
Diocesan Plan of Evangelization and Pastoral Reflections

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THE CATECHIST

The catechist plays a key role in the work of Evangelization. It is very important to instruct him adequately, motivate him apostolically and sustain him spiritually.

Training

The diocese will organize from time to time programs for the formation of the Catechists. Some such programs could be for the whole group for their instruction, motivation and spiritual animation, and some others meant for specific groups, e.g. newly appointed Catechists, senior Catechist, Catechists who have had a formal training earlier, those who have not had any such training, those that are directly concentrating on new contacts, full-time Catechists, etc. The Diocesan Pastoral Centre will assist in carrying out these programs.

But the regular on-going formation of the Catechists will, of necessity, have to be carried out at the Parish level. It is impossible for all the Catechists to gather at the Diocesan Centre too often. But the Parish can help and train them month after month, following a well-planned updating and renewal program when they gather for their First Friday devotions.

In some Parishes the Catechists come early in the afternoon on the Thursday before the First Friday, and have their classes in the afternoon and evening. In some other places, the Catechists stay on after the First Friday mass and return home after lunch. Explanations are given of the readings of the following four Sundays. In addition, tips are given on preaching and even actual exercise in preaching.

This will be an occasion to give a training in the effective use of the Bible, e.g. in preparation of a sermon, or how to find passages suited for various occasions, prayer services, home-visits (when someone is sick or dead, when there has been a quarrel in the family, some joyful moment). All this calls for painstaking preparation on the part of those who will be giving this training. The fruits, however, will be abundant.

The Catechist must be made to understand that when he reads the Bible in public, he is announcing God's word. Hence the need to prepare himself very well and read slowly and clearly, with proper emphasis on the right words, truly as though he is proclaiming a message from the Lord.

The First Friday gathering will also be an occasion to introduce the Catechists to the deeper meaning of the liturgical year and proximate liturgical events (like Lent, Holy Week and Easter, Advent and Christmas) and ask them to lead their communities into a more profound understanding of the liturgy.

They are also taught Church singing.

Duties of the Catechist

An important skill that should unfailingly be imparted to the Catechist is the one for making new contacts, facing initial difficulties, answering objections, introducing Christ and His Church, and leading people to the Faith. **Every Catechist must be made to feel it one of his primary duties to take the gift of Faith to those who have not yet received it.** It must remain an on-going challenge for him to return month after month with a report of what has been accomplished in this area of spreading the Gospel. **At least one third of his time and energy must be spent for this purpose.** Failure in this regard is a sign of stagnation.

Equally important for the Catechist is to trace out Catholics who may have dropped out. Persons drop out not so much for want of faith as feeling unequal to the demands of Christian living. Sometimes differences with Church personnel can cause similar mishaps. The Catechist should develop the skill for house to house visiting, tracing out the fallen-aways, inspiring confidence, building up friendship, re-establishing relationship, giving a sense of belonging and leading back the straying members to the fold.

The responsibilities of the Catechist will include conducting the Sunday service, preparing people for Baptism, First Communion, Confirmation and Marriage, officiating at funerals, visiting the sick, house-visiting, promoting family prayer, settling disputes, making new contacts, looking after the church and things connected with the church (compound, equipment), and in general the comprehensive pastoral care of the faithful.

In some places there are no women-Catechists. But the generosity of women church-workers is a mighty force in the church.

Duties Towards the Catechist

As the Catechist plays such a central role in the life and growth of the Church, he deserves special respect in the community. He is given a cordial welcome when he comes to the Parish Centre. His meals and convenient stay receive attention.

The Diocese pays the basic salary of the full-time Catechist. The Parish should add a contribution of its own according to the seniority and service of the person concerned.

The village Catechist is generally chosen by the community under the guidance of the Parish Priest. They receive their remuneration from the community. In addition to the salary, the community helps their Catechist for cultivation, harvesting, house-making and similar needs. There are many ways in which the Parish shows its appreciation for the work of the Catechist: may be, a Christmas present, the bus-fare when he comes for meetings, a lump-sum assistance from time to time, attention to his accommodation and food, above all a respect for the person of the Catechist.

The Catechist, a Man of God

The Catechist is essentially a man of God. His work is closely linked with spiritual matters. **It is important to foster this spiritual quality in the Catechist.** He should not be treated just like an ordinary employee of the Parish, or continuously used as a driver or a general factotum. He can lose his ability to be a spiritual animator by the non-use of the skills he had. On the contrary, we should strengthen his abilities with the help we give him during the annual retreat, monthly recollections, and personal guidance. We should spend some time in prayer with him before we send him out on an apostolic expedition and after he returns.

THE TOURING SISTERS

Unlike in many other regions of India, we are fortunate in having the services of persons who are known as Touring Sisters. Every convent at the service of the Parish offers two sisters for doing village work. The Church growth and pastoral care in our region have greatly depended on the sacrificing effort of the Touring Sisters.

Village - Visiting

A well-organized Parish makes effective use of the services of the sisters who are available for pastoral work. **They are in the village right round the year, except for the rainiest season and short periods of rest between tours.** They attend the Catechists' meeting (generally along with the superior of the community), and are present when the touring programs are being drawn up for the next month. They take active part in the planning.

People want the best months for the visit of the sisters to their village. However, it will not be possible to oblige all of them. It will be necessary to do a bit of persuasion to get them to accept programs also during the other seasons of the year. It would be a pity indeed if the Touring Sisters remained at home much of the time, because of our inability to persuade the communities to accept programs. It will often be found that it is not so much the community that resists programs as the leader who does not want to take the trouble of organizing them. Proper choice of leaders is very important. The sisters will make themselves adaptable so that their presence is not an undue burden on the community. Generosity generally stimulates generosity.

Continuity

In order that the sisters' work may be effective in the villages, it is important that continuity of service be ensured. The community to which they belong ensures this continuity, which means, normally the Touring Sisters will remain at a place long enough to know the people and render effective service to them. This need is generally recognized with regard to the teaching sisters. The same norm is valid for the Touring Sisters too.

Normally only one sister is changed at a time, and the other is transferred only after the new sister has become sufficiently acquainted with the people, place, work, traditions, problems etc.

While one sister going out with a novice, an aspirant, a girl or a visiting sister will always be useful, the evident advantage of two sisters steadily touring an area for a period of time cannot be denied. They will come to know the people, and the people will come to know them. With each visit, they can go one step further in their personal relationship with the Catechists, Panches, Sangat members, families, children, the old, the sick, the fallen-aways and prospective Catholics. They can follow up each contact. They can give deeper instruction, ensuring continuity with what was taught earlier and with the latest message given at the Parish Centre.

Continuity also makes it easier for the sisters to offer effective help when the Catechists, Sangat members or others gather at the Parish Centre. They take active part in their devotions and animation programs in their behalf. When such programs are on, the sisters are fully involved with the events, welcoming people, making them feel at home, teaching, assisting at liturgy and similar activities. Thus, continuity benefits the apostolate greatly.

Activities

In the villages, the Touring Sisters are engaged in a vast variety of activities. They teach catechism to children, instruct the adults, and reach out to non-Catholics. They prepare people for the Sacraments. They visit the sick, trace out the fallen-aways, make new contacts. All that was said earlier with regard to the Catechist can be repeated with additional emphasis as a part of the work of the Touring Sisters too.

They must keep at least one-third of their time and energy for reaching out to prospective converts. On this depends the future of the Church. Failure in this is a great drawback. Regular visit to the homes of non-Christians, keen interest in their sick, their old, and their children, will open out new doors. A careful account should be kept of the number of new houses visited each time, and each visit must be followed up.

In addition to the pastoral work that the sisters do, they contribute whatever they can for the total growth of the community. They encourage children to attend school, they ask good candidates to apply for the boarding house and Grihini school, they campaign against excessive drinking, they teach cleanliness in homes, they give health norms to the villagers, they encourage kitchen gardens, they inculcate the habit of saving, they introduce natural family planning methods to couples, they guide women and grown-up girls in a variety of ways, they promote night-schools and every form of development activity that the community is engaged in.

Updating

In order to do all this, the sisters must try to equip themselves with every sort of skill possible. It is not a matter of routine repetition of the self-same visit. Each visit should be a stimulus to the community, and an education to the sisters themselves by which they improve their services. They will try constantly to update their knowledge of the Scriptures, History of the Church, methods of teaching catechism, and various other sciences that promote the total growth of people. **They should preserve the habit of reading** by which the learning process continues all through their life-time. **They should be eager to learn from the experience of other sisters** who are engaged in the same apostolate, so that there is always novelty, freshness and dynamism in the services that they so generously render.

Annual updating programs should be organized at the Diocesan level for the Touring Sisters in order to add to their evangelizing ability. The Diocesan Pastoral Centre can greatly help in this task.

THE SANGAT (SODALITY) AND OTHER ASSOCIATIONS

Experience shows that those Parishes are most active that have the Sangat very well organized. The enthusiasm and generosity of youth, when effectively tapped for Evangelization, are the strength of the Church.

The Sangat girls should be under the guidance of a sister and the boys under the guidance of a priest, usually the Assistant Parish Priest.

The Sangat can be engaged in all the apostolic activities that we have mentioned earlier, especially programs like visiting homes, attending to the sick, teaching catechism and singing, organizing prayer-groups, settling disputes, and tracing out fallen-aways. They are the best agents for bringing prospective converts to the Church. **Month after month they can come back with a report of how many new houses they have visited and what their experiences have been.** With youth, there is no admitting of defeat!

The Parish can also launch community development programs like night-schools with the help of the Sangat. Young people are quick to adopt new and improved ways of living and working. Thus if they are motivated, they can take up a campaign for improving their kitchen garden, planting some income-yielding trees, making additional furniture for their homes and other useful equipment, fostering the saving habit, abolishing excessive drinking, etc. The care of the village church and the improvement of the church premises can be entrusted to them. **The key to success is the monthly report they give of their achievements.** One is stimulated by what one hears from another.

The formation of the Sangat members is very important, which usually is done during their monthly gathering at the Parish centre. It is not only an occasion to motivate them for the above mentioned programs and to draw up concrete plans, but also to give a thorough training in the Scriptures, History of the Church and a variety of religious topics. A well instructed and well motivated team of youth can transform the entire region.

There are many other groups and apostolic associations that can help in the work of Evangelization. The Mahila Sangh (women's Association) is showing its strength of late. The Catholic Association is active. But ultimately every association proves its relevance by its apostolic fruitfulness.

THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

It is being increasingly recognized that the entire Christian community is the agent of Evangelization. Therefore, aside from the groups mentioned above, it is most imperative that the entire Christian community be organized for the noble task of sharing the Faith with others.

Observers say that the Church is growing in those regions of the world where there is a happy relationship and collaboration between the clergy and the laity. When the Catechists, Panches, leaders and youth are well instructed, well motivated and actively engaged in the

tasks described above, the rest of the community too will be active in like manner. **However, a constant reminder that everyone is a missionary and an evangelizer is important.**

THE SCHOOL

The Catholic School, from the earliest years of its existence, was a powerful instrument of Evangelization. In India, Catholic schools were first started for ensuring the religious formation of Catholic Children while they went through their studies, and introducing the Faith to those who might be interested. In North-East India, the Church was introduced to many places through the school and the Gospel was carried by the past pupils of those schools that had an evangelical thrust.

Education, a Service

In the history of the Church, education was always a service and never a source of income. If at this moment of history in India, the service of education happens to be rewarding we may be very sure that it is too artificial a situation to last very long. Anyone who has a long-term perspective of human affairs, knows that the public will ultimately see to it that the returns are only in proportion to the work put in. Either through legislation or through public criticism, schools will have to return to their original identity, an instrument of service and nothing more (which usually means financial commitment rather than an advantage). It is very important to keep this in mind when locating the school among our other activities.

Our schools have primarily come into existence to cater to the needs of the Catholic community and to witness to our Christian Faith. We should keep our educational institutions true to their goals. Which means Catholic children will have preference in admission, and the needier members of the Catholic community stand a better chance of assistance (according to the possibility of the school). Experience shows that generosity in this regard will favour a happy and cooperative spirit in the school, which is an evident sign of the blessing of God on the institution.

Priestly and religious vocations and committed Christian living are fostered in a good Catholic School.

The rise in educational standards are closely linked with the improvement of teaching, character formation, cultivation of evangelical and human values, and not necessarily with improved externals, costly uniforms and other heavy financial burdens. In fact these only serve to keep the children of the poorer sections of people away from our institutions. It would be a pity if the schools in a missionary region like ours would be moving in a direction from which better-led-institutions in the rest of the country are trying to move away.

The Size of the School

As an educational institution grows in size and becomes more and more complex, the administrative burdens too increase. As the number of students rises (more than 40 students in a class is considered too many for effective follow-up), and sections increase, the school authorities are taking on greater and greater commitment. The educational influence of the staff on the students may not be rising in proportion. It is very important, therefore, to keep the school to a size in which personal relationships among the staff, students and the parents

will be possible. Hence a **Parish school which is only one of the activities of the Parish should limit its size to ensure effective educational follow-up.** As years go by, the expectations of the children and their parents can only rise, the Government requirements can only become stricter, our responsibilities towards the staff can only grow. Hence the wisdom of keeping the school to a size in which personal follow-up of every individual and every activity will be possible.

Insertion into the Local Culture, Community and Pastoral Situation

Equally important it is for the school to be inserted into the community and the culture of the neighbourhood. Such an insertion will mean a respectful recognition of local traditions, practices, feasts and relationship with the local leadership; participation in significant local events; the use of cultural symbols in the campus; employment of local teachers; and many other things that our creativity will suggest to us.

Insertion of the school into the pastoral situation of the neighbourhood will mean the involvement of the religious personnel (men and women) in the life of the Parish and active collaboration in its apostolic endeavour.

The CBCI had brought out a pastoral plan for Catholic Schools in India. We should invite each school to draw up a pastoral plan based on it suited for their own school.

THE BOARDING HOUSE

In North-East India, **boarding houses were always formation houses for the laity.** So many leaders and active Evangelizers have come out of our mission hostels, that they have amply established their validity.

Even though the day school is open to every community in the neighbourhood, **the boarding house is usually kept for Catholics and those who give hope of further evangelical contacts.** This helps to create an atmosphere of homeliness in the Parish compound, in which it is easy to form the youngsters to Catholic traditions. The boarding boys and girls have an opportunity to do a full course in religion during their stay at the Parish Centre and are trained to authentic Christian living (prayer life, Sacraments, liturgy, brotherhood and in general a life inspired by faith). They also grow up eager to take back their faith to their homes and their neighbourhood.

In the boarding house the children are also assisted in their studies, so that they can perform well in the scholastic field. In a healthy boarding house atmosphere, the children are trained to habits of work, discipline, austere living, industry, collaboration, and cheerful community living, so that they can become active and effective leaders in later life. Even during their holidays they can be engaged in apostolic activities and development works, habits they can preserve for a life time.

If these goals are to be achieved, it is evident that the children cannot be left to merely to the boarding-master, but that the religious personnel who are in charge of the hostel must with their presence and their personal involvement create the required climate.

A good boarding house nourishes vocations, trains lay apostles, builds up sound Christian communities.

HEALTH SERVICES

Unlike in many other parts of the country, we do not have many hospitals and complex health institutions in our region. However, at every Parish Centre there is some sort of health service or the other.

The healing ministry itself is an announcement of the Gospel. During the process of healing we are able to come intimately close to an individual and witness to the love of Christ.

Healing, it is increasingly being recognized, is not a matter of tablets and injections. The patient is often living in a world of his/her own, and it is the challenge of the health worker to enter into this world, to understand and accept him/her as he/she is, to rebuild self-confidence in him/her and set him/her firmly on the way to health and his/her genuine self. **Prayer and counseling are as important as medical treatment. Part of counseling is the very loving relationship that the health worker builds up with the patient.** Christ is the supreme healer, and we have so much to learn from Him every day.

Of late, community health programs have received much attention. Such programs seek to create conditions conducive to health in the villages. The promoters of these programs adopt a holistic view of life and aim at building up good health in the context of the total well-being of the whole community.

For a creative missionary, such health programs can become powerful means for establishing relationship with a village community and leading them to the message of the Gospel.

THE PRINTED WORD AND OTHER MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

The spoken word can easily be forgotten. But the printed word remains. One may return to a discarded book after many years. It may change hands and stimulate thought in unexpected places. Hence the great importance for the Evangelizer of promoting the written word.

Of all the forms of religious literature to be diffused, the Bible should receive the first attention. It is the Word of God. The complete Bible and the New Testament should be available at the Parish Centre for anyone who wants to acquire a copy. **The Bible or at least the New Testament should be enthroned in every family.** Even a house of illiterates will benefit from the presence of the Bible, because it will be a reminder to them that they ought to read it. They may get a visiting Catechist or a friend to read them a Passage. They will be eager to see that their children will grow up to read the precious message from the Book of Life.

Along with the Bible, a wide choice of Catholic literature should be available at the Parish Centre. **If sufficient interest is created, we will be surprised to see how many books can go out in a short time and how far they can reach.** Our distribution of religious articles is generally brisk and active. The distribution of good Christian literature is equally important, if not more.

There are many other Media of communication that can be brought to the service of the Gospel, e.g. films, video- cassettes, flannel-boards, music, dramas. There is no end to creativity in the use of such means where there is genuine zeal.

THE PARISH CENTRE

All that we have said till now are closely related to the Parish Centre, the inspirer and the promoter of all activities within the Parish. The Parish is often looked upon as merely an administrative unit, and the Parish Priest as just an administrator. The Parish, on the contrary, is the communion of believers, and the Parish Priest (along with his Assistants) their spiritual animator and the architect of unity in the Parish.

Under his guidance, all the above mentioned forms of apostolate take shape, develop and yield fruits. He stimulates action rather than controls initiatives. He encourages, strengthens and follows up various types of activities that go on in the Parish. He respects the autonomy of competent bodies. He builds up relationship among various persons, groups and organizations. He reconciles contending groups and brings peace to divided communities. He sets a marvelous example of unity at the Parish Centre with his co-workers (Assistant Parish Priest, Sisters, Catechists, Teachers and others). **This very unity creates an atmosphere of generous service on the part of all.**

The most important task of the Parish Priest and his Assistants is to build up a community of faith, a community that prays. They spare no pains in the preparation of the community for the worthy reception of the Sacraments and active participation in the Liturgy. Liturgy is made both beautiful and meaningful. The church singing is well prepared. The church equipments and the sacred precincts are carefully maintained.

The animation of the Christian community receives all the attention of the Parish priest and his Assistants. **They carefully prepare their sermons and help the Catechists to do the same.** They guide the teaching of catechism in the schools and in the villages. They organize annual retreats for the Catechists, Sangat members, teachers and other groups, and for the communities in the villages. They plan their own village tours and those of the Touring Sisters and full-time Catechists and ensure their effectiveness. **They set an example, by spending considerable amount of their time in the villages.** They organize the annual feast (or sabha) at the Centre or in one of the villages for a collective expression of faith. They ensure the solemn and meaningful celebration of the various feasts of the liturgical year.

Among all their tasks, the formation of the Catechists, lay leaders, youth in the boarding houses and other groups will receive the special care of the Parish Priest and his Assistants. Their annual retreats, monthly meetings and similar programs are carefully planned to achieve definite goals.

Ecumenism is a very important part of our evangelical work. Genuine zeal does not express itself in competition or in looking down on persons of other beliefs. Respect for everyone and love for people of other faiths will win respect and love in equal measure.

Christ is the model of all apostolic workers. A personal example of prayer, austerity of life, a brotherly and helpful attitude, generosity in service, faith and optimism in difficulties, these and other qualities make of the team at the Parish Centre a force of reconciliation and a powerful agent of Evangelization that nothing on earth can resist.

The wonder-worker behind everything is the Evangelizer. Ultimately everything depends on him/her. He/she can change a defeat into a success, a set-back into an advantage, a period of crisis into a golden opportunity. The magic wand he wields is his faith. His strength is his inner life.

That is why the **person of the Evangelizer is very important**. It would be highly desirable if he has a vast variety of skills, e.g. for organization, administration, teaching, entertaining. The wider his interests, the more useful he can be. However, the Evangelizer is primarily a man of God. He loves to pray. He loves his annual retreat, his monthly recollection, his daily devotions. **He loves to be alone with God**. He loves to search the Scriptures. He is essentially a spiritual man.

The Evangelizer loves people. He loves his co-workers. He is not jealous of them. He does not consider them his competitors. He loves the faithful. He loves those beyond the fold. He changes his opponents into his collaborators. As St. Paul says, Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Cor 13:7). He has patience. He waits. He takes risks. He is willing to take the blame. His ultimate motive in everything is love.

The true Evangelizer keeps his goals ever in mind. He is not lost, as it often happens, in a labyrinth of means. If he meets with difficulty, he faces it. If he is defeated, he begins again; if he comes across the impossible, he seeks strength from the Lord and struggles on. As St. Paul writes, We are often troubled, but not crushed; sometimes in doubt, but never in despair; there are many enemies, but we are never without a friend; and though badly hurt at times, we are not destroyed (2 Cor 4:8).

The Evangelizer, while sparing no pains to lead people to conversion, recognizes the need for conversion that he himself has. Thus, conversion becomes not something preached from the books, but a personal experience he goes through every day. St. Paul says, Yet we who have this spiritual treasure are like common clay pots, to show that the supreme power belongs to God, not to us (2 Cor 4:7).

I can do all things in him who strengthens me (Philip 4: 13).

QUESTIONS FOR THE THIRD DAY

1. Name some of our lay collaborators. How can we prepare them for their apostolate? How do we encourage and support them in their work? How do we help the various lay associations?
2. How can we more effectively place the talent and generosity of women religious at the service of the ministry?
3. How do we make of our work of education a true work of evangelisation? How do we make of our medical services a true work of evangelisation?
4. How can we better use the means of social communications in the service of Gospel? Mention some new and creative forms of ministry relevant for our times and situations
5. Suggest ways of renewing our pastoral ministry. How can we strengthen our work of evangelization of responsive group?