

**ROLE OF RELIGIOUS WOMEN IN THE BUILDING UP OF THE CHURCH/ MISSION
ORIENTATION RELATIONSHIP WITH HIERARCHY/
CHALLENGES/**

INTRODUCTION

Faced with declining public confidence and a fading image in the post modern world, Women religious are called to re-discover their role as consecrated women in the building up of the Church by deriving strength and inspiration from the person and mission of Jesus.

On the occasion of the Year of Consecrated life (2015) Pope Francis in his apostolic letter *Witness of Joy* stated: “Consecrated life is a gift to the Church; It is born of the Church, it grows in the Church; and it is entirely directed to the Church (no.5). Through this statement Pope Francis proclaimed not only to the Church but also to the world at large, the worth of religious life as a “pearl” that is kept by Our Lord not at the periphery of the world but at the “core” of the Church. By their very nature as women consecrated and dedicated, to the service of God and of the whole Church, Pope Francis asked the Church’s religious women to *wake up the humanity* as part of their missionary mandate.

CONSECRATED WOMEN AND FEMINITY.

Women religious constitute three fourths of all consecrated persons. In Mary of Nazareth consecrated women have their highest model and the most authentic expression of the dignity and mission of women. History bears witness to the contribution made by consecrated women, not only to the Church’s holiness but also to evangelization and mission and to catechesis and theological research, as well as in the field of education, health care and service of the very poor. Conscious of their personal dignity and their own vocation, consecrated women are seeking to grow in their appreciation of all women who are still oppressed or degraded to a status of inferiority.

THE WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN THE MALANKARA CHURCH

The Servant of God Metropolitan Archbishop Geevarghese Mar Ivanios initiated religious life for women in the undivided Malankara Church in 1925. What prompted Mar Ivanios to inaugurate religious life for women which was unknown to the Malankara Church of his times? From his writings we could find few answers behind this noble undertaking. The first and foremost concern is his great conviction that the most important duty of Christian men and women is “the spread of the Gospel”. That is to say: “to show the Saviour Jesus Christ to all”.¹ Another motive behind the foundation of the religious community is his ideal that: It is only through founding an institution comprised of chosen people, who have chosen God as their sole possession and the service of God as their life principle could bring about development to the Syrian community and effectiveness to the work of evangelization. And finally the precise vision behind the foundation of Bethany madhom is: Those women who had dedicated themselves fully, *could rouse the womenfolk in spiritual matters*, could carry on service to the sick, could evangelize the non-Christian women folk and children and thus they could glorify the name of God in several other ways. Thus the religious life of women in the Syro Malankara Catholic Church became the symbol of the radical following of Christ for

¹ Mar Ivanios, *Girideepam, Mountain Torch* (transl. by Sr. Rehmas) Kottayam, 2015, p. 57.

the realization of God and his Kingdom through a life of contemplation and action. This way of life is constituted by *sanyasa prathisthta*, monastic consecration and profession of evangelical counsels.

THE MISSION OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN THE MALANKARA CHURCH

The Great commission of the Lord to the Church is “Go into the whole world and preach the Gospel to all creation” (Mk 16:15). Accordingly, the consecrated women religious in our Church numbered 2060 (Malankara Directory, 2018) play a key role in spreading the Gospel all over the world obeying the Pope, the Catholicos, the father and head of our Church, the bishops (of the concerned eparchies) and the major superiors of their respective religious congregations). Our vocation is not to be confined to one or two dioceses only, but to go into the whole world to inflame the hearts of men and women, so that they may do today, what the Son of God has done on the earth. Accordingly the sisters from our congregations (Bethany, Daughters of Mary,) are serving all over the world (including Africa) irrespective of rites, language, cultures, colour, caste, creed and profit, to the best of our ability. The consecrated women religious make remarkable contributions to evangelization and catechesis in preaching the Word of God, in works of charity, in missionary works, in caring for the sick and the marginalized, in the education of children and adolescents, in teaching the values of justice and peace, in the sphere of social communication and above all in living a life of witness and love. However, they convey the message that their value lies *more in being than in doing*.

MISSION ORIENTATIONS

- Our vision: All religious who participate in the saving mission of Christ and His Church is by her very nature a missionary
- Mission Orientation on an individual, community, institutional and parish level is imparting to the sisters.
- Inculcating in our sisters, a theological vision on mission: “A vision without a mission is blind and a mission without a vision is drudgery.
- The Vision of the Jesus Christ the true missionary of God is to be the guiding light of each religiousand not the vision of the world.
 - The great thrust of Jesus given on mission “I must go and preach” “For this I was sent” That is why I came into this world” and St. Paul’s missionary activities are given as topics of reflection to the junior sisters.
 - The Religious are encouraged to study in depth the liturgical, theological, spiritual and disciplinary patrimony of the Malankara Church during their initial and ongoing formation
 - A study and reflection about the Charism of the Congregation is given importance.
 - The Vision of the founder, the living faith of our pioneer members (their holiness, fidelity to life, sense of communion, Zeal in empowering the women, their relation with the founder and the priests, and the faithful their dedication to the cause of re-union, their love towards the poor, their personal integrity) enliven our missionary spirit.

- Special care is given to the empowerment of girls, working women, tribal women, unwed mothers, orphans, elderly, physically, mentally and psychologically challenged, HIV Patients, People who are Terminally ill, etc.
- Exposure programmes in missions are arranged as part of our formation programme.

THE MCC AND MISSION ORIENTATION

- There is the need for providing an apostolic orientation for the religious sisters in the Malankara Catholic Church (I suggest 3 days every year)
- Promoting the participation of the sisters in the life and activities of the Malankara Church
- Women religious are to be granted access to places of discussion, consultation and decision making and that they be present in the pastoral entities of the dioceses, parishes etc.
- The Malankara Catholic Religious Conference (MCRC) is to be re-instated and reformulated as per the norms of can. 356 -357.

RELATION WITH THE HIERARCHY: In general, Very Understanding, and Co-operative, which promote our mission activities. But there are minor issues at parish levels (lack of understanding, dialogue, ego clash, lack of initiatives etc)

OBSERVATION: About 70% of our sisters are doing mission at different places. Greater Thrust is given in our *synaxis* for mission orientation. Mission orientation and awareness programmes are conducting at different places. Experts are inviting to deliver talks on mission. We run a centre (Mar Ivanios Missiological Theological Centre, Trivandrum) specially dedicated for enhancing mission. However, we do strive to become “consecrated women missionaries” of our times.

CHALLENGES:

Religious life is going through a period of profound change. There is a growing anti-clericalism and anti-religious feeling among many Christians, especially the youth. The Social attitude have changed and ‘vocations are fewer’. Families are smaller than earlier. Many young people are more-reluctant to make like-long commitments. One girl asked to one of our vocation promoters: Why do you want us to join you? What is it that we can’t do outside? It is the time to ask ourselves “what is that something extra/noble in the way we live our religious life today? *Answer this question meaningfully and living that answer credibly* is the challenge that faces the religious today.

CONCLUSION

From my own experience as being a missionary in my own capacity as a religious throughout these past years I would say, for the success of preaching Christ and His Kingdom we should always keep before our eyes, Christ the Great missionary of the Father, and Holy Spirit the giver of life and Mary the model of the missionary. We also should keep before us the Gospel values instead of worldly values and we should promote a spirituality of *kenosis* and of *Incarnation*. As missionaries we are called to give our ears to the cry of the Poor, oppressed, the sinners, the troubled hearted, and in a special way to our own families. We are called to walk with our people, pray with our people and as heralds of the Gospel we are called to instil faith, hope and charity in the hearts of our people. We are to be models of mercy and

Let us give a new thrust in visiting families, giving pastoral care for the dying, initiating the youth for parish and society based activities (esp. like during flood), participating in the little joys of the parish and the parishioners.