

## DOCUMENTATION

### Theological Education for Mission in Context

Statement of a National Seminar  
Samanvaya Theological College, Bhopal

#### Introduction

"Theological Education for Mission in Context" was the theme of the National Seminar, held on 20-22 November 2007 at Samanvaya Theological College (CMI Mission Theologate), Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. There were 52 participants in all, consisting of formation personnel and activists of different traditional as well as frontier ministries in the Church.

The background of the seminar is the emergence of new formidable challenges in social, economic, political, and especially in the cultural-religious sectors of the people of the subcontinent and the growing unease about the inadequacy of the traditional paradigms employed to impart theological education in India. Some initiatives and experiments in theological education done so far have produced encouraging results. They seem to raise hope for further experimentations.

Threefold input contributed to the dynamics of the seminar, namely, **research papers** presented by scholars on different areas of theological formation in India today, **experiences shared** by those who are actively involved in different ministries and **reports from different seminaries** experimenting the contextualization of theology in the past three decades.

#### Theological Education Yesterday and Today

1. During the centuries-long pilgrimage of the Church, theological education had benefited from a variety of sources from varying milieus. Shaped largely by Greek philosophy used profusely by theologians as the '*ancilla theologiae*' for the process and method of interpretation of the Christ Event, Catholic theology grew to become a definite discipline as 'Faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*) and reigned supreme as the queen of sciences. From the time of the Council of Trent, the well developed **scholastic theology** has been a distinct feature of theological education. But soon the scene changed, new irruptions in the fields of knowledge took place in quick succession contributing to the social processes for the meeting of which theology began to feel incompetent. Religion in general and theology in particular were left behind. A new world replaced the old.

2. Several factors contributed to this sidelining of theology by the new developments. Its birth in monastic centres or monastery-linked universities,

constrictions that fell on it from circumscribed understanding of 'faith', over-systematization and theorizing, trans-historical concerns, proneness to disengage from the secular realities and their 'mundane' flavour, could be some of the factors. Being overly abstract-*vis-à-vis* the pastoral and unfortunately ahistorical *vis-à-vis* the empirical, and understandable concern for truth and accuracy *vis-à-vis* the demands of experimentation in doctrine, as demanded by the integrity of faith, theology seemed to have failed to face the gigantic contextual problems of a fast changing human community in the West in the wake of the many modern developments. If Yahweh **heard** the 'cry of the poor' (Exodus) and responded promptly and aptly, and if Christ **deeply felt** 'compassion on the multitude' (Mt 9:25) and was present at the site of the affected and responded effectively, theology of the pre-Vatican centuries seemed not to have been able to 'hear' and 'feel' the tremors of a deeply affected and disoriented human community in the West.

For in the wake of colonial plunders of ancient cultures and religions came the tragic blot of slave trade. The loss of the working class following industrial revolution climaxed in the phenomenon of Marxism that greatly drained the West of Christianity. Darwinian evolutionism and the philosophy of existentialism created a vacuum that was filled by 'enlightenment' and other developments of a fast secularizing West. These did virtually dwarf theology. Further still, the birth and growth of the many empirical and human social sciences as well as of modern philosophy, expanded the mental horizon of the western minds. The Greek-philosophy-shaped theology could not withstand the pressures and assaults on Christianity. A mere return to Neo-scholasticism with a view to a restatement of what these could offer the new world in the West could not provide effective response to these challenges that came from the new developments. Moreover, the pedagogy of the 'teaching' of inherited theology could not go beyond mere transmission of an inherited package of interpretations by earlier generations of masters.

Massive exodus of the faithful from the world of religion and faith became a regular phenomenon. The distressing experiences of the deeply affected people, had not yet been counted among the sources of theology although it was God that was at work demanding truth, justice and kindness through these people. The largely apologetic approach consisted of inputs from the inherited theological sources. But what was inherited was shaped by factors of a distant past. Texts were drawn from the sacred scripture to establish the point, for application of these insights to human situations that were so different from times and situations when theology flourished. Old answers to new questions, and not new wine in new wineskins! The great vision of "Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*), inspired by the grassroots experiences of the faithful the world over, was not yet available to the Church at that time.

3. Against this scenario and taking note of the 20<sup>th</sup> century pluralistic world vision, the Second Vatican Council directed the local Churches and theological institutes to attend systematically to the task of theological

formation suited to our times and local contexts and work out priestly formation suited to the 'Church in the Modern World.

The Church in India took several steps to respond to the call of the Vatican Council. The historic 'Church in India' seminar of 1969 was also a new vision chasing corporate exercise that did generate considerable enthusiasm and set in motion a renewal culture. In order to contextualize priestly formation, first there was the provisional draft "Priestly Formation in India" of 1971 prepared by the *Commissio Technica* for the seminaries set up by the CBCI. This was followed by the Regional document, "Priestly Formation for North India" published in 1981. Then the revised programme of priestly formation for India was published in the form of a "Charter of Priestly Formation for India," first published in 1988 and revised later in 2004. There was yet another initiative, "The Charter of *Priestly Formation in the Syro-Malabar Church*" of 2007. Both Charters of 2004 and 2007 deal with different aspects of priestly formation, taking cognizance of the Synodal document, "Priestly Formation in the Circumstances of the Present Day" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*) of 1992.

4. These incentives from the Church in India inspired many a fresh experiment in what eventually came to be known as **incarnational epistemology**. Exploration of the roots and heritages of the people of the region where one is placed, deep insertion in the struggles of the people and reflection on them in the light of the Word of God, were attempted as part of the new theological method. Incarnation of the Church, it was widely felt, calls for genuine dialogue with the world of religions as well as active solidarity with God's poor and the marginalized in their struggles to be free of dehumanization. It was then felt that such insertions necessitated sufficient knowledge of the regional languages, regionalization of training, and inculturation in liturgy and other areas of the life of the people. In particular, two models of a "New Order of Mass for India" were prepared, one by NBCLC, Bangalore and the other by Dharmaram College, Bangalore in response to the Council's vision of a possible 'radical adaptation in liturgies (SC 40) and in support of the declared policy of the CBCI Commission for liturgy in favour of inculturation. These were indeed laudable efforts towards developing an Indian Order of the Eucharist, although these were later beset with unwarranted controversial issues.

In the 1980s, we had the phenomena of the opening of Regional Theology Centres (RTC) with inculturation as a guiding principle. Taking advantage of the insights and experiences gained thereby another logical next step began to be in sight, namely, 'formation for mission to be given in mission'. There was the thrust on rural focus and 'action-reflection-action' for a method in theologizing. The deprived and the dehumanized sections of the Indian society began to be taken for a starting point in theologizing. Insertion in and experience of the marginalized began to become a major theological source. Thus Dalit theology, Tribal theology, Feminist theology, Eco-theology, all under these broad-based theme of 'subaltern theologies', began to emerge.

The encouraging results of these models with limited number of students and people's issues-oriented programmes of theological education have been influencing positively the urban and larger seminaries with hundreds of students and traditional training patterns.

### **The Context of Theologizing**

5. Participants at the seminar addressed some of the major issues like the Tribals of India under the assault of mighty national and international forces struggling to preserve their roots and promote their cultures and ethnic identities, and to redefine their identity. The Dalits struggle to throw overboard the centuries long oppressive structures laid on them, and assert their dignity and rights in the society to be a free people. The women are engaged in the struggle to end millennia old gender discriminatory perceptions, values and systems, and raising their banner of revolt aiming at a just, humane and participatory society. The deeply wounded ecological system has been signaling the steady deterioration of the earth's atmosphere that seems heading towards irreversible cosmic catastrophe, probably the greatest of all these disturbing trends. There were issues like the communication media with revolutionary changes brought about in the day to day life of the people and their impact on the life of the Church. Underpinning the above issues were the economic and political processes that are seen subject to altogether unfamiliar forces demanding Christian involvement and participation. Sectarian caste-class interests by exploiting religious instincts inflame passions and fan communal aberrations, in order to strengthen rightist fascist ideologies and political parties. Mainstream religions with their scriptures, oral traditions, rituals and popular practices also needed attention. Above all the State's unilateral opting for the New Economic Policy is being seen as a national opting for a systemic exclusion of the historically excluded majority that lived on the fringes. Should not these issues engage the minds of the future pastors in India in the light of the Word of God? Do they? How much? In other words, the task before theology in India is: How to make proclamation of the Reign of God under these circumstances intelligible.

### **Paradigm Shift in Theological Education**

6. The researched papers presented, the experiences shared and the discussions held during the seminar led to a deepening of the awareness of the urgent need for substantial shift in the method of theologizing in India. This now should consist in a serious effort to take the liberative struggles, experiences and perceptions of the Dalits, Tribals, the women and the landless aggrieved sections of the society, as the very starting point of theological studies. God's continued action for restoring the human family to the original plan of God, as we learn from the biblical pattern has to be our model (Eph 1:10; Rom.8:19). For, the first major divine intervention was to be in and with the oppressed of those times. Today, it is the Dalits and the Tribals that are the least and the last in the Indian society. Further, Jesus Christ, sent by the Father to inaugurate His Kingdom, set the objective of His being anointed: to bring the good news to the poor, liberty to the captives,

recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and to announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people (Luke 4:18-20). And He set the ultimate criterion for entry into His Kingdom: identifying and serving God in Jesus Christ in the hungry, in the thirsty, in the stranger, in the naked, in the sick, and in the prisoner (Mt 25:35- 37)

7. When these materials were sifted we saw emerging before us THREE NEW DEVELOPMENTS that are to be incorporated into the existing theological formation. These are: **first**, the DIVINE PEDAGOGY OF INTERVENTION which the recently grown biblical scholarship has placed at the disposal of the Christian community, **second**, the necessary role of EXPERIENCE of and PARTICIPATION in the struggles of the people as a necessary theological source, and, **finally**, assistance of the HUMAN SCIENCES to help us to analyze and interpret them. By incorporating these valuable new gains in a judicious manner into the existing theological formation, we have to UPDATE the existing theology studies both in METHOD and CONTENT. In other words, time is ripe for a **paradigm shift** in theological education to meet the needs of the Church in South Asia and to redesign our method in sharing the Good News to the peoples of South Asia. The seminar arrived at a consensus on these basic innovative dynamics. In concrete, the following received consensus:

7.1 In fidelity to God's way of serving His people, as we learn from the Old Testament and in the New Testament, and to be true to the divine pedagogy of Restoration, **the starting point of theological formation** has to be "the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1). In our case, these are **the Dalits, the Tribals, all the deprived, and the women**. Their experience should trigger the incentive and motivation for commencing theology.

7.2 **Involvement** in and consequent **experience** of these deprived sections of the people, in view of eventual transformation, personal and structural, could be set as a component of the new theological method and a source for Indian theology. The objective is all the diverse peoples to become a truly human community enjoying their inalienable rights, their dignity, and their inviolable freedom.

7.3 In order to gain greater clarity about the complex South Asian human situation, and to intervene, along with peoples of good will, with proper response, **assistance of the human/social sciences** should be increasingly used for theological reflection over the Christian experience of the human situation. And the experience of the Indian social processes and structures need to be subject to rigorous socio-cultural-economic analysis. This has to be dialogically conducted with the Word of God that illumines and interprets the reality as God sees it.

7.4 In order to give greater depth to contextual theological formation in India, the **redesigning of the syllabus** is a requirement. The objective in this exercise

is to enable our students of theology to gain deeper knowledge of the vast and complex Indian human situation. In concrete the theologian, the pastor, should be sufficiently familiar with the racial-anthropological, historical-cultural, and economic-political process and disciplines obtaining in the country. The Jewish Christian heritage, now enjoying a monological role, should interact, interpret and illumine Indian realities. The resulting synthesis becomes the true foundation for an authentic Indian Church. To be deeply rooted in and to serve effectively our people, the focus of the Indian theologian has to be the **Indian human realities** and the **Judeo-Christian tradition and heritage** in a proportionate manner. This demands, attending to the prevailing imbalance in the existing syllabus, and creation of a **new syllabus** that will reflect proportionate presence of the Indian and the Christian disciplines. Current syllabi are overwhelmingly pro-Judeo-Christian in content, with marginal presence of Indian human realities. This disequilibrium needs to be removed.

**7.5 Deep spirituality** befitting pastoral ministry in a country known for the many spiritual heritages, on the one hand, and one that will enable our pastors to face the new realities, should be the corner stone of theological formation in South Asia.

**7.6 Academic excellence** and the **intellectual competence** needed to face contemporary India racing towards eminence in scientific and economic supremacy, leaving behind the large sections of the people in deep penury, need to be insisted upon all through formation.

**7.7 Authentic Indian expressions** of the Christ-event had been one of the dreams of many Indian Christians for decades. The Church's liturgy, celebrations and festivals, spiritualities as well as customs and practices, to be true embodiments of the Christian and Indian heritages had been part of that dream. Mindful of the historical developments when the Gospel interacted with the many cultures critically and creatively, giving birth to many churches that were truly local and fully universal, some endeavours were made to recapture the spirit of the Church at her infancy when the memory of the event of true Incarnation was fresh to inspire the local churches. Given the Church's recognition of the treasures and values in other traditions, as confirmed by the current attempts at Faith-culture dialogue, Indian theology method could aim at resuming for our times the primal approaches of the Church. Born elsewhere Christianity can be reborn in India as a Church truly local and fully universal, only through such approaches.

**7.8 Theologizing** is not the prerogative of priests alone; it is the right of every Christian. The entire Christian community needs to be nourished and enriched by the treasures of the Faith. Hence, there is the need to break the exclusive link between theologizing and priestly formation. The goal of theological education has to be to form men and women who are in the service of and in demand by the common people; hence human formation

has to be the solid basis of priestly formation. The Church has to become a people's movement, always seeking God's reign and justice. Briefly the goal of theologizing has to be birth of a new humanity in India..

7.9 The contextual theological education in India can gain greater momentum if there is a concerted effort from all concerned to collaborate and share their respective achievements. There are many institutes of theology all over India which experiment in this area. The learning experience of all of them can be mutually enriching, encouraging and edifying if they are shared and discussed among faculties of similar interest. Such a **common forum for all institutes** concerned seems to be the need of the hour.

7.10 The **creativity of the students** is to be promoted as they confront concrete situations of life so that they develop sensitivity, sensibility and responsibility towards what they see and experience. Creative responsibility in them is to be considered an important criterion of the success of contextual theologizing.

7.11 Recognition of the crucial and dominant role played by **the media** is necessary in our times more than any other. The truth is that the media shape and lead the society. It is also being accepted, reluctantly though, that religion is not so much the shaping, guiding and leading force as before. Religion seems to have largely abdicated that tradition in the past and withdrawn to a secure and insulated conclave. This state needs to be reversed and a quick return to the civil society in order to enter massively into the communication media is increasingly seen as most urgent. Hence it is imperative on theology to take to training in **communication media**. Media education is to be considered an integral part of theological education.

7.12 The students of theology are to be exposed to different contexts of people's life in India in order to prepare them face the various challenges and risks of contemporary society. The method of **action-reflection-action** will be of great help for this purpose.

7.13 Democratization of peoples and nations has been a mighty and irreversible process the world over, and equally so in India. Emergence of movements for human rights and freedom of conscience and expression, are the very soul of that movement. Promotion of truly participative culture feeds and nourishes these movements. The recent introduction of PANCHAYATIRAJ by the Indian State has contributed immensely to this global phenomenon. It is through these local bodies that the voice of the hitherto-voiceless is being raised and heard. It is important for Indian theology that by offering courses in panchayatiraj and by actively participating in the movement, our students, pastors of the future, are introduced to the evolution of this grassroots institution. The students are to be introduced to collaborative work with the local *panchayats* and NGO's to integrate our presence and ministry into the mainstream of India and contribute towards nation building.

## **Conclusion**

The New Creation was the goal and experience of the post-Resurrection Christian community. To leave behind the many shackles that kept the people confined in the many walls and cells has been the aspiration of the many peoples' movements in our country. To create a society where a fair degree of realization of this many suppressed and denied aspirations is the hope of the people. To be in the service of our people waiting for such situation is to be involved in the proclamation of the Good News. The Christian community in this country has the privilege and vocation to be partners with our people to bring to birth such a community.

Theological formation aims at forming future pastors that are involved in the service of the Christian community to be involved in the service of the wider human community. To be part of that process, the Word Incarnate in our midst is challenging us with the prospects of insertion and immersion in the varied human cultures, traditions, ethnic and racial groups in order to elevate every one to the status of the child of God. The process of knowing and realizing the Word in its spatial and temporal dimensions is not so much the work of expert theologians as the existential requirement of every genuine Christian. What is required is to be part and parcel of the socio-religious processes sweeping the country. Formation needs to be alert to and monitoring these in order to respond in more effective ways.