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**National Consultation on
GENDER RELATIONS IN THE CHURCH:
A CALL TO WHOLENESS AND
EQUAL DISCIPLESHIP**

Mumbai - August, 13 - 15, 2011

The Consultation was a follow up of the consultation organized by Streevani a year ago, prompted by two important contemporary events in the Church: 1) The publication of The Gender Policy of the Catholic Church in India, by the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (2010), 2) The unprecedented crisis in the universal Church triggered by revelations in the public domain of cases of pedophilia and sex abuse.

This Consultation jointly organized by Streevani (Voice of Women), Satyashodak, Montfort Social Institute and Indian Women Theologians Forum was held at Anugraha, Holy Spirit Hospital Compound, Mahakali Caves Road, Mumbai, from 13 - 15 August 2011. The Theme was "Gender Relations in the Church: A Call to Wholeness & Equal Discipleship".

The participants were of a fair representation of the different sectors of the church. There were 42 in all, of whom 29 were women and 13 men. Among these participants there were persons who are in leadership positions in the church such as Bishop Agnelo Gracias, Auxiliary Bishop of the Bombay Archdiocese, Bro. K.M. Joseph S.G., the President of the National CRI, Sr. Helen Saldhana, Secretary, Women's Commission, Provincial Superiors, Theologians, Formators, Grass Roots Activists, Feminist thinkers, People involved in education, Health care, Media, Psychologists, Lawyers and a host of other professionals.

Bro. Varghese Theckanath S.G, in the context of situating the Consultation and its Dynamics explained the four-fold purpose:

1. To understand sexual abuse from a legal perspective,
2. To study sexual abuse in the church from a morality and psycho-sexual paradigm,

3. To analyze the structural implications for the church in creating a more just gender relations,
4. To formulate recommendations for the different sectors of the Church in negotiating wholeness and equal discipleship.

Inaugural messages were given by Rt. Rev. Agnelo Gracias and Bro. Joseph. K.M, the President of National CRI, and Sr. Pauline Pereira, the Assistant Superior General of the Missionary Sisters of the Servants of the Holy Spirit, Rome.

Dr. Joseph M.T. SVD, while Situating the theme of the consultation explained that as committed members of the Catholic Church in India, as women and men disciples of Jesus, the onus is on us today to engage in the following:

- a) Familiarize with the new frontiers of Gender equality and justice carved out in the civic sphere.
- b) To look at the deeply entrenched ideas and practices in the church today.
- c) To have the courage to face with an outstanding sense of honesty and integrity the cases of abuses of power by men.
- d) Explore the ways in which the maximum of equal discipleship can become a reality.

Papers were presented on the following topics:

“Understanding Sexuality, intimacy and Human relationship in Consecrated life” (Dr. Tony Da Silva, SJ), “Sexual Abuse in the Indian Law” (Advocate Flavia Agnes), “Official Response to the Sexual Abuse Scandal in the Church: A Critical Appreciation and Analysis” (Dr Shaji George Kochuthara CMI), “Sexual Abuses as a Crime: Global Perspectives” (Ms Virginia Saldhana), “Understanding the Morality of Sexual Abuse” (Dr. Shalini Mulackal), “The Theological Basis of Hierarchical Structures in the Church – Implications for Gender Relations” (Dr. Jacob Parappally MSFS), “Psychology of Hierarchical Structures in the Church – Implications for Gender Relations” (Dr. Rosamma John ICM), Panel Discussion on “Negotiating Partnership in the Church” (Dr Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, *Scientist & Feminist Writer*, Sr Jyoti Pinto BS, *Former Mother General of Bethany Sisters*, Dr Paul Raj, S G, *Provincial Superior*, Mr Joseanthony Joseph, *Married Theologian*).

STATEMENT

1. Introduction

1.1. As a follow-up of the commitment made at the 1st Consultation on Gender Relations in the Church¹ “to wipe away every tear (Rev 21:4) and bring healing and wholeness,” forty-three women and men active in Church ministry gathered at the 2nd Consultation organised jointly by *Streevani*, *Satyashodhak*, Indian Women’s Theological Forum

¹“Gender Relations in the Church: A call to Integrity and Justice”, August 15, 2010, Pune initiated by Streevani.

and Montforte Social Institute, to reflect on “*Gender Relations in the Church: A Call to Wholeness and Equal Discipleship.*”

1.2. This Consultation sought to deepen the discussions begun at the 1st Consultation which focused on the Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India and the need for a policy to address sexual abuse in the Church in India. Thus it examined the structural implications for the Church in promoting gender just relations, the moral and legal consequences of sexual abuse, and the psycho-sexual paradigm that supports clergy sexual misconduct.

2. Reflections on Structures in the Church for Equal Partnership

2.1. We began by acknowledging that leadership in the Church is divinely instituted and vested with authority that is exercised as servant leadership in the community of brothers and sisters. However, we also realized that in keeping with the self-understanding of the Church that it is a continuation of the Old Testament community of faith, namely, Israel, the structure of the early Church was modelled after the prevalent patriarchal and hierarchical structure that privileged men over women, children, strangers, and slaves.

2.2. This was counter to Jesus’ own practice that was a continuation of the prophetic tradition which stood against substituting cult or power structures, whether religious or secular, for ordering right relationship with God and among human beings. “But it shall not be so among you” (Mk 10:43) is not an advice but a command equally valid as “love one another” and “go out to the whole world proclaiming the good news” (Mt 28:18). Not surprisingly, the word *hierarchy* is not found in the New Testament.

2.3. We further acknowledged that a proper theological understanding of the leadership structure in the Church dictates that it should be a re-affirmation of the equality of all humans because they are created in the image and likeness of God, the Absolute communion of equals in whom there is no higher or lower.

2.4. Given this context, the hierarchical structure of the Church can be justified only if it is understood in terms of self-emptying, servant-leadership of the people of God (Mt 20:25-28). Wrongly understood it becomes a social order of increasing access to, and exercise of power, giving priests legitimacy to dominate and control, especially women, who are excluded from its ranks. Discrimination and subjugation are constitutive of such a hierarchy, making it one of the major challenges to equal discipleship in the Church.

2.5. There is an urgent need for the Church to be self-critical and to reclaim the servant leadership model mandated by Jesus through the washing of the feet in the Eucharistic ritual. Such servant leadership is centrifugal in nature and recognizes only brothers and sisters or friends. It empowers everyone to be a leader, including women, who sadly are forbidden to have their feet washed on Maundy Thursday. It is not based on the worldly principles of higher or lower, autocracy or democracy, patriarchy or kyriarchy, exclusion or inclusion but on the divine principle of charism given to a person to offer kenotic or self-emptying service for the sake of the kingdom. All are called equally to such leadership (Acts 2:16-18), and to whom it should be given cannot be pre-determined by any social system without infringing on the right of God to be God. No one has the right to deny leadership in the Church to one who has the charism to be a leader simply because she is born a woman.

2.6. By depriving women of leadership positions the hierarchical structure of the Church creates in women's psyche the characteristics of subordination, passivity, servitude, dependency, unquestioning obedience and vulnerability. This is compounded by the arrogation of power down the centuries which has created in the male psyche the belief in its innate superiority, wisdom and decision-making capability while engendering in the female psyche a belief in its inferiority, 'foolishness' and indecisiveness.

2.7. The starting point of a gender-sensitive approach is a questioning of the accepted beliefs and practices related to gender stereotyping, with a view to laying bare the ideology of male domination ingrained therein.

2.8. Also imperative is a sincere introspection on the concepts of power and hierarchy in the Church and secular society. Awareness of internal conditioning is a prerequisite to change. Education - both religious and secular - of women and men to overcome generations of power imbalance is crucial. The need to recognise that both women and men are victims of this imbalance and both need to change is crucial for true partnership to evolve.

2.9. Since equal partnership in a male-dominated, hierarchical structure is not possible, women have to negotiate partnership in the Church. Negotiation however, can only be from a position of strength which comes from theological knowledge, high self-esteem and independence from the Church. Thus there is an urgent need for the non-ordained, especially women religious, to empower themselves with theology so that they can critique, question and redefine their

place in the Church. The need to break the myth that ordination makes one superior and advantaged is a vital aspect of this process.

2.10. As long as the Church remains fundamentally unequal, changes can be initiated by delinking ordination and governance and vesting the people of God, called together by Christ, with administrative and juridical powers by virtue of their baptism (1Cor 3-13). Additionally, the early tradition of women deacons in the Church can be restored. Since “Sacred Orders” includes diaconal ordination, women could then be included in decision-making.

3. Recommendations

To work towards a Church that reflects more truthfully the mind of Christ, where women and men work together, without gender or ministry dictated hierarchies, towards the building of the Reign of God, we propose:

1. A progressive deconstruction of existing hierarchical structures to form more inclusive and participative ones in keeping with the prophetic spirit of Jesus. This can be achieved by demythologising and demystifying concepts like the priesthood and hierarchy, encouraging the belief that ‘we are the church’, and formation at different levels for equal discipleship. Strategies for implementation could include:

- Modules on gender relations for seminarians and trainees at all levels in the Church.
- Broad-based theological formation of the faithful that covers human rights issues and social responsibility, by faculty that includes the non-ordained.
- Transforming/reforming existing theological formation by appointing and affirming faculty that is critical, liberative and prophetic.
- Promoting online formation programmes such as the Catherine of Siena Virtual College Courses.
- Continual and ongoing formation.
- Formation for priests and religious that is integrated with society to make it socially relevant and responsible.
- Fostering leadership in the Church and society at the grassroots levels through appropriate formation.

2. Formation of Advocacy or Task groups

Think-tanks of different types (amorphous, parish based, religious, interest groups, etc.) to share ideas, spread awareness and network.

- Counter-movements through a federation of like-minded groups.

3. Using media and technology to create awareness and advocate for changes in existing structures.

4. Broadening the understanding of Church and mission by engaging in civic and social issues as part of our Christian calling to bring about the Reign of God.

4. Reflections on Sexual Abuse

4.1. The starting point for our reflections on sexual abuse in the Church was the understanding of human sexuality, intimacy and relationships within the context of consecrated and priestly life. A positive, developmental perspective of the human person formed the basis of our discussion, and the potential for danger to and difficulty in remaining true to our calling to fidelity, that is inherent in our sexual nature, was highlighted. Consequently it was stressed that within consecrated and priestly life proper boundary markers must be laid out in relationships to provide a helpful road map in navigating the inevitable emotional ups and downs.

4.2. The strong link between intimacy and identity was emphasised. Since intimacy is relational, we can only relate well to the other if we first know who we are. Within consecrated and priestly life this would entail recognising and owning multiple identities such as one's genital (male/female) identity, gender identity (masculinity/femininity) and religious sex role identity (Brother/Sister/Priest).

4.3. Culture and religion play important roles in shaping identity. Seminary/religious formation tends to give those being formed readymade identities which may not always be appropriate for the different stages of religious life or to the particular individual, resulting in internal conflict and distorted religious sex role identities. This coupled with the way authority is exercised in the Church leads to an imbalance of power that allows the possibility of sexual abuse.

4.4. Women in the Church are doubly vulnerable, when faced with an all-male hierarchy of power. There is potential for emotional and sexual exploitation with no efficient forum for redressal. Approaching civil courts is often resisted because of a sense of betrayal of the Church and difficulty in proving allegations.

4.5. Despite the Church's mandate to be prophetic, it is civil law that has led the way in recognising and creating mechanisms to redress the abuse of women. In doing so it has challenged the Church to fulfil its own call to "act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly before God" (Micah 6:8).

4.6. The media glare, on the horror of clerical paedophilia while it brought many issues to the fore, left the sexual abuse of women out

of public consciousness. Often, such abuse is overlooked because it purportedly entails consensual sex between adults. This approach fails to consider the unequal power equation that renders the woman's consent invalid. This sinister blend of sexuality and power traps women in a web woven by the imposed belief that the same religious structures that exploit them can resolve issues of violence against them. Predator priests have cleverly spiritualised abuse of their victims leaving them feeling confused, condemned, betrayed and in a crisis of faith.

4.7. Often the Church remains silent on issues concerning women and leaves women with no recourse but to bear the crime stoically or seek legal relief. While there has been recognition of the problem by the hierarchy, the response has been largely defensive, safeguarding the reputation and interests of the institution. There is little consciousness of the responsibility of abetting a crime and sin. The lack of accountability with regard to action for justice, the tendency to place the clergy outside the ethical and legal frameworks that govern professionals in society, the hiding of a crime with the cloak of sin that demands only forgiveness instead of lawful retribution, and the evasion of responsibility towards the victim has left the faithful disillusioned and angry with Church authorities.

4.8. Although the responsibility of those who are personally involved cannot be ignored, what has become increasingly clear is the failure of the system and structure of the Church to ensure ethical behaviour and response. Clericalism, the hierarchical structure and the assumption of 'divine' power are at the root of the problem and must be deconstructed.

4.9. The criminal nature of sexual abuse needs to be acknowledged and addressed in addition to its sinfulness. Women victims must be advised and helped to pursue criminal and civil remedies. Women and men must be formed into believing that they are not betraying the Church by doing so. They must be taught to believe that they actually have a Christian duty to do so and that failure to do so is a serious sin and will eventually harm the credibility of the church.

4.10. Informal interviews have shown that entrants to clerical and religious life can also be sexual abuse survivors, and studies in psychology have shown that these run the risk of becoming abusers themselves.

4.11. Victims of sexual abuse harbour anger, depression, shame and guilt that frequently last a lifetime and prevent normal human relationships. This lasting impact points to the grave sin and crime of sexual abuse. If the perpetrator is a priest it amounts to a double

betrayal, as a trusted religious leader becomes the predator, destroying the victim's God-given dignity and freedom as well as belief in God.

4.12. There is an urgent need to demythologise male privilege and power, especially in the priesthood, which leave women powerless. The absence of a language to name violence and abuse has silenced women. They are left with a sense of guilt to suffer the burden of the "sin".

5. Recommendations

To ensure a swifter mechanism of redress for victims of sexual abuse as well as to create awareness of the severity of the problem we advocate:

1. A Code of Conduct for Church personnel to be drawn up, circulated and implemented.
2. The institution of independent, woman-headed and women-centric investigating and grievance redressal commissions/committees similar to those mandated by the government (e.g. Vishakha guidelines), in all parishes/dioceses to enable victims to seek justice. A CBCI Commission to oversee these.
3. Youth to be made aware of the code of conduct for Church personnel and the measures to be taken to protect oneself from possible sexual abuse in the Church. Easy access to professional help to be provided to youth struggling with clergy sexual abuse.
4. Formation programmes for women and men in parishes, through the CBCI Commission for Women, Justice and Peace Commission, and Family Commission, to create awareness of the Code of Conduct and the need to guard against abuse.
5. Relevant formation and training programmes in formation houses of men and women that provide opportunities for healing and holistic development of the human person.
6. Networking of various Church-based and secular groups involved with women's issues to provide fora for counselling, support to claim redress in the Church, advocacy and legal aid.
7. The setting up of fora comprising committed Christian activists who will follow-up cases of sexual abuse and, if all remedies fail, initiate civil suits and public protests.

6. Our Commitment

In the light of our deliberations and recommendations, we felt an urgent need to:

1. Strengthen the prophetic spirit in ourselves.

2. Explore how the New Way of Being Church (FABC PA V, Bandung 1990),² which the CBCI and most dioceses have adopted as their pastoral priority, can help facilitate partnership and change the hierarchical structures in the Church.
3. Use media and new technology to network and explore ways in which equal discipleship can become a reality.
4. Promote the education of the non-ordained including women religious, in theology and philosophy.
5. Create spaces and opportunities for critique of the ways in which power is exercised and misused in the Church, and priesthood and hierarchy in the Church are mythologised.
6. Build advocacy groups for renewal of victims, and redressal of grievances related to gender justice, violence against women and sexual abuse.
7. Make formation of seminarians and religious more holistic and grounded in “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the (women and) men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1).
8. Ongoing formation in gender sensitivity for those already ordained and professed, to address issues of gender justice and clergy sexual abuse.

7. Conclusion

This Consultation was meant to be productive not just polemic. It brought together those who love the Church and wish to see it grow and prosper in the image of Jesus Christ in whom all are equal in dignity, respect and responsibility (Gal 3:28). It focused on the structures that need to be deconstructed for equal discipleship to become a reality in the church. At the same time it examined a serious problem in the Church today, one that has assumed critical dimensions: clergy sexual abuse. It looked at these issues with a critical mind but also with a warm heart, tracing their roots and suggesting alternatives for change.

We believe that the Spirit of God, that Spirit of wisdom and love, can animate all of us to rekindle in the Church the mission of Jesus who came that women and men, the ordained and non-ordained, the mighty and the lowly, all may have life, life in all its fullness (John 10:10).

²A co-responsible & participatory church which functions as a communion of communities (small Christian communities).