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People of God - Missionary Disciples in a Synodal Church

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As I heard of participating in the meeting of Catholic Action Forum - Asia, an old memory of my father being a member of Catholic Action in my Home Parish back in 50s and 60s came to my mind. He was very closely involved in Parish activities and was always there to assist the priest and the nuns of the Parish. They were a group of 14 young men, closely knit to the Parish and was sought after for every need of the Church at Parish level as well as at Diocesan level.

Today, as we are reflecting about Training Missionary Disciples in a Synodal Church, our attention is to rise to the urgent need for People of God to 'walk together' under the guidance of the Spirit, like the first disciples of the Lord as followers of the WAY. Together as ONE people, ONE community is the essential dimension of the Church; this is the heart of the renewal, very much desired by the Council.

From the Scripture we learn, the People of God consists not only of men (Ex. 24:7) leaders, officials, priests ... but also women and children and even aliens (Jos 8:33-35). Through the prophets, God himself promises to give His People a new heart and spirit(Ez.11:10) by the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh (Joel 3:1-4) in order to gather together the nations. In Jesus of Nazareth, the Father's plan is fulfilled according to his prayer, "May they all be one, Father, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us ... (Jn.17:21) The Acts describe the People of God as the community called to discern the mission entrusted by the Risen Lord. The apostle Paul portrays the Church as the Body of Christ, having unity of the organism and the diversity of members... all have the same dignity by virtue of Baptism (Gal.3:28; I Cor.12:13) and all must make their contribution to carry out the Plan of God "according to the measure of Christ's gift"(Eph.4:7).

The teaching of Lumen Gentium confirms this, ALL members of the Church are agents of evangelization [16]. The very nature and mission of the Church is communion; as People of God ...all the members by virtue of baptism are honoured with the same dignity as children of God and appointed to the same mission. Hence, for a new missionary energy that will involve the entire People of God, as missionary disciples, a Synodal Church is indispensable. The Church [must be] herself a missionary disciple[EG 40]. As the agent of Evangelization, the Church is more than an organic and hierarchical institution; she is a PEOPLE, certainly a mystery rooted in the Trinity, yet exists concretely in the history as pilgrims and evangelizers [EG 111]. Every Christian who has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus is a missionary disciple [EG120].

In the backdrop of the pandemic that plagued the world and the Church, in an extraordinary moment of prayer on 27 March 2020, Pope Francis remarked, “how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities”. The pandemic marks a pause and a ‘change of era’, challenging the Christian community to take concrete and decisive missionary decision towards a pastoral and missionary conversion, which naturally leads to a reform of structures, “capable of transforming ...the Church’s ways of doing things (and) be suitable for the evangelization of today’s world”[EG 27]. Such conversion requires a significant change in mentality and an interior renewal, especially among those in pastoral leadership. Being faithful to the mandate of Christ, they must resolutely grasp the need for missionary reform of pastoral action.

In India, we are fortunate to have a vibrant Conference of the Bishops, the Pastoral leaders, which provides possibilities for varied sections of the People of God to be participants in the life of the Church. Various Commissions catering to Laity, Family, Women, Youth, Labour, Migrants etc work towards enabling the renewal visualised by the Vatican II through a participatory process. The Commission for Laity, urged by the need for training lay leaders, has already conducted a six month course - G.O.A.L - Go Out And Lead. The second one is in progress. Numerous efforts are undertaken by other commissions for promoting participation and co-responsibility of the laity in the Church. For India, the greater challenge is in the mission territories (north) where the Word (the seed) needs to find its growth to maturity on more fertile soil for greater missionary thrust.

Typically, in Varanasi- my Diocese- the Church finds herself living amidst a very special religious situation rich with a cultural religious past which is the impact of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism etc. Hindutva wave is no doubt a resentment. Our only mission is to be the sign of God’s love to all men and women, poor and rich and unite all into ONE common family. The Church’s involvement in the life of people of all faith through a process of dialogue is a unique path of Evangelization. Dialogue at every level of life is must. Basic Christian Communities, especially in the rural parishes, are becoming effective way of being the Church in the neighbourhood. A new phenomenon named Khrist Bhaktas, people devoted to Jesus and his teachings, longing for healing of heart through the power of His Words, is rapidly growing. These are people, not baptized, yet follow Jesus through worship and witness of life. The Church for the Bhaktas “is a place for everyone, with all their problems”[EG 41].

True, the Church has been journeying long on the path of renewal since Vatican II, to be a People of God ; and still a long way to go. ‘To walk together’ must be the WAY of the Church; to be the ‘home and school of communion’ must be the new paradigm of the Church for developing a new spirituality of communion among the People of God, ie. the people who journey...”as a closely bound community of all and for all”[CV 231]. Only this way can the Church move forward, be a Church that “ goes forth” [EG 46] in order to address the complexity of the present time and be proudly called ‘the Church on the move’(Pope Francis).