

### 13. THE CHURCH'S APOSTOLIC PRIORITIES

**On the whole, the Church in India is hardly known as an agent of social justice and structural change.** People may encounter the Church's concern for the poor and the suffering to a certain extent, but despite a few exceptions, her involvement in human right issues and people's movements and struggles is terribly deficient. It is hardly seen. *How many indeed feel that standing for social justice and building a better society is one of the 2 or 3 main concerns of the Church? The Church possesses imposing structures and institutions, and dedicates much of her personnel and finances for her spiritual, charitable, medical and educational apostolates, but not for her social mission. Hence, the Church has little credibility in the social field. The contrast between her image and her expressed ideals is very great.*

**The Church must radically transform this situation by clarifying (and implementing!) her apostolic priorities.** The following reflections may serve as a background for this chapter. In 1968, the Latin American Bishops stressed that the personnel and finances of the Church must be organically ordered in favour of the common good and especially that of the poor. Social awareness and concern for the common good demand that *"one organises power and wealth for the benefit of the community"*. They stated: *"The Lord's distinct commandment to 'evangelise the poor' ought to bring us to a distribution of resources and apostolic personnel that effectively gives preference to the poorest and most needy sectors and to those (people) segregated for any cause whatsoever."*<sup>1</sup> The 1971 Synod document, "Justice in the World", further observed that *"the Church is obliged to live and administer its own goods in such a way that the Gospel is proclaimed to the poor"* (JW, #47).<sup>2</sup> **The Church must use her personnel and finances according to such priorities.**

In this chapter on **The Church's Apostolic Priorities**, we will first highlight the importance of priorities to enable the Church to use most effectively her personnel and finances (1). We will then successively examine the Bishops' reflections on the poor (2) and social justice (3) as priorities and on the Church's use of her human (4) and material (5) resources. Finally, we will consider whether these priorities are actually implemented (6) and what should be done (7).

#### 1. The Importance of Priorities

In 1970 and 1976, the Bishops recognised **the great importance of priorities** without however using this word. In 1970, they noted the need of effective planning between the CBCI and CRI *to harness the full resources of the Church for the good of all* (10, cf. above, 115). In 1976, they added: *"In a spirit of true collegiality, we should be ready and willing to make available trained personnel and financial resources for the tasks which we consider vital for the growth and development of the Church"* (44). They were then thinking of strengthening the diocesan, regional and national bodies of the Church, but *this principle holds good for the whole mission of the Church.*

Speaking of evangelisation (*"which implies an integral liberation of the whole man and every man"*), the Bishops had been still more explicit in 1974: *"In order to fulfill the task of evangelisation in the length and breadth of the country, the Church in India must make fuller use of all available personnel and resources on the basis of nation-wide planning and accepted priorities. It must move towards greater self-reliance. Greater mobility of personnel is urgently needed. Within the existing framework of co-ordinating agencies (CBCI-CRI Joint Committee, etc.), co-operation should be fostered more widely between the three individual (ritual) Churches, and between the hierarchy, clergy, religious and laity... If the existing structures should prove inadequate, they should be changed in accordance with the overriding needs of a more adequate distribution of personnel and resources"* (26, cf. 24-6).

The principle is crystal clear. The Church personnel and finances must be at the service of the apostolic priorities. *The priorities have to be translated into an appropriate distribution of the finances and personnel, including the appointment of trained and competent members.*

## 2. The Option for the Poor as Priority

As already shown, **the preferential option for the poor** is a frequent and central theme in the Bishops' reflections (e.g. ch. 4.7 & ch. 5.4) and recommendations (esp. ch. 10.6 & 10.7). In reading these texts, one realises that the Bishops mainly think of the **following target groups**: *the economically poor and the marginalised* (the vulnerable and the voiceless), *the Dalits and Tribals* (above, 72 & 148-9), *and the women and children*.

**The Bishops' practical guidelines therefore emphasise the service of these groups, especially the poor and the Dalits**, (esp. 118, 128 & 171, cf. above, 145-9). They however hardly even mention the unorganised workers and certain occupational groups like the landless and marginal farmers, whom they list among the poorest (cf. above, 37) in their analysis – probably because they find it more difficult to effectively help them.

## 3. Social Justice as Priority

The Bishops, perhaps surprisingly for many people, clearly identified **the promotion of social justice “as a privileged expression of mission and an apostolic priority”** (88, cf. above, 57). Though this goal is difficult to pursue, the Bishops make serious efforts to highlight it. *The concern for justice is indeed very much present* in their societal analysis, their educational vision and proposals, their emphasis on legal aid, the areas singled out for lay involvement, their stand against corruption, their parish priorities, etc. A reading of chapters 8, 9 and 10 makes this concern abundantly clear. However, as we pointed out (cf. above, 48-9), the Bishops failed to take up larger issues and campaigns regarding land reforms, employment, the environment, etc.

## 4. The Distribution of Personnel

*If the option for the poor and the promotion of justice are priorities, what apostolates should be privileged? Did the Bishops try to establish priorities concerning the various apostolates and the distribution of personnel?*

*The Bishops seem to emphasise the need of personnel for whatever apostolate they speak of at a particular moment. For*

### Box 13.1

#### The Church's Primary Calling

In Sept. 1974, a Seminar on the *Church and Social Justice* was organised at Bangalore by the Church of South India and some other 'Protestant' organisations. This was its key message: “*The great human issues of our time are in the political and socio-economic spheres... The Church cannot opt out of its responsibility to co-operate with Christ in the transformation of the manifestly unjust and inhuman society of our day. To continue merely helping the victims of the present systems, however necessary this help might be, without consciously working, at the same time, for the transformation of the whole system is criminal irresponsibility in the face of the radical demands of the fullness of the love of Christ. To be on the side of the oppressed, to be involved in their struggle for justice, to look at life and orient it from the point of view of the poor in the light of the Gospel ethic, is the primary calling of the Church in the present context. For, the Church is called to be a sign of the Kingdom of God where the chief values are justice, peace, love and brotherhood.*”<sup>3</sup>

instance, they recognised in 1970 the need to provide “the services of qualified counsellors and competent chaplains” to the youth who are educated outside our institutions, and to give special attention to the “young men and women on farms, in factories and offices” (9, cf. above, 120). They also expressed the hope to dedicate, through the Labour Commission, “a larger number of priests, brothers, sisters and lay people” to the apostolate of working with India's citizens “to bring about a better social order” (10, cf. above, 25). In other Statements, they stressed the need of working with families (26-7 & 78), the media (36), for inter-religious dialogue (36-8) and the formation of the laity (e.g., 87 & 94), etc.

**A few passages are more specific.** In their 1978 consideration of *The Church's Response to the Urgent Needs of the Country*, the Bishops speak of 'direct' evangelisation as the “primary task committed to the Church”, but they go on to emphasise the promotion of justice and the transformation of the world (48-9, 52 & 53-4). In the same Message, they say that “each region and diocese should

respond, where possible, with time-bound priorities”. And that the Church involvement with all people of goodwill “in the vital issues of the country” is even more important than working for justice within our own institutions (55).

**Some passages are particularly telling from a social perspective:** *the priorities set for non-formal education and community health care* (cf. above, 131 & 134), and the ‘top priority’ given in the social apostolate to the conscientisation, training, organisation and empowerment of the poor, Dalits and Tribals (162, cf. above, 146). The social service programmes are also expected “to take up as a priority the socio-economic uplift of the Christians of SC origin (128, cf. above, 135).

**The most comprehensive vision of apostolic priorities** by the CBCI is probably a passage of its *Statement on Poverty and Development* in 1971. Speaking of carrying on Jesus’ mission of answering human needs and standing for human dignity and justice, the Bishops enlighteningly and strikingly declared: “To achieve this aim, the Church must accept that, while personal services and relief work will always have their important place, *the more relevant and meaningful efforts today will concentrate on change of atmosphere, transformation of structures, creation of new relationships and fresh value systems, and provision of ampler freedom and wider opportunities for all men.*” And they went on to say that *human beings “have been created by God to erect and establish with Him and (their) human brothers a community of temporal and eternal love”, a “world stabilised by justice and crowned by peace”.*<sup>4</sup> **This is the mission and responsibility of the Church and all human beings.** *The most relevant forms of ministry however still remain to be concretely specified...*

One can therefore conclude that **the Bishops never made a thorough analysis regarding the most needed and efficient forms of apostolate in India today and, therefore, the desirable distribution of the Church personnel** in different apostolic sectors. **But they gave some significant pointers to this effect.**

## 5. The Use of Funds

The Bishops asserted in 1984 that “diocesan funds should be made available, wherever possible, for training those lay men and women

who volunteer to dedicate themselves for service to the local Church” (96). They added in 1998 that “*there must be an adequate budget to meet the needs of the poor and the lowly* (164). The Bishops were still more explicit in 2002: “*For this purpose (lay formation), sufficient funds should be set aside in the parishes and dioceses. Centers for the formation of the laity should be set up and suitable courses should be organised in different parts of the country. Resources of the Church should be made available for the educational empowerment of the Dalits, the Tribals and the women*” (182).

The Bishops’ recommendations on the formation of the laity and the service of the poor and their insufficient but pointed reflections on the promotion of justice and other ministries certainly demand **a significant reorientation in the use of the financial resources of the Church.**

## 6. What Is Being Done?

Considerable efforts have undoubtedly been made *to redistribute the Church personnel on a geographical basis in favour of neglected areas* (e.g., from the South to the North in the country, and even towards poorer areas or places without ‘Christian presence’ within dioceses). Quite a few religious congregations and some dioceses have also begun to reflect on their distribution of personnel and some new ministries and communities have been started among the poor. More priests and religious have been sent for training in vital fields like social work and law. And a few appointments have been made to develop certain ‘neglected’ apostolates. (Some intellectuals and activists however question whether such trends and concerns have not been weakening rather than growing in the recent past – as perhaps among the youth and the country as a whole.) **All these steps are greatly welcome, but do they match the social awakening in the Church in the last 3 or 4 decades and her declarations on the preferential option for the poor and the great importance of certain social sectors?**

*The truth is that the Church has not really come to a consensus regarding the most crucial apostolic sectors. She has not clearly and firmly established her apostolic priorities.* The Church has not reflected enough on the most efficient ways of tackling

contemporary problems, promoting social justice and transforming society. (The most basic questions are indeed: “*What forms of apostolate have the greatest social relevance in India today? Which ministries can best empower the weaker sections and contribute to change the structures of society?*”)

**As a consequence, the Church is not truly orienting and distributing her personnel (and finances) towards the poorest groups and most needy sectors.** The religious and priestly personnel involved in certain sectors is disproportionate, while other sectors remain greatly neglected and under-staffed. The Church’s apostolic choices are thus too often made to answer the pressures of existing institutions and apostolates and to ensure their continuity, to promote the prestige, ‘influence’ and power of the Church, to generate finances for the dioceses or congregations, even to serve the interests of the wealthy and powerful, or simply to satisfy the personal convictions and interests and even the needs for comfort and security (or the fears) of the individual bishops, priests and religious.

There may be modest progresses, but **the redistribution of personnel and finances towards the most crucial apostolic sectors is certainly not up to the mark.** The 2005 NBCLC Seminar for example recognised that “there has not been sufficient attention paid to the formation of the laity. Compared with the money and the concentration given to the formation of priests and religious, the expenses allotted for forming the laity are too little.”<sup>5</sup> It would also be enlightening (and probably shocking!) to find out what percentage of the total annual expenses of the Church is directly for the poor... **It would certainly be “too little”**, perhaps not much higher than the percentage of the Government expenditure.

**The cause of social justice and the service of the poor therefore suffer from the lack of personnel and finances.** The systematic collection of funds for the poor has not been encouraged enough and organised properly in the Church in India (cf. above, 167-8). Except in emergencies, what richer dioceses and parishes regularly share their funds with poorer ones (as the Bishops exhort them to do, cf. 146)? And how much of sharing is there within our parishes? The Bishops’ statements do not moreover consider where our investments should be made, how our lands and estates can

provide more employment for the people, especially the poor, and in what apostolic sectors we should use our money on a priority basis. They do not for instance say anything on whether the Church should spend more money on education or on the social apostolate, and whether she should increase her budget for the employment of lay apostles and reduce it for the construction of buildings. **Enlightened and firm policies are needed on several such issues.**

## 7. What Is to be Done?

**What should therefore be done?** First, the CBCI and all the dioceses and religious congregations must intensify their efforts to *clarify apostolic priorities and their implications for the use of the Church personnel and finances. A General Body Meeting of the CBCI should soon be held for this purpose.* Second, **clear policies must be made regarding the training and appointment of the priestly and religious personnel, and the employment of**

### Box 13.2

#### “Create a Passion for Justice!”

In answer to the feedback I requested on an earlier Draft of this chapter, a friend replied: “I have only one major suggestion to make. I think that an all-important strategy for ensuring that the Church lives out her social mission is **a strong, persistent and practical initial formation of the seminarians, religious and lay people.** *All must understand their very vocation as a call to create justice and right relationships and animate others to do the same.*”

“Most formation programmes fall far short of this. They form people primarily – if not solely – for pastoral ministry and then are surprised that the formees do not get involved in the social ministry. Even if some dioceses and congregations take a clear stand on the social justice ministry, *their formation programmes often remain very defective.* **We have to create a passion for justice in those who will be animators of others in the Church.** *I would even suggest that priests, religious and lay people are not accepted as apostles in the Church if they don’t demonstrate that passion.* **Ultimately, all Christians and human beings must be filled with this passion for justice!**”

**many lay persons for vital apostolates.** People cannot be forced to become involved in certain ministries, but proper training can be given, and the interest created and respected. Serious consultations should be held before all appointments, and *all socially committed, interested and capable priests and religious should be permitted and even encouraged to get involved in the more relevant and prioritised apostolates.*

**In every parish and centre there should be a team of full-time and part-time apostles,** including quite a few lay people working on a paid or voluntary basis (cf. above, 166). **New ministries, centres, communities and programmes will thus be multiplied, developed and organised** (cf. above, 164-6). Dedicated lay people, including some from other faiths, must also be enabled and encouraged to begin new involvements. As already suggested, **a JPD Commission** should be created in every region and diocese – with parish representatives – to animate and coordinate the social ministry and thus enable the Church to truly fulfill her social mission. *Competent and committed lay people, priests and religious must moreover be officially accredited and appointed to speak and act in the name of the Church.*

**In this way, the dioceses and the parishes, the bishops/priests, the religious and the laity will all live more fully the Church's apostolic priorities.** D. Alphonse's meaningful description of the presbyter (priest) is worth remembering in this context: "A community with the presbyter as the coordinator will have a whole variety of ministries, ordained and non-ordained, part-time and full-time, paid and voluntary. The presbyteral ministry will unfold itself only as the service of actualising, energising, harmonising and celebrating the ministries of everyone in the community."<sup>6</sup> *The bishop will thus animate the diocese, and the priests the parishes, and the laity will truly live their role in the Church and the society. And the parishes (and dioceses) will implement their priorities* (cf. above, 149-51)! **In fact, human beings of all religious and ideological persuasions will together fulfill the priorities of God's Reign and People's Aspirations.**