

MY EXPERIENCE AS A VINCENTIAN BISHOP IN INDIA **(Thomas Thiruthalil, C.M., Bishop of Balasore)**

ARRIVAL OF THE VINCENTIANS IN INDIA:

The Spanish Vincentian Fathers of Madrid Province came to the Cuttack Mission, Orissa, India in the year 1922 and started evangelizing this area. Gradually the number of Catholics began to grow and more and more Mission Stations were opened. In 1937 Cuttack Mission was raised to the status of a diocese. In 1974, Cuttack Diocese was bifurcated into the Archdiocese of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar and the Diocese of Berhampur. I was appointed the first Bishop of Berhampur. In 1990, the Apostolic Prefecture of Balasore was raised to the status of Diocese and I was transferred from Berhampur to Balasore Diocese as its first Bishop.

MY VINCENTIAN VOCATION

I joined the Vincentians in 1952 as a young seminarian. After completing my Philosophy course in Orissa, I went to Spain to continue my studies for the priesthood. I was ordained priest in Spain in 1963. I stayed in Spain for six years.

I came back to India in 1965. I acknowledge the contribution of the Congregation of the Mission in my life. The charism and spirituality of St. Vincent de Paul had made deep impression in my life. The mission towards the poor and the downtrodden of the society had made deep impact in my life and helped me to develop a mission-oriented spirituality and a special love and option for the poor. The inspirations of the early missionary priests, especially their life-style, prayer-life, austerity, hard work, love for the poor, dedicated mission in the terrains and in the interior places and the loyalty and obedience to the authority of the Church, created in me deep impression.

As Bishop my focuses were on the formation of the laity, catechists and the future priests along with the special emphasis on starting new Mission Stations, inviting religious to work in the Diocese especially in the fields of education and health-care. When I look back and reflect on my life as a Bishop, I realize that the Lord was with me in my endeavors.

THE AREAS OF OUR MISSIONARY WORKS AND THE IMPRESSIONS ON IT

1. Catechetics

Our village catechists play a very vital role in spreading the message of Christ. These catechists themselves are not much educated, but very strong in their faith and goal. They are the pioneers in getting into new villages, making contacts and preparing

the ground for a missionary to get into. They are dedicated simple village leaders at the service of the missionaries and of course, of the Word of God. To make their work more effective, these catechists were given training for teaching, preaching, and catechizing to the vastly illiterate village folk. As a result, the message of Christ has reached far and wide and the church is growing.

Visiting villages is perhaps the most exciting part of a missionary in this part of the globe. Villages are spread far and wide; many of them can be reached only on foot. People eagerly wait for the visit of a priest. It may be possible only 3 to 4 times in a year. So any visit heralds good news for the village. The villages gather together in the evening after their days work. The warm welcome that is accorded to you helps you to get refreshed. This provides you the best chance for catechizing them. You have the joy of sharing their life.

2. Education

Education is fundamental to any progress. The village folk, simple and illiterate as they are accept faith whole-heartedly, but their life situation remains much the same. They value education very little. They care little to send their children to school for studies. Against this backdrop, many schools and hostels were opened by the missionaries to spread the light of education. Many of them are to be financially helped and as such we have to depend much at present on overseas help. Yet the opening schools and hostels and imparting education has brought a sea change in their lives. Many big officers proudly acknowledge their indebtedness to the missionaries and their institutions for the same. So more and more hostels have been opened. English medium schools also have sprung up for quality education to all. Now emphasis is more on education of the girl child.

3. Priestly Formation

Formation of the future priests is a very important ministry for us. At present we get enough candidates to our Seminaries in Orissa. We have to give them a contextualized training so that they will be prepared to work among the people of various culture in Orissa. The number of Vincentians in India is growing. In 1997 the Indian Province of the Vincentians was divided into two Provinces.

4. Health Services

Our Lord Himself went around preaching teaching and healing (Mt.4,23). For an ordinary man who is more worried about his daily existence, preaching and teaching may not mean much, but healing does. People flock to our mission centres irrespective of caste, creed or religion for medical help. There are no hospitals in most of these villages. For these villagers, the small village dispensaries that we run means a hospital. They

approach the Sisters working in the health centers for medical attention with much confidence. The faith of the people is an incentive for the missionary to reach out to the people more and more. Since there are no medical facilities in the remote villages, we have opened dispensaries in all the parishes. It is run by trained Sisters. Many places they hold mobile clinics. At times they go even walking.

Opportunities are also provided to train village health workers as it is impossible for a sister who is in-charge of the dispensary to reach out to all the villages. Thus we try to reach out to all the villages for community health care. Now the diocese has a hospital at Balasore (Jyothi Hospital) to facilitate a better health care to the people.

5. Promotion of Women

The status of women in the society is very low. They work hard. They take care of the children. They suffer the injustices inflicted on them. For their betterment, various programs such as Grihini School (Home Science), Mahila Mandal (Association of Women) etc. were opened. Through Mahila Mandals, women are given awareness programmes on family life, health and hygiene, their rights, their roles in the society, savings, self-employment etc. Grihini School serves as a launching pad for self-esteem and dignity. It is here that most of the uneducated young village girls get initiated to reading and writing, health and hygiene, getting trained on tailoring, crafts etc. It also prepares them for family life. There are different training centres for the same run by different Women Religious Congregations.

Celebration of girl child day is another landmark even where awareness is created for respecting the dignity of the girl child. It involves children belonging to different faiths. The schools provide an ideal situation to create and impress upon these young minds on equality of women. It has created a tremendous impact on people.

6. Developmental projects.

Through these programmes we are aiming to promote human development. Under the banner of social service wing, various activities have been undertaken such as, education, balwadi (village day school for small children), health care, housing projects etc. In times of natural calamities this wing is at the forefront in bringing succour to the affected and later get them rehabilitated. The missionaries in Orissa did a very commendable relief work to the super cyclone affected people of the coastal Orissa in 1999. In the process, it actively works in collaboration with other Non-Governmental Organizations (N.G.Os). It has not only built up a bridge between people of various faith, it has also built up confidence among people. It has helped us in making inroads to new areas for proclaiming Christ which in other circumstances could have been difficult.

7. Formation of Small Christian Communities (SCCs)

The idea of S.C.C.s is relatively new in this region. We have made just a modest beginning. Priests and animators have been trained for this ministry. We started the S.C.Cs. In some of the parishes and it is functioning. This brings to the people a deeper awareness of the community.

8. Dialogue

We live in a society of diverse creed, language, culture and traditions. Hence it holds pertinent to have common celebrations like, World Peace Day, National day etc. It builds up good will among the people. Coming together and holding discussions together clears a lot of air of suspicion and misunderstandings. It is also the most pressing when the suspicion runs high. The diocese has organized various programmes for dialogue on different occasions.

9. Fundamentalists

“Happy are you when people insult you and persecute you and tell all kinds of evil lies against you because you are my followers” (Mt.5,11). For the past few years, this has become a reality in this mission. A few fundamentalists have started a misinformation campaign against the missionaries, trying to create atmosphere of unhealthy tension and fear. This unhealthy atmosphere has affected our missionary works to certain extent. In this context, the poor and the marginalized are specially affected. The missionaries face these challenges with courage.

More the persecution, the more resolute we become. We know the Lord’s assistance is with us. He is our strength (Mt.28,20). United we go ahead. We look forward with optimism, courage and enthusiasm.

Balasore
14th November, 2001

Thomas Thiruthalil, C.M.
Bishop of Balasore (India)