

The Role of Catechists in the Dialogue with Muslims in Pakistan



(Lasalle Brother Zafar Daud to the left.)

Historical Background of Christians in Pakistan and need for dialogue

Traces of Christianity are found historically from St. Thomas the apostle's presence in the court of Gondopharnes the famous king of Taxila near Rawalpindi between 19 and 45 A.D. When a few Christian communities exited in the northern areas of Pakistan. Since then Christian travelers have crossed this land from time to time without making any significant impact. Later in the 16th Century some Jesuit priests' presence in Moghul Emperor Akbar's court (1583) and their missionary activities is also part of the Christian history. Which by less support and favor of Emperor Shahjehan in (1650) did not bear much fruit.

The Real beginning of Christian evangelization started when the British rulers granted religious freedom to all its inhabitants in the whole British empire. It mainly started in the service of British Army and their Christian employees.

The missionary work in Punjab and other provinces of Pakistan started with the arrival of Capuchin and Jesuit priests (1855) from (Agra and Bombay) now India.

With the arrival of missionaries to cater the needs of the British army and religious freedom evangelization took place in large

scale. Most of the missionary work was done in the areas of Sialkot among the low caste Hindus in the beginning.

The missionaries learnt the local language to preach the gospel among the common people. A large number of people embraced the Christian faith among whom many were from the poorest of the poor. Most of them working for Hindu, Sikh, or Muslim landlords. The Christian missionaries acquired lands from the British empire and established Christian villages for the identity and Christian formation of the converts. Many of the Christian converts moved to cities for ordinary jobs and livelihood, sweepers job was an easily available opportunity for unskilled and uneducated people. This provided an opportunity for them to settle in city and earn their living.

The missionary work was expanding and the missionary needed to reach the people so they needed help of the local people who could accompany the missionaries in their work. Some of the young boys with little education were chosen and were called "Babu" Adha, Sialkot.



The Role of Catechists' in Evangelization and Dialogue

Since then the Catechists have been involved in the Christian community. A Catechist is assigned from the parish for a particular community, he does the spade work for the parish priest, most of the time the Christian families are scattered in a vast geographical area or villages. In some villages there are five or ten Christian families, in others fifty or hundred families. Catechist reaches to all these families for their spiritual needs, teaching catechism, guiding and helping them in other matters of life. Sometimes even settling the petty disputes and dealing with government officials under the guidance of the parish priest.



Catechist is the person who visits each family and helps them grow in faith and in social and economic matters. Since he lives with faithful he gets involved with the people of that area both Christians and Muslims. As a local religious leader of the community he initiates dialogue with Muslims not necessarily on religious matters but on socio political matters, that helps both the communities to understand and accept each other.

In a country like Pakistan one must be open to Inter Faith dialogue. You have to dialogue or else you can stop all your work. It is absolutely necessary to survive.

Catechists in St. Albert's Catechists' Training Centre are formed to be open to other faiths. Catechists must be fully aware of the Islamic studies, which can help them

in their field work, especially in the areas where both Islam and Christianity agree. Both being Abrahamite religions share a lot in common and that can be the beginning of a dialogue.

At our Catechists' Training Centre, we not only prepare the gentlemen to be a good Catechists we also train the wives of the trainees to be fully involved in the apostolate. Many women folk when they come do not know to read and write. For this purpose, we have adult Education classes for the wives of Catechists, thus the whole family gets involved in the mission.

One such couple when they passed out here they took deep interest in reaching out to Muslims. During the Muslim Holy month of Ramadhan, they fasted from Sehri (before sunrise) to Iftari (to sunset). They broke fast with different Muslim families. They got many invitations for breaking of the fast. Slowly people started sending meals for Sehri as well.

Slowly this couple invited Muslims couples to fast with them in the season of Lent. This was more difficult because their Christian fast was not as strict as the Muslim fast. Explaining this Christian notion of fasting was very difficult.

There are occasions when Muslims have helped Christians to build chapels, or have helped them to acquire land for church or contributed in the form of labour for the building.

Catechist works at the very grassroot level, in a country where 97% population is Muslim. As mentioned earlier due to the poverty, social discrimination, and religious prejudice there are so many problems that the Christians face in an Islamic country and the only way to bring them closer is a peaceful dialogue every level.

Social services, such as Schools and hospitals can be very helpful in dialogue. Many of the Muslim students come to our schools for education, discipline, and learning values. And we should be more effective in these areas through our humility and service.