

FORMATION TO MINISTERS IN A MULTI-FAITH PARISH

Lawrence Simon

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Christian Studies, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India

Introduction

If you make a survey to-day of all the R.C. Seminaries (training centres of future priests) you would certainly notice that no seminary trains the students to cater to the needs of the different religious communities who live within a parish limits. Most of the parishes are situated amidst people of different faiths except in some villages. This is why I would like to pay attention to the formation of candidates to work in multi-faith parishes presenting my own ideas and opinions in order to try and show how the future formation can come to cater to the needs of a multi-faith parish(s).

The Present (given) Condition of the Parishes: By condition, I mean the place in which one has to exercise one's ministry. What I mean is, mission happens whenever a Christian community, located in a particular place, recognizes God's dynamic presence and proclaims its faith in God through gestures of justice. The recognition of this presence happens whenever a Christian community is truly involved in a given (condition) situation. Such involvement is always contextual and praxis-oriented. Authentic ministerial formation will be domesticated if one were to import alien traditions, thought forms, concepts of ministry and theologies into any context rather than allow the context to determine and throw out patterns of ministry in dialogue with scriptures, tradition and the traditions of a particular community.

Christianity in India is a minority faith around 2% of the total population of 128 crores. All religions of the world live in this country and Hinduism is the dominant religion and Islam takes the second place. Ministry should take two main factors into account: the massive poverty and the presence of different religions, the de-humanizing caste system and the two other forces, capitalism and Marxism. They too attract the poverty-stricken Indians with a promise of salvation from want, oppression, hunger and exploitation. So when we define a parish we need to take into consideration, the politically oppressed, economically exploited, culturally despised and socially marginalized, and it is in contact with them that one needs to evaluate the credibility of the Indian Church, the patterns of present ministerial formation and the hope for the future.

Assessment of the present formation of Ministers:

From 16th Century we have the missionary movements and so we have the theologies, thought-forms and life-styles which dominate and determine the manner in which ministers are trained in our lands. Our theology is also still western. To put it in a nut-shell, they are all oriented to meet the needs of an inherited ecclesiastical structure. There is no appreciable and visible effort to do theology to respond to people's life style and culture. The Roman Catholics, who were first in the Indian and Asian missionary field, were greatly influenced by mediaeval theology of the Counter-Reformation. The missionaries knew nothing of the local culture or traditions and nothing at all. Their converts, many of them adopted the same attitudes and they found themselves alienated from their own people. They had the protection of their converters who were in power and eventually they condemned their own cultures and traditions. This is not the thing of the past but we are still captive to our inherited past. It is this captivity to our past, our enslavement to alien traditions that are not our own deprives of our freedom to serve in the present time and in our own situation. Is it in order that we are made aware of our own situation? Is it in order that we are made aware of our captivity to inherited traditions and their limitations that prompted these words? "We have inherited the "great traditions" of the Gospel from those who brought the gospel to Asia, but we believe that Christ has more of his truth to reveal to us, as we seek to understand his work among men in their several Asian cultures, their different religions and their involvement in the contemporary Asian revolution. In the past we have been too tied to inherited, traditional, conceptual forms of confession to make such ventures. Such formulations have been signposts and pointers to the truth, but we have often interpreted them, or had them interpreted to us, as the final word of truth so that we have encamped around them, forgetting that even as people of their times and cultures made their own confession, we too must do the same in our time and culture. When we make absolute and written confessions of the churches of another culture or age we become incapable of discovering the new depths of truth God can reveal to us in Christ amidst Asian life."¹

Our sense of captivity and alienation cannot be confined to the areas of culture and religions alone but much more by

the massive poverty which alienates us by oppression, exploitation and silence by the powerful and the church has failed to deal with this problem. Our theology does not display signs of liberation. Our Indian Church claims to be the Body of Christ and yet it is theologically elitist, spiritually and morally bankrupt and ministry wise deformed. Our formation of ministers is so maimed that we do not hear the cry of the Poor, "My God why have you abandoned me?" Our formation confines to as Aloysius Pieris of Sri Lanka says, " ... whenever we try to live and proclaim our faith in a just God by our ministerial presence in the lives of our people and in their struggle to achieve full humanity within a just order, we are confronted with the harsh fact that the traditional ministry, compressed into a tripartite hierarchy (deacon, priest, bishop) is simply not adequate to meet the demands of the contemporary apostolate."² If we do not prepare our ministers to respond to the cry of the poor, then our formation centres are wasting their time and energy and money. We have a tendency to say this is our tradition come down from Rome. Our traditional role of ministry is questioned and challenged by others. Today we speak about inter-faith dialogue, indigenous theology, sociology, Marxism, modern religious and secular movements are taught. Today we are taught of other faiths to have dialogue with other people of other faiths, and secondly, since we are accused of being foreign we began to speak of indigenization and we have yet to produce a genuine indigenous theology and thirdly when ideologies and political forces became a threat and challenge, the response from the church is artificial and we do hold more seminars and introduce more courses. After all these ventures the response and reaction to the present need to change confined to curriculum changes. As someone said, "in the past the subject of ministry has been understood from the angle of ecclesiastical tradition trying to support it with biblical texts and theological definitions of the past. The whole subject was hardly approached contextually. This was also due to the fact that ministry was considered in static terms, as given once and for all by God to be continued, used, protected and guarded. The emphasis was often placed on the given ministry rather than on the God who is free to call men and women in different historical and social situations to exercise ministries to accomplish his purpose."³ The emphasis is on the content of the academic excellence rather than relevance. From a Sri Lankan context which I feel fits very well to Indian context: "In spite of the eminent scholars that staff our national Seminary, its theological output, in terms of

creativity, has been nil: and what is taught there neither springs from nor responds to the new challenges of the pastorate The academic centres have not succeeded in the training of new minister..."⁴ The inability of the church to make a radical response in the multi-faith parish situation is, at least, the problem of poverty in its context is not paid attention to.

Ministry Formation in a Multi-Faith Parish: Ministry is basically a re-enactment of the life and ministry of Jesus in one's given situation. To be rooted in the ministry of Jesus, therefore, implies not only claiming to be filled with the Holy Spirit but also being open to the Spirit who constantly leads us to the truth. It also means being open, always to new challenges, to take risks even to the point of death. This is to say that, if one were to say that one is a minister of Jesus the Christ, or that one is engaged in his ministry one must have already shown a willingness to go through the double baptism of Jesus which, in a multi-faith parish, means going through the baptism in the Jordan of Indian religiosity and the cross of Indian poverty. This and this alone, is the criterion by which to judge the validity of any ministry which is associated with the name of Jesus. Furthermore, if one has truly gone through the fire and pain of this double baptism then one's ministry of the Word will turn into words of justice, and one's ministry of the Sacrament will turn into gestures of justice.⁵ Here I would like to propose a pattern of seminary formation:

1. If ministry should become creative and meaningful, then the present pattern of formation should be abandoned and the candidate are to be made to go through a process of double baptism, since the hall mark of entering into real ministry is to be immersion in one's context and not a residential six to seven years of academic training. It should be a lifelong process of *becoming, learning and unlearning*. Once we institutionalize the faith it enters into a state of moribund. As Buddha used to tell his monks through "*JathakaKathas*" particularly we find in '*Mahavagga*'- Access to Insight: "*Go yet now, monks, and wander for the good of the people for the happiness of the people out of compassion for the world.*" This was an exhortation that they plunge into the context of the lives they were to live. Having done so they were to come back to their Guru to share their experiences, frustrations, difficulties and seek guidance through dialogue. It was altogether a method of praxis and reflection which comes out of experience rather than from intellectual speculation. Did not Jesus employ a similar method of training with the seventy?

2. This process should begin after one places oneself in a community within a multi-faith context. The trainee would be directly related to a guru who functions as one's mentor, counselor and enabler. These live-in situations would cover such areas as the slums, farms, trade unions, factories, peasant organizations and worship centres. Though they live in different places, they will return from time to time to one's formation community for reflection and interaction with one's guru and the rest of the community. It is through this process of praxis, reflection and interaction that maturity, growth and formation takes place. This process would help one to come to grips with oneself and discover one's capabilities and ministerial gifts.
3. The present practice in the R.C. Church, at least, one goes through his academic training, ordained and absorbed into the prevailing ministry patterns of the local church or religious congregation. Their exercise of ministry is more cultic-oriented. But one's formation to work for a parish of Multi-faith parish(s) context would be that of one's ministry and ordination need not be denominational, cultic oriented but context-oriented or need centred seminaries. That is to say, the dominant feature now is that the sending church is the receiving church. One does not need to lose or ignore one's identity of his denomination but to take the context and need of the majority of the people as the priority to work with. One does this not irresponsibly, or without regard to one's tradition, but because of one's ministerial convictions and the challenge posed by the multi-faith parish. In this process, team-work is very much possible. Chanakya gives a very clear idea about the same. He says it's the 'common purpose': "Being not restricted as to place and time because of having a common purpose, allied troops are better than alien troops." (9:2.17) Sensing the need of the community ministers from different denominations can work together in such a way that their ministry in relation to the needs and challenges of the context can be solved keeping the common good alone irrespective of the different faiths of the people. A good business knows how to respect and give credit to everyone so that the whole team can become united and aligned: they need to

define their purpose; they need to have an open discussion among themselves and they have to give time to each other to strike the right chord and have a wonderful partnership. This is a risk the churches in India must be prepared to take. It is a challenge to renounce their parochialism and petty denominationalism.

4. In the process, the formation programme itself can be structured to suit the future ministry of a candidate. To work and live in a particular parish which has, say, a non-Christian religion, the candidate must take the pain of living and following, for example, of Jainist precepts – a tasting and seeing, which is akin to what the Psalmist says: "O taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps.34:8). Having gone through this tasting of the Jainist water a few uncomfortable questions may arise in one's mind: Is the Bible the only word of God? Who are the people of God? Do not other religions point to salvation?

Conclusion

As Kosuke Koyama says, I conclude with his words: "Theology has become so brainy. In my understanding theology is basically singing, not proving and arguing. The one who sings can really jump into the pain of history. Also, theology is to paint the image of God in Christ with the colours provided with one's locality."

References

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3. "Education for Christian Ministries in Sri-Lanka", by Donald Kanagaratnam, doctoral dissertation submitted to Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California, 1978, P.177.
4. Aloysius Periris, Op. Cit., p.15
5. For a detailed exposition of this thought see "Monastic Poverty in an Asian setting", Aloysius Peiris, Dialogue, New Series, Vol. VII, No. 3, September-December, 1980, pp113-118.