



THE EMERGENCE OF BASIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES IN ARCH DIOCESE OF TRIVANDRUM

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INTRODUCTION:

One of the greatest achievements of Francis Xavier's mission in the Fishery coast and in the Travancore Coast was the establishment of ecclesial communities. As the number of Christians increased he was concerned about the construction of the churches. But he gave more importance to building up ecclesial communities emphasizing the spiritual aspects of Christian life. This he did through the deepening of Christian doctrine.

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE : BASIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES:

As a pre – condition for the formation of ecclesial communities Francis Xavier was very particular to teach Christian doctrine. According to G. Schuhammer, Francis Xavier adapted himself to the mental capacities of his listeners. His method was very simple but profound. When Francis Xavier reached a village, he brought all men and boys together. He then preached to them and explained the chief articles of the Christian faith in their native language. He made the sign of the cross and asked his hearers repeat three times their acknowledgment of one God in three Divine Persons – In the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirits. He then put on sleeveless white surplice of the kind worn by Portuguese priests and recited the Confiteor, Creed, Commandments, our Father Hail Mary and Salve Regina. Then all, both young and old had to repeat for some time what he had said.

ROLE OF PRIEST IN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Francis Xavier converted the people of Travancore coast en masse. After giving baptism to the people of a village, he passed to another. In the process of great evangelization he did not get sufficient help from secular (or) religious priests. So, he wrote to St. Ignatius in Rome and Fr. Simon Rodrigues in Lisbon, urging them to send more priests. In his letter, Fr. Francisco Mansilhas, who was at the fishery coast, gives admonition to take special care of the newly converted Christians of Travancore. In his letter, dated 8th May, 1545, to Master Diogo and Fr. Micer Paulo in Goa, Francis Xavier wrote that since Mansilhas and the Malabar Priests were in Cape Comerin his service was not that much required. He, however, had shown special concern towards the new converts by asking the priests who came from Europe to go to Cape Comerine. And in his letter on 22 October, 1548 he encouraged Fr. Francisco Henriques to continue in Travancore inspite of the anti-conversion approach of the king. For, Francis Xavier was quite sure of the result of Fr. Henrique's work.

According to Francis Xavier, the priests also should be instruments of peace. He says that priest should enquire about any quarrelling in the villages and should help the people to become friends when they come to the Church on Sundays and the women on Saturdays. Though Francis Xavier was concerned very much about the Salvation of Souls he had special care for the sick and the needy. He instructed the priests to exhort the faithful about their obligation to inform them

LAY PARTICIPATION IN THE ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES :

When the missionaries came to Travancore they sought the help of the natives. Lay participation in the ecclesial matters in Kerala is not a new phenomenon. The appointment of Kanakapula had much influence in the ecclesial communities. Francis Xavier was assisted by laymen. They were called Kanakapula. In Tamil, Kanakkapillai, whose duty was to teach Catechism, assemble as Sacristan, assemble the people for prayers, administer baptism in case of necessity, keep register of births and enquire about impediments of marriages. The Kanakapula had acquired a hereditary status; the system was also not free of errors. Since the people of coastal villages lived so close to the church and the Parochial house, the role of Kanakapula becomes functionary.

CONFRATERNITY :

Confraternity is defined as a sodality that has been established as a moral person and has as its purpose the promotion of public worship. The worship may assume any one of the many practical forms: assistance at the Mass, nocturnal adoration, procession, public recitation of the rosary. The purpose of a confraternity is often indicated by its title, which may also refer to the attributes of God, the mysteries of the Christian religion, the feasts of our Lord (or) His Blessed Mother (or) the Saints.

The emergence of confraternities in the history of the Church goes back to the Middle Ages especially during the time of Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic.

In the old Cochin parishes, these confraternities are known as Combria Sabha. A short experience in the coastal villages of Trivandrum would reveal how much the people were taken up by the confraternities in their religious life. The confraternity promises to abide, obey and practice everything which is ordered by Canon Law.

SODALITIES (CHRISTIAN LIFE COMMUNITIES)

The Jesuit Sodalities are known all over the world. Already in the seventeenth century the Sodalities were founded in India. There were sodalities at Cochin, Quilon, Tuticorin, San Thome and elsewhere. It is understood from the Annual letter of Jesuits in 1633, Bishop Beziger introduced Christian Doctrine Sodality throughout the Diocese.

LEGION OF MARY:

Frs. Ildaphonse, the then parish priest of Palayam, wanted to bring a unit of the Legion of Mary at Palayam in 1931 itself. In Trivandrum, at present, there are 5,000 members in the Legion of Mary. Their activities include visiting of sick people in the hospitals, Jail and asylums. Many leaders of the Legion of Mary work as animators of BCCs. They also take part in the fight against social evils.

CATHOLIC ACTION:

The origin of Catholic Action derives from a lay movement in the last century in Italy. In the Diocese of Trivandrum Bishop V.V. Dereere, insisted that all the priests establish catholic action in every parish. The main purpose of the establishment of Catholic Action was the re-Christianization of parishes. Together with Catholic Action, St. Vincent De Paul Society has been working in the Diocese for a long time. Compared to the Pious Associations where women dominate, in St. Vince De Paul Society one can see the laymen in charitable works.

The formation of BCCs in the Diocese of Trivandrum

The formation of BCCs in the Diocese of Trivandrum was not an outcome of a sudden decision of a bishop (or) of a few priests. A continuous research, study, self evaluation and struggle of the people of God could be seen behind it. The influential factors are manifold. Of these, the most important is the liturgical awareness of the church as "People of God" had its effect in many of the parishes, both in the coastal and

non-coastal areas, though the traditional parishes were reluctant to accept changes. The contributions of D.S. Amalorpavadas, Fr. Edwin, Bishop A.B. Jacob and Bishop M.S. Pakiam are very important. And the Golden Jubilee Celebration of Diocese in 1987 was an important event which speeded up for the formation of BCCs.

The first evaluation seminar facilitated the speedy execution of further recommendations of the "Living Together". With an intention of constituting the diocesan pastoral council in 1989, Bishop A.B. Jacob sent a pastoral letter restating the role of laity in the Church. In order to give a correct understanding of the pastoral council, the Bishop arranged different seminars for the lay leaders of the parish. And within two months the members of the pastoral council were elected from all the vicariates (or) Foranes and the diocesan pastoral council was constituted on 1st January 1990.

CONCLUSION:

The investigation was from the formation of Christian Communities in the time of the greatest missionary of India, St. Francis Xavier. From the investigation, it is understood that although the Portuguese missionaries were working before Francis Xavier in the Travancore Coast, it was Francis Xavier who gave a sound foundation to the establishment of Christian Communities. The BCCs in Trivandrum have their own indigenous nature. The emergence of BCCs in Trivandrum traces its origin to the Christian Communities founded by St. Francis Xavier and the Carmelite missionaries. The second Vatican Council called the ecclesial communities for renewal. In the process of renewal, through the moments of painful experiences, prayer, and reflection, the BCCs become the pastoral option of the Diocese. In the new pastoral option the traditional role of the Bishop, priests, religious and the laity changes. In the changes, an incarnated spirituality emerges. Since BCCs have become a pastoral option, a structural change was inevitable.

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