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The Cathedral Congregation and its Role in Society

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Cathedral congregations are both the strength and the weakness of Christianity in India. They represent a remarkable potential because of the strength they represent in terms of education, professional competence and economic and social standing; and also in terms of attachment to the Church. From the role some of their members have played in the Church and in society, we know the immense good which can emanate from a Cathedral congregation.

But there is a frightening reverse to the medal. Quite a large section of many in the Cathedral congregations belong to the top 5 per cent of our society which is being increasingly accused by the great majority of the people of running the whole establishment of society in a way which primarily serves their own self-interest. In recent years a mountain of statistics has been built up to show that not only does the whole development process in India really mean development for the top 5 per cent, but that also all the institutional set-up (health system, educational system, industrial production and business) mainly serves the interests of the upper strata of society.

It is a fact that a family with a monthly income of Rs 1,000 belongs to the richest top 1 per cent of the population.

It is a fact that although the national income has increased annually by 3 per cent, after 25 years of development 40 per cent of our people are living below the poverty line and are unable to purchase the minimum requirements for nutrition.

It is a fact that despite great progress in education, there are today more illiterates in absolute figures than there were 25 years ago.

In this context, the words of Julius Nyerere, President of Tanzania, have a challenging ring: *'If the Church is not part of our poverty, and part of our struggle against poverty and injustice, then it is no part of us'*.

In the past we gave much importance to the *personal* virtues: today is the age of analysis of *systems of society*. The Principal of a College is not asked today whether he is individually a good person, but rather an evaluation is made of the impact his educational institution has on society as a whole. Thus the Government of Sri Lanka nationalised the Christian schools on the grounds that they did not serve the national needs in education. Today the masses have acquired a new consciousness, and they are discovering that most of the institutions of society work not for them but against them. All these

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structures and systems seem to function on the lines of 'injustice': i.e., they do not function to meet the basic requirements of the masses.

A Parish is part of Society

Ideally a congregation should be a visible sign of God's presence which is Love and Justice. But in reality we know that the members of a congregation are also members of society, playing very definite roles; and through them a parish makes a certain impact on society. Today sociologists are studying the 'social role' of the Church in society, and one may predict the conclusions to which they come: the Church in many places is a conservative force, constantly opposing any serious transformation of society and defending its own self-interests. Recently an Asian Seminar on 'Religion and Development' was conducted in Bangalore under the guidance of an outstanding Christian sociologist. Many participants were shocked by the results of a scientific analysis of the role of religion, and Christianity in particular, in society. The same might well happen if a similar study were made for a particular Cathedral parish.

There is in fact, for most Christians, a 'Split-Christianity', separating 'Ideal Values' from 'Operational Values': i.e., Gospel values inside the Churches, and the actual values which guide the social behaviour of Christians. A businessman has his own ways of solving his business problems, which are not derived from the pulpit. A doctor does not ask his Pastor what fees he should charge. A manager puts loyalty to his firm before purely personal humane considerations. Every man has his own 'hidden ideology', which leaves some place for piety, but in fact controls his conduct. Few would care to admit this, because few are conscious, in practice, of how it works. There are few Bonhoeffers who have the spiritual freedom to swim against the stream.

It is true that great efforts have been made to confront congregations consciously with social reality, and to bring Christian faith to bear on crucial issues in society today. But we carry a heavy burden from the past: e.g., the former status of 'elite' Christians in the colonial society, the individualistic pastoral approach which aimed too exclusively at 'changing hearts', our past inability to understand the functioning of society and its inherent contradictions in reference to the values of the Kingdom. We laboured under the illusion 'which thinks it possible, by means of sermons, humanitarian works and the encouragement of otherworldly values, to change men's consciousness and thereby transform the world' (Paulo Freire). To hear Freire say, 'Unless I am involved in the liberation of the masses, I cannot hear the Word of God' still sounds shocking to us even today. But this is the real issue: can faith, the Church, prove itself to be a force of liberation for humanity crushed by poverty and injustice? *Social justice is not simply the Kingdom: But social injustice is incompatible with the Kingdom that is in each one of us.* This has tremendous implications for a congregation that wishes to be faithful to its mission in the midst of a city in which millions live in slums, without employ-

ment, exploited by landlords and money-lenders, ignored by the Corporation, excluded from most of the services a modern city can provide.

The Poor have no Voice

One of the great weaknesses of a Cathedral parish, attracting mostly upper-class Christians, is that it bears a profile similar to that of society at large: the poor have no voice in it. (If the poor do not feel at home in a parish, we may suspect that it might be difficult for Christ, too, to be at home there!) Especially in the cities, where the poor constitute the majority, the Gospel meaning of 'sharing' sounds too impracticable to us who are socially far away from the life and hardships of those who have no place in society.

The Prophetic Mission of Youth

It is a fact that many of the most socially committed and alert youth are becoming estranged from the Church. Fortunately there are also many instances to show that youth can play a decisive role in the implementation of 'outreach' programmes that express, in many places, a genuine spiritual renewal of parishes. The best among Christian youth is like an arrow which points to the future, to what the Church must strive to become: caught by Christ and daringly and unconventionally involved in the battlefields of human liberation. It is mainly youth that has responded to the call coming from refugee camps, cyclone and drought affected areas, etc. Hundreds of young people are today working with the rural poor, giving up their studies for one year or even longer. Involvement in cities seems to be more difficult. It remains to be seen what concrete shape action for justice can take, what concrete experiences indicate realistic openings of liberation from a ghetto existence which hides the face of Christ from the poor.

'We who have been born into an unjust system, are we prepared to grow old in it . . .?'