forth into creative 'Magnificats' like Mary, into songs of praise and pain, of deep longings and love, of our search and struggles, of beauty and wonder, of daring and dynamism that come forth from the wellsprings of our womanhood.

Notably absent from our contemporary spirituality is the sense of wonder, a spirit of relatedness of the human and cosmic world and the divine and the virtue of wisdom. Wisdom is the quest of seeing things in relation to the greatest reality - God. T.S. Eliot rightly pointed out: we suffer today from having lost knowledge in the pursuit of information, wisdom in the pursuit of knowledge. Any God experience is also an invitation to a life of mystery, of wonder, of quiet and contemplative silence. Eco-feminism invites us to develop a contemplative attitude towards creation, towards Mother-earth who in the silence and hiddenness of her womb nurtures life to enrich the quality of our own human lives. Every touch of the divine experienced in human realities and in communion with the cosmos brings forth newness of life.

Finally, an Emmanuel spirituality for our Indian context would also include a woman's experience of being co-partners in God's creative and restorative work. It is her God-experience of:

- listening with a compassionate heart to the Spirit speaking through the poor

- sharing with an empathetic heart in their struggles of life
- questioning with an intuitive heart the existing social order which is the root cause of the oppressive and dehumanized state of life
- reading and re-interpreting the Word of God with an open heart in the light of her experiences and questions

In this way, the message of the crucified Lord is re-discovered in the groans of the contemporary crucified and the hope of the risen Lord enkindles our faith and re-energises us to enter into collaborative action with the poor for structural change. This shift from the conceptual and wordy prayer to a liberating communion with God through his people becomes an on-going adventure of God-experience.

## Conclusion

Every religious institute is challenged today to examine and re-interpret its foundational charism in order to become incarnate in the contemporary Indian reality and to be relevant in its mission. The dignity of women is recognized in the official teachings of the Church, but in its total ministry, women are still marginalized. To empower consecrated women, a major task for religious life, is to make a deep commitment to creative and radical change which, undoubtedly, must begin with religious formation. Quite a few women religious congregations have already dared to change its structure and life, but a vast majority have yet to take the plunge. The hope of being empowered women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century spurs us with enthusiasm, energy and life to be partners in fashioning the new society of God's dream.

## Notes

1. Samuel Rayan, "A Brief Meditation on the CRI 1986 Statement on Commitment to Liberation", *Jeevadhara*, 16 (1986), p. 214.
2. *Ibid.* p. 214.
3. Paul V.Parathazham & Anthony da Silva, *Religious Vocation in India: Changing Patterns and Problems*. Preliminary Report of a National Survey, 1999 (unpublished), pp. 11&9.
4. Cf. PC 1.
5. Rekha Chennattu, "The Quest of Women Religious", *Jnanadeepa* 2/2(1999), p. 90.
6. Paul Parathazham, *Religious Vocation*, *op. cit.* pp. 15-16.
7. Yong Ting Jin, "New Ways of Being Church", Curt Cadorette and others, ed., *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1992, p. 201.
8. *Ibid*
9. "Decolonization of Formation", *Jnanadeepa*, 1 / 2 (July 1998), pp. 126-139, p. 132.
10. Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Refounding The Church. Dissent for Leadership*, London, 1993.
11. Francis. X. D'Sa, and others, *The World as Sacrament: Interdisciplinary Bridge-Building of the Sacred and the Secular*, JDV Theology Series, Pune, 1998, p. 4.
12. Augustine Kanjamala, *Analysis of Religious Life in India: Its Impact on Women Religious*, Ishvani Kendra, 1999 (Unpublished).
13. S.D. Isvaradevan, "God Language and Women", in *Towards A Theology of Humanity: Women's Perspectives*, ed. Aruna Gnanadason, Delhi, ISPCK, p. 69.

## Training of Priests in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Errol D'Lima, SJ

*Dept of Systematic Theology, JDV, Pune 411014*

### Introduction

In the 1990s, the different formation houses situated on the campus of Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth (JDV), Pune, began to voice their concern about the spirituality of the students.<sup>1</sup> The superiors of these houses felt that the students' lack of attendance at community exercises was the result of messages communicated to them by the JDV faculty and their radical teaching, and they wanted to know the "impact of JDV on the spirituality of the students." The superiors' anxiety was expressed in the following words: "If at JDV they are told that the rosary, the benediction and the way of the cross are exercises that arose in a specific historical and cultural milieu many centuries back and therefore may not have the same relevance today, then it is highly unlikely that the students will consider it important to attend these exercises today in their own communities."<sup>2</sup> Hence, they commissioned an exploratory study to learn "what the students actually think about spirituality." The study showed that the students appreciated the contribution (by way of a progressive theology) that the JDV Theological Faculty made to their spirituality. But could the campus houses offer them suitable support systems to integrate that theology in their lives? If they did, priestly training could

help form creative and innovative students.<sup>3</sup>

The concern voiced by the superiors centres on a problem that is not explained away by saying that the students appreciated the JDV Theological Faculty's progressive theology. The end product of theological formation cannot be a mere understanding of the more progressive points in theology, but depends on whether the student can integrate in his life the theology that is offered. In fact, successful priestly training requires that the formees (the students) and the formators (the Theological Faculty and Houses) have a common understanding of the priesthood. If we question the need of the formee to take part in the usual exercises of traditional piety, we must also enquire whether the impact of JDV leads him to self-doubt and/or, ultimately, to loss of faith!

How does one construct a programme for priestly training? Not merely by having recourse to past patterns and the findings of traditional dogmatic (systematic) theology.<sup>4</sup> A programme for priestly training must take into account the changing needs of the community that the priest must serve. While the traditional Christian understanding of the priest's role re-