

Orientations and Goals of Theological Formation in India/Asia Today

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“[Theology] students should be encouraged to establish a critical dialogue between theology and human culture, between faith and the real questions and problems which occupy the minds of the people among whom we exercise our apostolate.”¹

What I am going to present for our consideration this evening is based on my brief study of the publications of some theological institutes in India – the *Statutes, Regulations and Syllabus* book, and *Handbook and Calendar* of the academic year 2012-13. While I refer to the context and mission, I speak of the challenging mission of Asia, though I limit my considerations only to India when I discuss the orientations and goals of theological formation. Reference to individual institutions and their goals and orientations made by me are not intended to commend or condemn anyone but to present the situation as I see it today. Hopefully we can learn from each other to come up with an apt theological formation for India/Asia.

Formees

The student groups whom a particular faculty caters to influence its goals and priorities. Some theology faculties in India restrict their aim to the formation of diocesan priests with a diocesan spirituality.² Some others have, as their aim, the theological formation of candidates to the priesthood and religious life.³ What they envisage is a holistic formation that integrates different dimensions of priestly life – the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral dimensions. The concluding statement of the Fifteenth Plenary Assembly of the CCBI, held in Tiruchirappalli, 15-19 January 2003 on the formation of priests in seminaries and other formation houses is cited as the guiding principle:

Preparing future priests and religious, who are intensely committed to proclamation, and inculcating in them a deep faith in Jesus and a love for the Church, should be the top priority. The entire formation programme – human, spiritual, pastoral and intellectual –

¹ 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, Decree 6, 158.

² “The aim of Morning Star Regional Seminary is the formation of Diocesan Priests with a diocesan spirituality.” *Morning Star Regional Seminary, Hand Book and Calendar, 2012-2013*, Barrackpore, West Bengal, p. 6.

³ *St Peter’s Pontifical Institute, Handbook, 2012-2013*, Bangalore, p. 8.

should be geared towards preparing them for a life of holiness and commitment to people. (No. 11.3) ⁴

A few centres have been established to impart theological formation to the members of their religious congregations. Some others open their resources to those who will be working in a particular part of India⁵ and even in that some restrict the students to those who would be working primarily in a mission diocese or religious congregation of a particular ritual church.⁶ The objective of a given theological centre dictates and decides the elements that will be stressed in the formation of its candidates. St Ephrem's Theological College, Satna, a theologate of the Syro-Malabar Church in North India, "aims at a theological formation in tune with the ecclesial tradition of St Thomas Christians in the context of the North Indian mission."⁷ Accordingly special attention is given to "the study of oriental Churches, the history, tradition and theology especially of St Thomas Church of India" and to the "study of the religious beliefs of the people in the north and of their socio-cultural traditions."⁸

There are some "open" Institutes of Theology which offer their services to all the people of God: "[to] promote the theological and spiritual formation of the clergy, religious and laity."⁹ Like the Serampore College many theological faculties take the whole Indian context as their point of their reference to foster theological ... reflections on the pastoral, missiological problems facing the Church in India today;¹⁰ to deepen the roots of the Indian cultural, spiritual ... heritage;¹¹ so that the formee can effectively mediate the vision of Jesus for the multicultural context of India.

⁴ As cited in *Morning Star Regional Seminary*, p. 6.

⁵ "From the outset, St Charles Seminary has been a missionary seminary dedicated to the training of mission-minded pastors for the needs of the Hindi-speaking dioceses of the Church in North India." *St Charles Seminary, Nagpur, Calendar and Handbook 2012-13*, p. 6. The Samanvaya theological college also has its programme focusing on the Church's evangelizing mission in the northern parts of India. See *Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Handbook 2012-13*, Bangalore, p. 16.

⁶ "St Ephrem's Theological College . . . is intended to impart priestly formation to those who wish to serve primarily in the Syro-Malabar mission dioceses and the Religious Congregations in North India." *St Ephrem's Theological College, Handbook and Calendar 2012-13*, Satna, p. 3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁹ *Statutes of Vidyajyoti Institute of Religious Studies*, Faculty of Theology, Delhi, 1990, p. 6.

¹⁰ *St Peter's Pontifical Institute*, p. 8.

¹¹ This is envisaged to be done by giving special attention to Indian orientation in the academic, spiritual, liturgical and cultural endeavours. *Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram*, p. 11.

The Institutes under the Serampore College speak of a wider goal of theological education including their different congregations rooted in their respective contexts: “Theological Education has the broader goal of equipping the people of God and the congregations, in their respective contexts, to live out the doxological-liturgical, koinonial, reflective, diakonal and missional dimensions of their existence.”¹²

For Mission

Despite the difference in the categories of persons in formation in different theological Institutes one thing that stands out as the common element among them is their sensitivity to the Asian/Indian realities with their rich diversity and plurality of religions and cultures and their brokenness due to abject poverty and dehumanising unjust structures. Sensitivity to the Indian/Asian *Sitz-im-Leben* is expressed in the programmes for and in mission envisaged by the theological institutes and their avowed aim to help the students “to acquire a critical awareness of the actual situation and the various forces shaping the country, so that they would be adequately prepared to meet the challenges of the contemporary world in the light of Christian faith.”¹³

Theological formation is closely related to mission. Christian mission in our context today in Asia is a challenging one. Except for the Philippines and East Timor, Christians in Asia belong to a minority religious group in spite of the 2000 years of the Christian presence in this region. In the past years, especially after the decolonisation of Asian countries, and the openness to see the signs of the times and act accordingly as expressed in the proceedings and meetings of the Second Vatican Council, the World Council of Churches and the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), there is a paradigmatic shift in the theology of mission. Asian Bishops see mission as a dialogue with the threefold realities of Asia - rich cultures, ancient and great religions, and dehumanising poverty. The Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC has expressed this triple dialogue in the following way:

Mission includes: being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God’s Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word. *Mission will*

¹² Aim and Objectives of Theological Education as articulated on page 11 of the *Regulations and Syllabus* book published by the Senate of Serampore College 2010, as cited in Roger Gaikwad, “Rationale and Perspectives of New BD Curriculum: Religion, Culture and Society Cluster,” *Teaching Theology in Context*, edited by Wati Longchar, Serampore: The Senate of Serampore College (University), 2011, p. 45.

¹³ *Sacred Heart Seminary, Calendar 2012-13*, Poonamallee, Chennai, p. 3.

*mean a dialogue with Asian's poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions.*¹⁴

The triple dialogue finds expression in different words in the goals the theological faculties have set for themselves as the end result of the formation they give in their centres. They seek to train their students in such a way that “being sensitive and attentive to the workings of the Holy Spirit in the lives and cultures of people, [they] will be ready to inculturate themselves into new socio-cultural situations, engage in dialogue with people who belong to other faith-traditions and collaborate with people of good will in working for justice, peace and integrity of creation.”¹⁵ What is aimed at is the Indian Christian response that draws inspiration from the Gospels and is open to the guiding and strengthening force of the Holy Spirit.

In Mission

To achieve this goal of formation for mission the orientation adopted in some centres of theological formation is to offer context based formation through regular involvement in the actual life situations and struggles of people, combined with immersion programmes or even situating the centre in a rural/tribal/dalit/poor area. The students of these centres learn to reflect theologically on their experiences leading to a personal and structural transformation and also an enrichment of the theology they learn.¹⁶ Through this action-reflection-action method, the students acquire a critical awareness of the actual situation and the various forces shaping India/Asia, so that they could in future meet the challenges of the contemporary world in the light of Christian faith.¹⁷

For Further Research

The theological faculties aim at offering their students a scientific learning based on accurate information and critical analysis. What they learn is not restricted to the pastoral activities in the near future alone but also lays the foundation for further research¹⁸ eventually

¹⁴ FABC V, art. 3.1.2, emphasis added, in Gaudenco B, Rosales & C.G. Arevalo, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asia Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970-1991*, vol. 1., Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992, p. 280.

¹⁵ *St Charles Seminary*, p. 6.

¹⁶ “Tejas envisages a participatory formation programme. It emphasizes both a solid theological education and a direct involvement in the actual life situations of people leading to a transformation of the theologian as well as an enrichment of theology itself.” *Tejas Vidya Peetha*, Bangalore, p. 10.

¹⁷ *Sacred Heart Seminary*, p. 3.

¹⁸ *Statutes of Vidyajyoti Institute of Religious Studies*, 6.

contributing to the emergence of Indian/Asian Christian theologies rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition and responding to the Indian/Asian context. The creation of such Indian/Asian theologies is an ongoing one. In this process one notices an ambiguous attitude to the use of local language or English or both. The Regional Theology Centres of Theology are envisaged as centres that promote local theology and also be a resource centre for theology for the local people in their own languages. While theologies in India emerge in contact with Hinduism in its various forms, Asian theologies in general develop in response to the different types of Buddhism.

Conclusion

The theological formation for mission in India/Asia is a people-centred and context-sensitive endeavour. Its emphasis is not a set of theological doctrines and moral teachings but the person of Jesus Christ, the Word who became flesh. What theological faculties in India aim at is the fostering and furthering of a thirst in their students to articulate and usher in Jesus' vision of Reign of God that can be appreciated and accepted in the Indian/Asian milieu.